

THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S WORD: Inspiration, Inerrancy, and the Interpretation of Scripture

∞: Brant Pitre ∞

Notre Dame Seminary

What is the Bible? Is it divinely inspired? If so, does it teach the truth? To what extent is it free from error? How should we interpret Scripture? What rules should be followed and what methods employed in order to properly understand the sacred text?¹

These are questions that Christians of every stripe have asked over the centuries. The purpose of this essay is to explore how the Catholic Church in particular answers these questions and what the Church teaches and believes about the Bible. We will consider three fundamental issues—the inspiration, inerrancy, and interpretation of Scripture—concentrating on the official teachings of the Catholic magisterium, the Church's bishops in union with the Pope.²

Catholic doctrine on Sacred Scripture can be found in several key sources: the teachings of the ecumenical councils of Trent (1546), Vatican I (1870), and Vatican II (1965); the three papal encyclical letters on the Bible, written by Leo XIII (1893), Benedict XV (1920), and Pius XII (1943); and the summary statement of Catholic doctrine on Scripture given in the official *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, promulgated by John Paul II (1992). Taken together, these documents provide everything we need for an overview of magisterial teachings on sacred Scripture. Unfortunately many of these sources, especially the papal encyclicals on Scripture, are often not studied closely by students in biblical studies; hence we will attempt to familiarize readers with them by quoting them directly. Moreover, since the Second Vatican Council's 1965 Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei*

1 This is a revised and expanded version of an essay that first appeared in Michael Bird and Michael Pahl, eds., *The Sacred Text: Excavating the Texts, Exploring the Interpretations, and Engaging the Theologies of the Christian Scriptures*, Gorgias Précis Portfolios 7 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010), 177-197.

2 For a collection of magisterial documents on sacred Scripture, see *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Bécharde (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002). Hereafter abbreviated *SD*. For the original Latin texts, see Heinrich Denzinger, ed., *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitonum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum* [Handbook of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations concerning Matters of Faith and Morals] (Freiberg: Herder, 1911); Eng.: *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto, 2002). See also *Enchiridion Biblicum: Documenti della Chiesa sulla Sacra Scrittura* [Documents of the Church Concerning Sacred Scripture], eds. Alfio Filippi and Erminio Lora, 2nd. ed. (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1993). Hereafter abbreviated *EB*. For original Latin texts of Church council documents, see Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1990).

Verbum (Lat: the “Word of God”) constitutes the most recent and most thorough conciliar teaching on the Bible, we will pay primary attention to its presentation of Catholic doctrine.

By reading *Dei Verbum* in continuity with the papal encyclicals, as well as the earlier Church councils, we will attempt to offer an overview of a distinctively Catholic approach to the Bible. As we will see, contrary to what is sometimes assumed about the Catholic Church and the Bible, when studied carefully the teachings of the magisterium—especially as formulated at the Second Vatican Council—present us with a beautiful, challenging, and inspiring vision of the splendor of God’s Word as found in the pages of the sacred text.

The Inspiration of Sacred Scripture

The first teaching that demands our attention is the one that lays the foundation for all of the others: Catholic doctrine on scriptural inspiration. At Vatican II, the Pope and the bishops summarized the Church’s teaching on the inspiration of Scripture with the following words:

The divinely revealed realities, which are contained and presented in the text of Sacred Scripture, *have been written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit*. For Holy Mother Church, relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and New Testaments, *whole and entire, with all their parts*, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, *they have God as their author*, and have been handed on as such to the Church herself.³

Several aspects of this teaching merit our attention. First, Vatican II directly ties the doctrine of inspiration to the reality of divine revelation. This is an important starting point, especially since the first two chapters of *Dei Verbum* are devoted to expounding the nature of divine revelation and its transmission.⁴ For our purposes here, we need only note that in Catholic teaching, there are two orders of knowledge: (1) the order of “natural reason” and (2) the order of “supernatural divine revelation.”⁵ Scripture belongs in a special way to the latter, insofar as it both

3 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (November 18, 1965) (SD, 19–31). All translations of *Dei Verbum* contained herein are from Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II: Vol. 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, rev. ed. (Northport: Costello, 1996), 750–765. Unless otherwise noted, emphasis in quotations from Vatican II is added.

4 Unfortunately, an examination of these two chapters is beyond the scope of this essay. For a famous study, see Joseph Ratzinger, “Revelation Itself,” and “The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 5 vols., ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967–1969), 3:170–198.

5 “By natural reason man can know God with certainty, on the basis of his works. But there

contains and presents “divinely revealed realities” (Lat.: *divinitus revelata*). In other words, the Council begins this section by affirming that Scripture is no ordinary book, but contains the supernatural revelation of God.

Second, notice that Vatican II clearly teaches that inspiration is not limited to certain parts of Scripture. Rather, all of the books of Old and New Testaments, “whole and entire, with all their parts” (*cum omnibus eorum partibus*) are divinely inspired. With these words, the Council is reaffirming the traditional doctrine of *plenary*, rather than partial, inspiration. Where does the Council get this formula? In the footnote to *Dei Verbum* 11, Vatican II cites two key sources. The first is the dogmatic teaching of the First Vatican Ecumenical Council, which defined that the books of the Bible, “whole with all their parts” (*integri cum omnibus suis partibus*) are “written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”⁶ The second is a 1915 decree of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, which spoke of “the Catholic dogma regarding the inspiration of Sacred Scripture,” whereby “everything (*omne*) the sacred writer asserts, expresses, and suggests must be held to be asserted, expressed, and suggested by the Holy Spirit.”⁷

As we will see throughout this essay, this is but the first of many instances in which Vatican II will invite us to interpret its teaching on Scripture with a *hermeneutic of continuity* rather than a *hermeneutic of rupture*.⁸ As Pope Benedict XVI has stated, the former approach to interpreting the documents of Vatican II emphasizes “renewal in the continuity” of the one Church of Christ, whereas the latter approach “risks ending in a split between the preconciliar Church and the postconciliar Church.”⁹ For its part, *Dei Verbum* itself encourages a hermeneutic of continuity and renewal rather than discontinuity and rupture by repeatedly citing modern magisterial teachings, as well as patristic and medieval sources, in the official footnotes to the text.

Third, and perhaps most important of all, in *Dei Verbum*, the Catholic doctrine of inspiration is ultimately an affirmation of the *divine authorship* of Scripture: the books of Scripture are inspired because they “have God as their author” (*Deus*

is another order of knowledge, which man cannot possibly arrive at by his own powers: the order of divine revelation.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d. ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 50. See also René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (New York: Alba House, 1966).

6 First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius* [The Son of God], Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith (April 24, 1870), 2 (*SD*, 14–18, at 16–17).

7 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *On the Parousia or the Second Coming of Our Lord in the Letters of St. Paul the Apostle* (June 18, 1915) (*SD*, 207–208).

8 See Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia (December 22, 2005), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (January 4, 2006), 4–6. This address is also available in a recent volume dedicated to interpreting the documents of Vatican II with a hermeneutic of continuity and renewal. See Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering, *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition* (New York: Oxford University, 2008), ix–xv.

9 Benedict XVI, Address (December 22, 2005), quoted in Lamb and Levering, *Vatican II*, x.

habent auctorem). In the final analysis, when the Church affirms the doctrine of inspiration, it answers the perennial question of who authored the Scriptures by declaring in no uncertain terms: “God is the author of sacred Scripture.”¹⁰ Once again, in taking this position, Vatican II explicitly cites and employs the language of Vatican I, which taught that inspiration is not the result of the books of the Bible being “later approved” of the Church; nor is it because they contain “revelation without error”; rather the books are inspired because they “have God for their author.”¹¹

The Mystery of Dual Authorship

Such a bold doctrine of inspiration raises several questions: If God is the author of Scripture, what role did the human authors have to play? Does the Church’s affirmation of divine authorship negate or neglect the human dimension of Scripture? By no means. In the same breath in which Vatican II teaches the divine authorship of Scripture, it also proclaims with equal force the truly human authorship of the sacred texts. Compare the very next lines:

To compose the sacred books, *God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their powers and faculties* so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was *as true authors* that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more.¹²

This emphasis on the full use of the human faculties and powers by the individual authors of the books of Scripture is something on which it is critical to insist. As anyone who has read the Bible knows, any doctrine of inspiration that fails to take into account the diversity of human voices within Scripture ultimately fails to reckon with the reality of the biblical texts. And once again, in affirming the full human authorship of Scripture, Vatican II cites earlier magisterial teachings, in this case Pope Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical letter promoting the historical study of Scripture, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Pius taught that “the inspired writer, in composing the sacred Book, is the living and reasonable instrument of the Holy Spirit,” such that by using “his faculties and powers” any reader of the Bible can infer “the special character of each” human author “and, as it were, his personal traits.”¹³

Catholic doctrine does not stop at merely affirming the fully divine and fully human authorship of Sacred Scripture. It also goes on to propose a striking analogy for illuminating the relationship between them:

¹⁰ *Catechism*, no. 105.

¹¹ *Dei Filius*, 2 (SD, 16–17).

¹² *Dei Verbum*, 11 (SD, 24).

¹³ Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* [Inspired by the Divine Spirit], Encyclical Letter Promoting Biblical Studies (September 30, 1943), 33 (SD, 115–139, at 128).

Indeed, *the words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men.*¹⁴

With these words, Vatican II is claiming that the mystery of dual authorship—divine and human—can best be understood by the equally ineffable (but equally true) mystery of the incarnation. In the incarnation, the eternal “Word” of God “became flesh and dwelt amongst us,” fully human, yet fully divine.¹⁵ Once again, the Council’s immediate source for this analogy is Pius XII’s landmark encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. There the Pope taught:

As the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things “except sin” (Heb. 4:15), so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect except error. In this consists that “condescension” of the God of providence, which St. John Chrysostom extolled with the highest praise and repeatedly declared to be found in the Sacred Books.¹⁶

In short, the Catholic Church proposes an *incarnational analogy* for understanding the mystery of Scripture’s inspiration. By means of this analogy it affirms in the strongest possible terms both the divine authorship of Scripture as well as the free, full, and reasonable human authorship of the sacred texts. Like the mystery of the incarnation itself, the mystery of dual authorship is a testament to both the truth and humility of the Word incarnate and the Word inspired.¹⁷

The Inerrancy of Sacred Scripture

The next teaching that demands our attention is what the 1915 decree of the Pontifical Biblical Commission—as cited by Vatican II in the footnote to *Dei Verbum* 11—refers to as “the Catholic dogma of the inerrancy (*inerrantia*) of Scripture.”¹⁸

14 *Dei Verbum*, 13 (SD, 25).

15 John 1:14. On the Catholic doctrine of the incarnation, see *Catechism*, nos. 456–483.

16 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 37 (SD, 129).

17 See Mary Healy, “Inspiration and Incarnation: The Christological Analogy and the Hermeneutics of Faith,” *Letter & Spirit* 2 (2006): 27–41; J. H. Crehan, “The Analogy between *Dei Verbum Incarnatum* and *Dei Verbum Scriptum* in the Fathers,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 6 (1955): 87–90.

18 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *On the Parousia or the Second Coming of Our Lord in the Letters of St. Paul the Apostle* (June 18, 1915), cited in *Dei Verbum*, 11 (SD, 24; compare SD, 207–208). See also Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 46, who speaks of “the traditional teaching regarding the inerrancy of sacred Scripture.” (SD, 132).

The doctrine of inerrancy flows directly from the doctrine of inspiration. The two cannot be understood apart from one another; nor can they be separated from one another without detriment to both. That is why Vatican II's teaching on the inerrancy of Scripture follows immediately on the heels of its doctrine of inspiration. After affirming that the human authors wrote only what God wanted written, and no more, the Council states:

Since therefore, *all that the inspired authors or sacred writers assert, must be held as asserted by the Holy Spirit*, we must acknowledge that *the books of Scripture teach truth*—which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred writings—firmly, faithfully, and *without error*.¹⁹

Three aspects of this important text demand our attention. First, although it is frequently overlooked, Vatican II situates its teaching on inerrancy in the context of plenary inspiration: “all (*omne*) that the inspired authors or sacred writers assert” must be regarded as “asserted by the Holy Spirit” (*assertum a Spiritu sancto*). This is a staggering claim, but one entirely consistent with the teaching on divine authorship we analyzed above. Second, on the basis of plenary inspiration, the Council goes on to affirm (“therefore”) that the Bible teaches “truth” (*veritatem*)—firmly, faithfully, and “without error” (*sine errore*). With these words we find reference to the Bible’s freedom from error, commonly referred to by Catholic theologians as the doctrine of inerrancy.²⁰ Third and finally, the specific reason for the inerrancy of Scripture is given: it is “for the sake of our salvation” (*nostrae salutis causa*) that God inspired the sacred authors to teach truth without error. These points sum up Vatican II’s teaching on the truth of Scripture and its freedom from error.

Now, it is important to note here that since the Second Vatican Council a debate has arisen among scholars about how to interpret the teaching of *Dei Verbum* 11. Specifically, the debate revolves around whether or not the second half of the sentence in *Dei Verbum* 11 limits the extent of the inerrancy of Scripture. Indeed, some scholars claim that the text teaches a form of *limited inerrancy*.²¹ They

19 *Dei Verbum*, 11 (SD, 24). Since there is debate about how to interpret this text, I have adapted Flannery’s translation to follow the Latin as closely as possible. The original reads: “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.”

20 For example, Augustine Bea, *De Inspiratione et Inerrantia Sacrae Scripturae: Notae Historicae et Dogmaticae* [The Inspiration and Inerrancy of Sacred Scripture: An Historical and Doctrinal Study] (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1954).

21 For example, Ronald D. Witherup, *Scripture: Dei Verbum, Rediscovering Vatican II*; (New York: Paulist, 2006), 93: “The lack of error pertains not to every jot and tittle of Scripture but to that essential truth necessary for our salvation. This seems to qualify the type of inspiration found in the Bible. Inspiration, then, does not concern historical or scientific content but religious content, specifically, moral and doctrinal truths essential to salvation.”

argue that the phrase “for the sake of our salvation” limits inerrancy to the saving truth found in Scripture; assertions in Scripture that are not directly “salvific” are not protected from error in the same way.²² To support this interpretation, they note that the Council used the phrase “without error” (*sine errore*) rather than the noun “inerrancy” (*inerrantia*), suggesting that it was departing from the teaching on inerrancy found in earlier magisterial documents.²³

Other scholars, however, argue that the limited inerrancy position is based on a misinterpretation of *Dei Verbum* 11.²⁴ In support of this interpretation, they note that in the original Latin, the expression “for the sake of our salvation” is an adverbial phrase modifying the word “consign,” not an adjectival phrase modifying the word “truth.”²⁵ In other words, this clause tells us God’s *purpose* in protecting Scripture from error; it does not limit *what kind* of truth in Scripture is protected from error.²⁶ From this perspective, Vatican II is simply “reaffirming inerrancy in a way both new and yet also in agreement with traditional teaching.”²⁷ In support of this, I would add that *Dei Verbum* itself suggests as much by choosing to cite two modern magisterial affirmations of “the *absolute inerrancy* of Scripture” in the first footnote to the teaching on inspiration.²⁸

Although we cannot go into the details of this debate in such a short essay, it is important for the reader to grasp its basic contours, not least because similar debates over inspiration and inerrancy are taking place in the ecumenical sphere, in Christian communities outside the Catholic Church.²⁹ However, because the interpretation of Vatican II’s teaching is disputed among Catholic scholars, I would like to make several basic arguments in favor of the latter position, while recogniz-

22 So Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology: An Introduction to its Sources, Principles and History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 131–140.

23 So Alois Grillmeier, “Chapter III: The Divine Inspiration and Interpretation of Sacred Scripture,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 5 vols., ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967–1969), 3:199–246, at 204–205, 234–235.

24 For example, Denis Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation: A Theological Introduction to Sacred Scripture* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2010), 221–235. An earlier version of this section appeared as Farkasfalvy, “Inspiration and Interpretation,” in Lamb and Levering, *Vatican II*, 77–100.

25 Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation*, 226–227, n. 26.

26 Augustine Cardinal Bea, *The Word of God and Mankind* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1967), 184–192, at 191. See also “Inspiration,” in *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, ed. Scott W. Hahn (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 381–391.

27 Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation*, 229.

28 The first footnote to *Dei Verbum*, 11 cites the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *On the Parousia*, and the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, Letter (December 22, 1923), both of which explicitly speak of “the Catholic dogma of the inspiration and inerrancy of sacred Scripture” (*dogmate catholico de inspiratione et inerrantia sacrarum Scripturarum*). (DS 3629; EB 415, 499).

29 For an exploration of the issue by a leading Protestant exegete, see G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

ing that the final interpreter of the Council is of course the living magisterium of the Catholic Church.³⁰

A Hermeneutic of Continuity

First, if we interpret Vatican II's teaching on Scripture with a hermeneutic of continuity, then the weight of probability is tipped heavily in favor of absolute (or complete) inerrancy. The reason: previous magisterial teachings on Scripture are unequivocal on this point.

For example, in 1870, Vatican I dogmatically proclaimed that the canonical books of Scripture contain "revelation without error" (*sine errore*)—the exact Latin phrase used by Vatican II.³¹ Likewise, in his 1893 encyclical, Pope Leo XIII taught that Scripture is "entirely immune from all error" (*ab omni omnino errore immunes*).³² Significantly, he also declared that the complete inerrancy of Scripture is not merely a theological opinion but rather "the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church."³³

In 1920, Pope Benedict XV repeated Leo's teaching and proclaimed "the absolute immunity of Scripture from error" (*de absoluta Scripturarum a quibusvis erroribus immunitate*) as "the ancient and traditional belief of the Church."³⁴ Finally, and perhaps most significantly, in 1943, Pius XII began his historic encyclical by declaring Scripture's "freedom from any error whatsoever" a "solemn definition of Catholic doctrine."³⁵ Note: none of these papal teachings are passing remarks; the manner in which the doctrine of absolute inerrancy of Scripture is formulated and the frequency with which it is proposed clearly identify it as a truth of faith.³⁶

30 In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI called a Synod of Bishops to discuss "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church." After the Synod, the following proposition (no. 12) was given to Pope Benedict: "The Synod proposes that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith clarify the concepts of 'inspiration' and 'truth' in the Bible, along with their reciprocal relationship, in order to better understand the teaching in *Dei Verbum* 11. In particular, it is necessary to emphasize the specific character of Catholic Biblical hermeneutics in this area." (Quoted in Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation*, 237). Currently, we are still awaiting such a magisterial clarification.

31 *Dei Filius*, 2 (SD, 16–17).

32 (Author's translation.) Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* [The God of All Providence], Encyclical Letter on the Study of Scripture (November 18, 1893), 20 (SD, 37–61, at 54–55).

33 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (SD, 55).

34 Pope Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus* [The Holy Spirit, the Comforter], Encyclical Letter Commemorating the Fifteenth Centenary of the Death of St. Jerome (September 15, 1920), 16 (SD, 81–111, at 87). In the same section, the Pope also speaks of "the absolute truth" (*absolutamque veritatem*) and "immunity from error" (*erroris immunitatem*), stating that "no error can occur in the inspired text," and that "divine inspiration extends to every part of the Bible without the slightest exception and that no error can occur in the inspired text."

35 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 1 (SD, 116).

36 See Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* [Light to the Nations], Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (November 21, 1964), 25, in Flannery, *Vatican Council II*.

Second, as we saw above, Vatican II also teaches the plenary inspiration of Scripture. The logical result of plenary inspiration is complete inerrancy. Look closely again at the two parts of how the Council formulates its teaching:

1. *Since*, all that the inspired authors or sacred writers assert, must be held as asserted by the Holy Spirit,
2. *we therefore* must acknowledge that the books of Scripture teach truth— which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred writings—firmly, faithfully, and without error.³⁷

It is only when the doctrine of complete inspiration (the first half of the sentence) is separated from the doctrine of inerrancy of Scripture (the second half of the sentence) that the *Dei Verbum* 11 can be interpreted as somehow limiting inerrancy. It makes no sense to affirm that inspiration is unlimited, but that inerrancy, the direct result of inspiration, is somehow limited. If everything asserted by the sacred writers is asserted by the Holy Spirit then, both logically and theologically, everything asserted by the sacred authors must be free from error.

Third, in the footnote to the teaching on the truth of Scripture, Vatican II explicitly cites two previous papal condemnations of limited inerrancy.³⁸ Although these magisterial condemnations are frequently overlooked, they are critical to correctly interpreting the Council's teaching, since Vatican II wished to bring them to our attention:

But it is absolutely wrong and forbidden, either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of Holy Scripture, or to admit that the sacred writer has erred. For the system of those who, in order to rid themselves of these difficulties, do not hesitate to concede that divine inspiration regards the things of faith and morals and nothing beyond, because (as they wrongly think) in a question of the truth of falsehood or a passage, we should consider not so much what God has said as the reason or purpose that he had in mind in saying it—this system cannot be tolerated.³⁹

"It is absolutely wrong and forbidden, either to narrow inspiration to certain passages of Holy Scripture, or to admit that the sacred writer has erred," since divine inspiration "not only is essentially incompatible with error but excludes it and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the supreme Truth,

37 *Dei Verbum*, 11 (SD, 24). See also Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation*, 226–227.

38 *Dei Verbum*, 11, n. 5 (SD, 24, n. 22).

39 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (SD, 55).

can utter that which is not true. This is the ancient and constant faith of the Church.” This teaching, which our predecessor Leo XIII set forth with such solemnity, we also proclaim with our authority, and we urge all to adhere to it religiously.⁴⁰

It is not apparent how these citations can be reconciled with the view that *Dei Verbum* is limiting the inerrancy of Scripture. As we have demonstrated, Vatican II’s overall teaching on the Bible stands in direct continuity with previous papal and conciliar teachings and indicates this fact by repeatedly citing them in the footnotes. Hence, if this passage were actually restricting the scope of inerrancy, then this would be the only footnote in *Dei Verbum* that indicates a rupture with previous magisterial teaching rather than continuity. I find this intrinsically implausible and exegetically untenable. Instead, the most probable interpretation is that Vatican II, like the passages from the papal encyclicals that it chooses to cite, is reaffirming—in a positive and concise way—the ancient and traditional Catholic doctrine of the complete inerrancy of Scripture.

A final support for this reading is offered by the most recent magisterial interpretation of *Dei Verbum* 11, given in 1998 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and signed by the congregation’s Prefect Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI). The Congregation asserts that “the absence of error (*absentia erroris*) in the inspired sacred texts,” is an example of a *divinely revealed article of faith* of the highest order, of like status with the solemnly defined christological dogmas or the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.⁴¹ The Congregation supports its interpretation by citing *Dei Verbum* 11, as well as Pope Leo’s condemnation of limited inerrancy.

A Hermeneutic of Trust

With that said, it is important to clarify what the absolute inerrancy of Scripture does and does not mean. In particular, we want to briefly distinguish the Catholic doctrine from other concepts of inerrancy that may be found outside the Catholic Church, such as in Protestant fundamentalism.⁴² For within different Christian communities the idea of biblical inerrancy takes various forms, some of which are very different from, and even incompatible with, magisterial teaching on the matter.

40 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 3 (SD, 116–117).

41 See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the *Professio Fidei*,” (June 29, 1998), 5, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (July 15, 1998), 3–4, at 3. Text also in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 90 (1998): 549.

42 For a discussion of the problems with fundamentalist interpretation and how it differs from Catholic doctrine, see Pope John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission (April 23, 1993), 6 (SD, 170–180, at 174–175); Pontifical Biblical Commission, *On the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Sec. I, Par. F. (SD, 244–317, at 273–275).

First, the Catholic doctrine of inerrancy does *not* mean that subsequent manuscripts of sacred Scripture are somehow preserved from any textual errors, omissions, or alterations. To the contrary, it is precisely the task of textual criticism—which Catholics have been doing at least since the time of Origen in the early third century—to establish the most probable form of the original text. As Pius XII affirms, the sacred writer “is not to be taxed with error” simply because “copyists have made mistakes.”⁴³

Second—and this is very important—the Catholic concept of absolute inerrancy presupposes *a correct interpretation of the biblical text*. This means that a passage of Scripture must be interpreted in accord with the literary genre of the text as well as the actual intentions of the human author. It should go without saying that any interpretation of Scripture that disregards the genre and historical context of the writings is bound to end up accusing the text of error—and not without justification. This is particularly true of those portions of Scripture that in both ancient and modern times have been interpreted as making “scientific” claims that are questionable and or verifiably false.

The classic example of this is the debate over texts of Scripture that depict the shape of the sky as being “like a skin” or a “dome.”⁴⁴ As St. Augustine points out, those who interpret these expressions literally and use this to cast doubt on “the trustworthiness of the Scriptures” ultimately “do not understand the style of the divine utterances.”⁴⁵ Augustine argues that these descriptions can and should be understood “figuratively”; or, as we might say, these descriptions are *phenomenological* descriptions of the appearance of the sky.⁴⁶ It is in this context that Augustine concludes: the biblical authors “knew about the shape of the sky, whatever might be the truth of the matter. But the Spirit of God who was speaking through them did not wish to teach people about such things which would contribute nothing to their salvation.”⁴⁷ Significantly, this statement from Augustine about figurative language and “scientific” statements in the Bible is quoted by both Leo XIII and

43 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 3 (SD, 116–117).

44 See Ps. 104:2; Isa. 40:22 (Lat.). See St. Augustine, *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Bk. 2, Chap. 9, 20, in *On Genesis*, trans. Edmund Hill, (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2002), 201–203.

45 Augustine, *Genesis*, Bk. 2, Chap. 9, 20.

46 Augustine, *Genesis*, Bk. 2, Chap. 9, 20. We still use such phenomenological language today. For example, when the Psalmist speaks about the “rising” of the sun being “from the end of the heavens” (Ps. 19:6), the text is no more making an objective “scientific” claim about the relationship between the sun and earth than is the modern weathercaster who speaks about “sunrise” being at 6:00 a.m. Just as no one who understood the idiom would accuse the weathercaster of affirming an astronomical error, neither should we accuse the sacred text of having erred on this point. In neither case is a properly “scientific” claim even being made. Instead, both are speaking in a phenomenological way about what the sun appears to do as it “rises” in the sky, according to ordinary speech. As such, both statements are true.

47 Augustine, *Genesis*, Bk. 2, Chap. 9, 20.

Pius XII in their encyclicals on Scripture,⁴⁸ as well as by *Dei Verbum* in its footnote on the inerrancy of Scripture.⁴⁹ As Pius XII says, following both Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas:

The first and greatest care of Leo XIII was to set forth the teaching on the truth of the sacred Books and to defend it from attack. Hence with grave words did he proclaim that *there is no error whatsoever if the sacred writer, speaking of things of the physical order, "went by what sensibly appeared," as the Angelic Doctor says, speaking either in figurative language or in terms that were commonly used at the time and many instances are in daily use at this day, even among the most eminent men of science.* For "the sacred writers or to speak more accurately"—the words are St. Augustine's—"the Holy Spirit, who spoke by them, did not intend to teach men these things"—that is to say, the essential nature of the things of the universe—"things in no way profitable to salvation."⁵⁰

In other words, in the case of an apparent 'scientific' error, one has to ascertain exactly what the biblical author is asserting. As Leo had pointed out long ago, the authors of Scripture "did not seek to penetrate the secrets of nature."⁵¹ Rather, they used "ordinary language" to describe the world around them "in a way men could understand and were accustomed to."⁵² Once again, the incarnational anal-

48 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 18 (SD, 54); Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 3 (SD, 116–117).

49 *Dei Verbum* 11, n. 5.

50 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 3 (SD, 116–117).

51 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 18 (SD, 54).

52 It is worth noting here that *Dei Verbum* 11, n. 5, also quotes St. Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions On Truth*, q. 12, art. 2, contra., resp. In this text, Aquinas draws directly on Augustine, *Genesis*, Bk. 2, Chap. 9, 20, when taking up the disputed question: "Does Prophecy Deal with Conclusions which Can Be Known Scientifically?" In his answer, Aquinas says that "All those things the knowledge of which can be useful for salvation are the matter of prophecy, whether they are past, or future, or even eternal, or necessary, or contingent. But those things which cannot pertain to salvation are outside the matter of prophecy." However, he immediately goes on to add that by "necessary for salvation," he means "necessary for the instruction in the faith or the formation of morals." Strikingly, he asserts that "many things which are proved in the sciences can be useful for this [that is, salvation]." Even more striking, he also asserts that "we find that mention of these is made in Holy Scripture." For this reason, Aquinas ultimately answers the question in the affirmative: "Conclusions which are demonstrated in the sciences can belong to prophecy." He even gives a pastoral reason for inspired prophecy containing things which can be known scientifically: "Although conclusions of the sciences can be known in another way than through prophecy, it is not superfluous for them to be shown by prophetic light, for through faith we cling more firmly to what the prophets say than we do to the demonstrations of the sciences. And in this, too, the grace of God is praised and his perfect knowledge is shown forth." *The Disputed Questions on Truth*, 3 vols. (Chicago: Regnery, 1952–1954), 2:112–113. Hence, for Aquinas, while Scripture does contain truths which can be proved through the sciences, it only contains those which are necessary for salvation.

ogy helps shed light on the mysterious humility of God's inspired Word, which really has been "made like to human speech *in every respect except error.*"⁵³

Third, according to Pope Pius XII, inerrancy *does* mean that Scripture's "freedom from any error whatsoever" also applies to "*matters of history,*" which should not be seen as "in no way connected with faith."⁵⁴ What does this mean? For one thing, it must be immediately noted that Church's view of the historical truth of Scripture also presupposes correct interpretation: that is, there must be an actual historical intent on the part of the biblical author. This is of course not always the case for every book of the Bible—for example, the Psalms and the Wisdom literature—nor even for every passage in a particular book—for example the parables in the Gospels, or allegories and apocalyptic imagery found throughout the Bible. Moreover, Pius XII also recognizes the presence of "*approximations*" in the language of Scripture that must be taken into account, so that what appears to be "historical error" often ends up being rather "the customary modes of expression" used by ancient historiographers.⁵⁵ One might think here of the differences in detail between the various gospel accounts of Jesus' words at the Last Supper.⁵⁶ However, with these qualifications in mind, the Church does indeed affirm the overall "historical truth of sacred Scripture."⁵⁷ As Pope Benedict XV wrote:

*Those too who hold that the historical portions of Scripture do not rest on the absolute truth of the facts but merely upon what they are pleased to term their relative truth, namely, what people then commonly thought are ... out of harmony with the Church's teaching ... For whereas physics is concerned with "sensible appearances" and must consequently square with phenomena, history, on the contrary, must square with the facts, since history is the written account of events as they actually occurred.*⁵⁸

This teaching may come as something of a surprise, given the climate of historical skepticism that has characterized a great deal of modern biblical scholarship. However, it is the logical outcome of the doctrine of plenary inspiration, in which "everything asserted by the sacred authors"—including their historical assertions—is held to be "asserted by the Holy Spirit."⁵⁹ Given the reality of inspiration, the Catholic Church teaches that whenever a biblical author actually makes an histori-

53 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 37 (SD, 129).

54 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 1 (SD, 116).

55 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 38 (SD, 129–130).

56 Compare Matt. 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:14–23.

57 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 3 (SD, 117).

58 Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 22 (SD, 89).

59 *Dei Verbum*, 11 (SD, 24).

cal assertion, these assertions are also true, in accordance with the intentions of the author.⁶⁰

Fourth and finally—and this cannot be stressed too much—from a Catholic perspective, the doctrine of inerrancy does *not* mean that there are no *apparent* errors, *apparent* contradictions, or other serious difficulties littered throughout the Scriptures. To the contrary, the Popes have repeatedly encouraged Catholic commentators to both recognize such difficulties and arduously seek solutions to them.⁶¹ Once again, *Dei Verbum* gives us clear guidance in this matter by citing in the footnote Augustine’s guideline for how Catholic exegetes should deal with an apparent error in Scripture.⁶² In a brilliant letter to St. Jerome, Augustine affirms that the authors of Scripture were “completely free from error,” and lays down this general rule:

And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that [1] either the manuscript is faulty, or [2] the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or [3] I myself have failed to understand.⁶³

In other words, the Catholic doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy ultimately calls the biblical interpreter to adopt what might be called a *hermeneutic of trust*—as opposed to the hermeneutic of skepticism that has been so widespread in the modern period. From an interpretive posture of trust, the truth of the biblical text is presumed and the Scripture is always given the benefit of the doubt. Such a hermeneutic is not uncritical naiveté, but rather an eminently reasonable response to the divine authorship of Scripture. Indeed, from a Catholic perspective, the truth of Scripture is not something that an individual interpreter derives as a result of inductive analysis, but a truth that is received as divinely revealed. All of this, of course, calls for the exercise of the virtues of patience and humility on the part of the biblical scholar. It is much easier to accuse the sacred text of error than to admit with Augustine the possibility that “I myself have failed to understand.” But if all of Scripture is indeed the inspired Word of God, then it seems reasonable to suggest that a hermeneutic of trust is exactly the posture that a person of “faith” (*pistis*)—which in Greek also means “trust”—should take.⁶⁴

60 See Bea, *Word of God*, 189–190.

61 For example, see Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 44 (SD, 131).

62 St. Augustine, *Letter 82*, Chap. 1, 3, is cited in *Dei Verbum*, 11, n. 5. Significantly, Augustine’s letter is also cited in two of the encyclicals on Scripture. See Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 14 (SD, 87); Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 21 (SD, 56).

63 Augustine, *Letter 82*, Chap. 1, 3, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 [reprint]), 1:350.

64 As an example of this posture, see the comments of Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*

The Interpretation of Scripture

The third and final issue is slightly less controversial but no less central: Catholic teaching regarding the interpretation of Sacred Scripture. Once again, it is no coincidence that *Dei Verbum's* discussion of biblical interpretation comes *after* its teachings on inspiration and inerrancy, for it presupposes them:

Seeing that, in sacred Scripture, God speaks through men in a human fashion, it follows that *the interpreter of sacred Scripture, if he is to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words.*⁶⁵

Notice that this teaching on interpretation emphasizes both the *human authorship* of Scripture (“the meaning which the sacred authors really had in mind”) as well as the *divine authorship* (“the meaning which God thought well to manifest through their words”). Both must be taken into account and neither isolated from the other if the exegete is to properly interpret the inspired text. It is worth pointing out that this emphasis distinguishes Vatican II’s methodology of interpretation from much modern exegesis, in which attention is given solely to what the human author intended to affirm.⁶⁶

How then do we discover what the human author intended? In one of the lengthiest and most detailed sections of *Dei Verbum*, Vatican II has this to say:

In determining the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be paid, (among other things), to literary genres. This is because truth is presented and expressed differently in historical, prophetic, or poetic texts, or in other styles of speech. *The interpreter has to look for that meaning which a biblical writer intended and expressed in his particular circumstances, and in his historical and cultural context, by means of such literary genres as were in use at his time.* To understand correctly what a biblical writer intended to assert, due attention is needed both to the customary and characteristic ways of feeling, speaking, and narrating which were current in his time, and to the social conventions of the period.⁶⁷

(New York: Doubleday, 2007), xxi–xxii, who sums up his “methodology” with the pithy, and surprisingly controversial phrase: “I trust the Gospels.”

65 *Dei Verbum*, 12 (SD, 24–25).

66 On this point, see Robert Barron, “Biblical Interpretation and Theology: Irenaeus, Modernity, and Vatican II,” *Letter & Spirit* 5 (2009): 173–191.

67 *Dei Verbum* 12 (cf. SD 24–25). The translation provided here is from Tanner, *Decrees of the*

From this important passage, we are able to distill several tools for Catholic exegetes to use in determining the intentions of the human author. First, exegesis must pay attention to *literary genres*. This means asking questions like: What kind of book is this? What is the literary form of the work? Is it poetry, prophecy, history? How one answers this question will have a direct effect on the interpretation of the text. Second, the exegete must also closely examine the *language* of the sacred text and its “characteristic ways of speaking.” This means asking questions such as: What is the precise meaning of the words used? What is their denotation as well as their connotation? Is the human author using a particular idiom, such as hyperbole or double entendre? Finally, both literary and linguistic analysis must be accompanied by a close study of *history* and *culture*: What is the “historical and cultural context” in which the text was composed? What were the “social conventions of the period” that can shed light on the text? In sum, these four tools—literature, language, history, and culture—are Vatican II’s primary means of discovering the intention of the human authors.

Once again, in making these statements, we can see the Council building in a very explicit way on the earlier teachings of the papal encyclicals on the Bible. In this case, *Dei Verbum* 12 footnotes Pius XII’s lengthy discussion of historical exegesis in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, in which the pontiff vigorously promoted the study of “grammar, philology ... history, archaeology, ethnology, and other sciences” as well as close scrutiny of the literary “modes of expression” used in the biblical text.⁶⁸ Pius, in turn, had been building on Benedict XV’s teaching that “all interpretation rests on the literal sense”—that is, on “a careful study of the actual words so that we may be perfectly certain what the writer really does say.”⁶⁹ Indeed, well before Benedict XV, Leo XIII had insisted that exegetes study the original languages of Scripture and “the practice of scientific criticism,” and carry out “historical investigation” of the biblical texts.⁷⁰ Once again we see that a close reading of *Dei Verbum* reveals a hermeneutic of renewal in continuity. Far from proposing a rupture with earlier Church teaching, *Vatican II* is explicitly incorporating modern developments from the papal encyclicals on Scripture, developments that support authentic scientific, literary, and historical criticism of the Bible.

However, this is not the end of the interpreter’s task. Given the reality of inspiration, simply determining what the human authors intended does not exhaust the task of exegesis.⁷¹ Indeed, to stop with the human authors leaves exegesis

Ecumenical Councils, 976 (slightly adapted), since the rendition of this important passage in Flannery, *Vatican II*, is deficient in several aspects.

68 See Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 33–43 (SD, 128–131).

69 Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 50–54 (SD, 100–102).

70 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 17 (SD, 52–53).

71 On this point, see Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict,” in *God’s Word: Scripture—Tradition—Office* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), originally published in Joseph Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and

incomplete, for there is another author involved: God. Hence, the exegete must also discover what the divine author intended. Surely this is the more difficult task. How does one accomplish it? According to *Dei Verbum*, the answer is as follows:

But since sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted with its divine authorship in mind, no less attention must be devoted to *the content and unity of the whole Scripture*, taking into account *the living Tradition of the entire Church* and *the analogy of faith*, if we are to derive their true meaning from the sacred texts.⁷²

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* rightly points out, in the above passage, the Second Vatican Council was proposing “three criteria” (*criteria tria*) for discovering what the divine author of Scripture intended.⁷³

The Council’s first criterion for discovering the divine author’s intention is to interpret any given text in the canonical context of the Bible as a whole, that is, according to “the content and unity of the whole Scripture” (*contentum et unitatem totius scripturae*).⁷⁴ This means that the meaning of a given portion of Holy Scripture, say, in the Old Testament, can legitimately be interpreted in light of another portion, say, the New Testament. Even though such texts may have different human authors, both texts have the same divine author. This gives them a unity that is supernatural but nonetheless real. Indeed, given the divine authorship of Scripture, it is not only fitting that Scripture interpret Scripture; correct interpretation actually requires that the biblical canon as a whole be taken into account.

The second criterion for discovering what the divine author intended is more controversial, since historically it has constituted a dividing line between Catholic and Protestant exegesis. According to Vatican II, the biblical text must not only be interpreted in the light of Sacred Scripture as a whole, but in the light of “the living Tradition of the entire Church” (*vivae totius ecclesiae traditionis*).⁷⁵ In Catholic doctrine, sacred Tradition is also the Word of God, which has its origin in “the preaching of the apostles,” is continued in the Church, “in her doctrine, life, and worship,” and is witnessed in a special way in “the sayings of the holy Fathers,” that is the Church Fathers of the first centuries.⁷⁶ All of these are guided by the help of the Holy Spirit. And because the Holy Spirit is likewise the author of Scripture,

Approaches of Exegesis Today,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on the Bible and the Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

72 *Dei Verbum*, 12 (SD, 24–25).

73 *Catechism*, no. 111.

74 *Dei Verbum*, 12 (SD, 24–25); cf. *Catechism*, no. 112.

75 *Dei Verbum*, 12 (SD, 24–25); cf. *Catechism*, no. 113.

76 *Dei Verbum*, 8 (SD, 22–23). On the relationship between sacred Scripture and sacred Tradition, see *Dei Verbum*, 7–10 (SD, 21–23); *Catechism*, nos. 74–83. For an exhaustive modern study, see Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay* (London: Burns and Oates, 1966).

in order to discover the intention of the divine author, Scripture must not be interpreted apart from Tradition—as if the two were opposed to one another—but in the light of that Tradition, led by the same Spirit of God. As St. Paul says: “Stand firm and hold to the traditions [Gk.: *paradosis*] which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.”⁷⁷

The third and final criterion: the interpreter must take into account what Vatican II calls “the analogy of faith” (Lat.: *analogiae fidei*).⁷⁸ This somewhat more obscure term is a reference to “the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the plan of revelation.”⁷⁹ In other words, the interpreter must also take into account the doctrine of the Church, as expressed in the ordinary and universal teachings of the living magisterium. Yet again, Vatican II is drawing this language from Leo XIII’s encyclical on the Bible, in which he states that “the analogy of faith should be followed”—that is, “Catholic doctrine, as authoritatively proposed by the Church.”⁸⁰ While this may seem like putting the doctrinal cart before the exegetical horse, note the reason for the Pope’s teaching: “Seeing that *the same God is the author both of the sacred books and of the doctrine committed to the Church* ... it follows that all interpretation is foolish and false which either makes the sacred writers disagree with one another, or is opposed to the doctrine of the Church.”⁸¹

No doubt this might strike non-Catholics as problematic, but consider two points. First, whether or not one agrees with the premises, the logic of the teaching is consistent. If the same Holy Spirit who authored the Scripture also guides the magisterium in the formulation and teaching of Church doctrine, then “sound doctrine”⁸² is an aid, not an obstacle, to discovering what the divine author of Scripture intended because both Scripture and sound doctrine are true. Second, a good case can be made that any Christian who accepts a *closed canon* implicitly acknowledges the importance of Church doctrine in interpreting Scripture. Indeed, the very fact that Christians accept that there is a single definitive canonical list of books implies an acceptance of this third criterion, because the canonical list of books is nothing other than an *extrabiblical Church doctrine*.⁸³ There is no inspired table of contents for Scripture; the canon is a Church doctrine, not found in the

77 2 Thess. 2:15.

78 *Dei Verbum*, 12 (SD, 24–25); cf. *Catechism*, no. 114.

79 *Catechism*, no. 114.

80 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 14 (SD, 48). The “analogy of faith” is also mentioned in Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 24 (SD, 125).

81 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 14 (SD, 48).

82 Titus 1:9.

83 See *Catechism*, no. 120, for the Catholic doctrine of the canon, citing the definitive canonical lists of the councils of Rome (A. D. 382), Florence (1442), and Trent (1546). I owe this point to my good friend, Michael Barber.

Bible itself, one believed by both Catholics and non-Catholics alike.⁸⁴ If the doctrine of the canon is an aid to interpretation, then it is consistent to suggest that other Church doctrines are as well.

In short, in addition to the incarnational analogy of inspiration discussed above, the official Catholic doctrine of biblical interpretation proposes what might be called an *incarnational* and *ecclesial hermeneutic*—one that gives equal emphasis to the human and divine authorship of Scripture, as interpreted in the context of Christ's Church. Discovering what the human author intended necessitates focusing on the literal sense of the text in its historical context. Hence the importance of literary and historical criticism. Discovering what the divine author intended means interpreting the biblical text in three broader contexts: Scripture, Tradition, and the doctrines of the Church. Hence the importance—indeed the necessity—of theological exegesis done in an ecclesial context.

All that the Prophets Have Spoken

By way of conclusion, we can now briefly summarize what we have learned about inspiration, inerrancy, and interpretation, and briefly tie each of these to the teaching of Scripture itself.

According to Catholic doctrine, the Bible is nothing less than the inspired Word of God, written under the very breath of the Holy Spirit. In making such an audacious claim, the Church is drawing directly on the teaching of Paul, who affirms that “all Scripture is inspired by God [Gk.: *theopneustos*, literally, “God-breathed”], and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”⁸⁵

Given the reality of divine inspiration, the Church also affirms that the Scriptures are to be believed. They teach the truth—firmly, faithfully, and without error. Again, proposing this doctrine, the Church is simply following the model of Jesus in the Gospels, who declares that “Scripture cannot be nullified,”⁸⁶ and upbraids the disciples on the road to Emmaus by saying: “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all [Gk.: *pasin*] that the prophets have spoken!”⁸⁷ Notice that Jesus does not limit the trust his disciples are to place in the inspired Word: *all* that the prophets have spoken is to be believed. Jesus sets no limits on the truth of Scripture; neither does the Catholic Church. Indeed, from a historical perspective, it is worth noting that Jesus himself no doubt shared the ancient Jewish belief in

84 Unfortunately, we do not have the space here to enter into the debate over the Old Testament canon. Suffice it so say that my point stands merely on the basis of the New Testament canonical list of books, which is likewise an extrabiblical Church doctrine. *Dei Verbum* 8 points out that, “By means of this same Tradition the full canon of the sacred books is known to the Church.”

85 2 Tim. 3:16.

86 John 10:35.

87 Luke 24:25.

the inspiration and inerrancy of Jewish Scripture. According to Josephus, first-century Jews believed both that the Scriptures were “inspired” and that “there is no discrepancy in what is written.”⁸⁸

Finally, the Catholic doctrine of interpretation adopts an incarnational and ecclesial approach to the exegesis. This approach recognizes Scripture’s fully human elements and difficulties as well as its divine origin and ecclesial destination. In this, the Church once again follows the New Testament itself, which declares that in the Scriptures—especially the letters of Paul—“there are some things hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction.”⁸⁹ It is precisely for this reason that, “no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation [*idias epilusis*].”⁹⁰ Rather, the written Word of God must be interpreted in the living light of sacred Scripture as a whole, sacred Tradition, and the doctrines of the faith, so that it not be “a dead letter” but rather become for “the children of the Church ... strength for [the] faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting font of the spiritual life.”⁹¹

88 Josephus, *Against Apion*, Bk. 1, 7, 37, in *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 [reprint]), 776.

89 2 Pet. 3:16.

90 2 Pet. 1:20.

91 *Dei Verbum*, 24 (SD, 29–30); cf. *Catechism*, no. 111.