



VATICAN II

Celebrating 50 Years

**Dogmatic Constitution on Divine
Revelation
*Dei Verbum***

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation

Dei Verbum

Promulgated November 18, 1965

This session is about an hour in length and is designed to introduce the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. This presentation may be accompanied by PowerPoint slides and handouts, both provided.

Opening Prayer (PowerPoint Slide 2)

Welcome to the fourth session of our series on the documents of Vatican II. Our last session dealt with the liturgy, and the importance of Scripture within the liturgy.

This session will focus on the Word of God as given to us in *The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum* and its importance in the life of the Church and our own lives.

Setting the Stage!

On October 11, 1962, the bishops of the Second Vatican Council entered St. Peter Basilica in solemn procession behind an ancient manuscript of the Scriptures. (PowerPoint Slide 3)

They conducted their deliberations before this centuries old Bible, enshrined in a place of honor. They were enacting a drama of the role of Scripture in the council itself and in the post-conciliar church. The church is summoned to be a follower and servant of the Word.

This document has been in the background of everything that happened during the Second Vatican Council, and much of what has happened in the church since. It is an enormously important document for anyone who loves Scripture, who knows Christ and who is committed to the Church. Yet in the fifty years since Vatican II ended, few have actually read it, and fewer still understand the importance of what it has to say.

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

In his opening speech at the Council, John XXIII said: “Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us. . .”

He laid out an agenda: Clinging to authentic revelation and rooted deeply in Scripture, we must present the faith in modern language and with a pastoral tone. Dei Verbum made a remarkable contribution to the way we speak about Revelation today.

The answer to these next four questions may help refresh our minds to help us better understand the document.

PowerPoint 4 for discussion below.

Discussion: With the person next to you consider how you would explain each of the following words to a non-believer: Inspiration, Revelation, Scripture, and Tradition.

3 minutes

1. What is Inspiration? **PowerPoint 5**

We believe the Bible is the inspired word of God. It is God’s assistance given to the human authors of the books of Sacred Scripture. Inspired by God and guided by the Holy Spirit, the human authors made full use of their talents and abilities while, at the same time writing the truth that God intended.

2. What is Revelation? **PowerPoint 6**

Revelation is God’s communication of himself and his loving plan to save us. This gift of God’s self-communication is realized by deeds and words over time and most fully by his sending of his own divine Son, Jesus Christ.

Those things revealed by God which are contained and presented in the text of sacred Scripture have been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. . . . They have God as their author, and have been handed on as such to the church itself. (DV #11)

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

God revealed himself in the events of salvation history from about Abraham's time (1850 BC) to about 100 years after Jesus' public ministry (early second century A.D.)

We believe that what the bible teaches us about God, about our relationship with God, and about what God would have us do to build up God's kingdom is true. Whatever we need to know in order to cooperate with God's saving grace is contained in the Bible.

3. What is Scripture? PowerPoint 7

The root word for *Scripture* means "to write", but the writings in the Bible are far from ordinary.

Scripture is also called the Bible. The word *Bible* "means a collection of books, and is the result of a long process that took place within a believing community.

- It is sharing the stories of the people of God through oral tradition.
- The stories to written down.
- The believing community edited the written stories.
- The community selected which written and edited stories to include in the Bible.

4. What is Tradition? PowerPoint 8

The Church's ongoing teaching, rooted in the teaching of the apostles, but applied to new settings for each generation, is called Tradition. The church is *nourished* and *ruled* by Scripture. Its teaching voice applies biblical teachings to new situations as life happens. We believe the Church continues to be inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The task of giving an authentic interpretation to the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the church alone. (DV #10)

Tradition existed before the church gave birth to the Bible. Living Tradition is now nourished by that same Bible. The Church keeps Scripture as a living word to be a light to our paths in numerous ways. PowerPoint 9

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

We saw in *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* the importance of Scripture in our proclamations at Mass, at the celebration of every sacrament, and in the Divine Office. We apply Scripture to our daily lives through homilies, “breaking open the Word” in the RCIA process, and meditation in our personal prayer lives.

PowerPoint 10

The authors of *Dei Verbum* tell us that [Vatican Council II] . . . wants the whole world to hear the call to salvation, so that through hearing it the world may believe, through belief it may hope, through hope it may come to love. (DV #10)

Purpose of the Document on Divine Revelation

The purpose of this document is to spell out the Church’s understanding of the nature of revelation -- the way in which God communicates with human beings. It touches on questions about Scripture, tradition and the teaching authority of the Church.

*God’s Word is the source of both Scripture and Tradition.

Background

The original *schema* (plan of action) was presented to the council for consideration on November 14, 1962. The council as a whole did not accept the document well, and many severely criticized it because they felt that it did not adequately reflect the pastoral demands of the modern world. Pope John XXIII called for this kind of pastoral response.

When it came to a vote to determine whether the schema as it stood was sufficient as a basis for further discussion or whether it should be redrafted by the committee that prepared it, the vote fell short of the two-thirds needed to return it to its commission. At this point, Pope John had the document withdrawn and redrafted. Pope John knew that clarifying this would make possible the rest of the work which he hoped the Council would undertake.

The new commission used language that was more easily understood in its rewrite and was also more firmly rooted in Scripture and in the history of the Church.

In the end the schema dealt largely with Scripture and in keeping with Pius XII’s document *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) endorsed modern methods of biblical research.

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

It was approved and promulgated on November 18, 1965, about a month before the end of the final session of Vatican Council II. It won wide approval; the final vote was 2,344 in favor and only 6 opposed.

This document belongs to all the faithful. It is relatively short, only 26 total articles in six chapters. It's extremely well written and readable.

Overview of the Document PowerPoint 11

After a brief prologue, the document has six major chapters:

- 1: Divine Revelation Itself
- 2: The Transmission of Divine Revelation
- 3: Sacred Scripture: It's Divine Inspiration and Its Interpretation
- 4: Old Testament
- 5: The New Testament
- 6: Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church

It is clear from this structure that the major concern of the document is to proclaim a Catholic understanding of the Bible as the “word of God”.

The first two chapters help us understand how God talks to us and how divine revelation is transmitted from generation to generation. Scripture, tradition and the teaching office of the Church form “one sacred deposit of the word of God. (DV #10)

Chapter 1: Divine Revelation (PowerPoint 12)

The first line of the first chapter provides us with a clue about how God speaks to us. God communicated himself and his loving plan to save us. This makes us “sharers in the divine nature” (DV #2). We have referred to this as “salvation history” or *grace*.

God provides us with constant evidence of himself in creation. (DV #3)

God offers himself to every human being from the moment of conception. This mystery of divine presence is the basis of all revelation. This is a free gift of God.

The entire chapter is devoted to this great truth summed up in Article 6, “God chose to show forth and communicate Himself. . .” God communicates his own

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

inner mysteries to us. We can never adequately explain or express the revelation of God.

God *perfected* this revelation and divine communication, the Constitution tells us in Jesus (DV #4). Jesus fulfilled God's plan by the total fact of his presence -- by words and works -- signs and miracles, but above all by his death and resurrection, and finally by the sending the spirit of truth who revealed God was with us. (Jn. 1: 14a).

Both the inner Word of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit play a role in revelation.

Chapter 1 is short, only six articles. It summarizes all the ways in which God has spoken to us throughout salvation history.

Chapter 2: The Transmission of Divine Revelation (PowerPoint 13)

The second chapter spells out carefully the close relationship between Scripture and Tradition and the way in which it is passed on from generation to generation. The role of the apostles and their successors the bishops is highlighted.

The writers speak of one "divine wellspring" rather than two separate sources of revelation – Scripture and Tradition -- making up one single "deposit of faith" entrusted to the Church (10). They merge into a unity and move toward the same end.

Sacred Scripture is the word of God because it is written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Christ entrusted his message to the apostles. He named them as teachers and preachers. Down through history, the bishops of the church have continued that role of teacher. The authentic interpretation of the word of God is entrusted to the teaching office of the Church, which is not "above the word of God but serves it." (DV #10)

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

Activity: PowerPoint 14

On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest) where would you place the importance of Scripture in your life? Tradition? (1 minute)

Both sacred tradition and sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.

In this document, Tradition is presented as that which embraces the whole life of the church. This section states that the church's apostolic Tradition develops with the help of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enlightens us and the church offers the truths of revelation.

God is always speaking to everyone in the church and we respond in faith. Tradition is not a memory of past teachings or doctrines. It is a living reality, the unchanging voice of God.

The world will hear God's voice by hearing it echoed in the lives of the faithful. The apostles warn them to fight hard for the faith that had been handed on to them once and for all. (Jude 3)

Growth in our understanding happens, the document tells us, through:

- contemplation and study done by faithful people
- preaching of the bishops

In order that the full and living Gospel might always be preserved in the Church, the apostles left bishops as their successors. This sacred tradition and the sacred Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments, are like a mirror in which the church contemplates God. (Jn. 3:2) The teaching of the Bishops is part of a larger process of growth rather than its only source. The magisterium is "not above the word of God, but serves it".

Reading this *Constitution*, it is clear that the community of the church, the people of God, the bishops and teachers, have a role in making the faith understandable in each generation. It is necessary to ask ourselves, "What does the Scripture demand of me?"

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

Chapter 3: Sacred Scripture: Its Divine Inspiration and Its Interpretation

The document concludes with four rather short chapters on the Bible. The chapters on interpretation, and on the Old and New Testaments, provide for and encourage the proper study of biblical texts, always with an eye to deeper faith in the believer.

Chapter 3 continues the teaching of *Divino Afflanto Spiritu* by encouraging scholars to read the Bible within its historical content.

While it is true that God speaks through the Bible, the human authors remain “true authors”, not just secretaries taking dictation from God. God speaks through them in “human fashion”.

Accepted only at the last session, *Dei Verbum* states that “the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted to put into sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.”

Three principles are given to attain the original sense of the text: **PowerPoint 15**

- Attention must be paid to the literary form—whether it is e.g. historical, or poetic or prophetic or another genre of writing.
- The interpreter must consider the historical circumstances of the time of writing. In order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture should investigate the meaning that the writers intended.
- Attention must be paid to the customary patterns of writing in that period employed in dealing with others.

Any literary form is an appropriate vehicle for revelation. Writing can respond to the question: What happened? But other kinds of writing: myth, legend, parable, allegory, fiction, debate, apocalyptic writing also teach us truth. Each of these kinds of writing is distinct, and can easily be misunderstood if it is mistaken for something other than what it is. In order to understand any book in the Bible, we must correctly understand its literary form.

These principles were the most controversial before and during the drafting *Dei Verbum*. All methods of scholarship should be used in seeking the meaning of the writing.

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

St. Jerome said: “The holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written. This means it must take into account the living of it.”

John XXIII reminded the church community in his encyclical *Ad petri cathedram* in 1959 that the official church leaves many questions open to the discussion of theologians because its answers “are not absolutely certain.” In relation to this John quoted an ancient saying that has often been used in speaking of his teachings: “In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity”.

Chapters 4 and 5: The Old Testament and the New Testament

Every action at Vatican Council II is based on God’s self-revelation to us, God’s people.

The chapters on the Old and New Testament place these books within the history of salvation that lies at the core of these collections. Revelation, remember, was God’s self-disclosure to humankind through creation, persons, and events. The Catholic Church holds that revelation is reflected in the Old and New Testaments, reaching its fullness in the person of Jesus Christ.

PowerPoint 16

For the Church the New Testament is hidden in the Old Testament, and the true meaning of the Old Testament is made manifest in the New Testament. (DV #16)

Old Testament PowerPoint 17

The Old Testament is an indispensable part of Sacred Scripture. Its books are divinely inspired and retain a permanent value.

Israel was chosen by God to establish a covenant of love with humankind. They were chosen to experience divine love and through this experience became an example for all nations. The Old Testament remains significant because it communicates how God remained active in the history of humankind and because it reveals the plan of God to provide Jesus.

The Old Testament was deliberately so oriented that it should prepare for and prophesy the coming of Christ and of the Messianic kingdom. The Old Testament bears witness to the whole divine teaching of God’s saving love (15).

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

The Old Testament provides us with the stepping stones to understand the New Testament. What is *old* and *new* is not God's covenant love, but our understanding of that love.

The mystery of salvation is in the midst of the Old Testament. It feeds us a wealth of prayers and insight into the teachings of God.

Christians venerate the Old Testament as the true Word of God. The Church has always vigorously opposed the idea of rejecting the Old Testament under the pretext that the New has displaced the Old. The Old Testament has never been revoked.

In the context of the human situation before the era of salvation, the books of the Old Testament provide an understanding of God and man and make clear to all how a just and merciful God deals with humankind. These books show us authentic divine teaching.

New Testament PowerPoint 18

The Gospels have a special place in the New Testament, and rightly so, because they are our principal source for the life and teaching of Jesus (DV #18). They are the heart of all the Scripture.

The Apostles entrusted the "sacred deposit" of the faith contained in Scripture and Tradition to the whole church (CCC #84).

The Church has always held that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin. For what the Apostles preached in responding to the commission of Christ, they themselves and others, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing. These documents were the foundation of our faith, -- the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. (DV #18)

The Gospel is the proclamation of the entire message of faith revealed in and through Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Second person of the Trinity.

The Church has firmly held that the four Gospels faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among us, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day he was taken up into heaven (Acts 1:1). (DV #19)

The document recognizes that the Gospels are not diaries of Jesus' life, but are written with the concerns of the Church in mind (DV #19).

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing. They reduced some to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of their churches, but always told us the honest truth about Jesus.

The four Gospels are the foremost teachings in Scripture. They contain the foundation of our faith. The Gospels provide the framework for the Church. They teach us how our lives are meant to be lived.

Activity: PowerPoint 19

How does the teaching of *Dei Verbum* help us to recognize that the Gospels can be “historical” without implying that they are diary accounts of Jesus’ life?

If Jesus’ kept a diary, what might he have said about the influence of Hebrew Scripture in his life? Give one example.

Besides the four Gospels, the New Testament also contains the Epistles of St. Paul and other apostolic writings composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The Church has always venerated the Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord. She offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body. (DV #21)

Chapter 6: Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church
PowerPoint 20

In his address to the bishops at the opening of the council, John XXIII said: Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught ore efficaciously. Scripture is to permeate every aspect of church life, especially at the Eucharist where people perceive the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body”.

PowerPoint 21

Dei Verbum has had a profound effect on the life of the Church. Taken together with the reform of the liturgy, Scripture now has a central place in the life of the Church and in the faith of ordinary Catholics.

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

Prior to the Council an interest in the Bible was somehow seen as “protestant”, whereas Catholics took their stand on Tradition.

This chapter lays out a plan which would have seemed radical only a few years earlier. It calls all to know and study sacred Scripture, to have access to accurate translations. It also calls on priests to give homilies about it in the Liturgy of the Word. It even suggests kindly that cooperating with “the separated brethren” may lead to faith (22).

The goal here is to help all discover the full message that God is communicating to the human family—to help all come to hear more clearly the voice of God, so that we may respond more perfectly in faith.

This required a major reorientation of this attitude. Catholics learned that they were to venerate the Scriptures as they venerate the Eucharistic presence. They learned to respect the inner relationship between Scripture and tradition, not to view them in opposition. This led to people taking up the study of the Scriptures in either an informal or formal way.

Dei Verbum insisted that Scriptures be read in their historical context according to the intention of their human authors and in light of their literary forms. This was an outright rejection of a fundamentalist approach to the Bible, which reads the Bible without paying attention to the historical and cultural context of the text.

Access to sacred Scripture ought to be open wide to the Christian faithful. (DV #22)

Historical method became the accepted way of approaching the Bible. This was a major shift whose implications for the Church are still unfolding.

The historical critical method of scripture interpretation uses all the tools of criticism: *archeology, history, the ancient languages themselves, to uncover fully the meaning intended by the inspired author. This method frees the reader from biblical fundamentalism, a reading that fails to consider the context of a scriptural passage, that is, its literary mode, purpose, relationship to other passages, or to the whole work in which it appears.

One very important implication has been that Scripture study is now largely an ecumenical discipline. Scholars from all the mainstream Churches have adopted the same historical approaches in the study of Scriptures. In many cases this

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

meant Catholic scholars catching up with their Protestant colleagues who had been using these approaches for some time.

After Vatican II theologians turned more and more to the Bible incorporating a renewed Scripture scholarship into their research. This has been particularly evident in the area of Christology.

Summary (PowerPoint 22)

Here are the key points of the document:

- It restored the understanding that all revelation is complete in Jesus Christ. The Scriptures are the foundation of divine revelation. Tradition elaborates the meaning of the Scriptures for each generation (4)
- Doctrine and dogma are expressed in different words for different generations. But the eternal truths do not change. (5-6)
- Dated routine changes but authentic tradition remains always with us. (5)
- Our response to God's revelation is faith where we entrust our whole selves to God. This faith is handed on to all generations through living traditions. (8)
- There is a close link between Scripture, Tradition, and the teaching authority of the Church. (10)
- Revelation is handed on to us by the Church. (7-9)
- God wants us to know God fully. (2)
- God reveals the inner life of the Trinity to us, communicating God's own self to us. This is known as grace. (2)
- This revelation is complete in Christ, but what the Gospel demands of us is still being revealed. God is still speaking.
- Over time, there is growth in our understanding of what God desires. (8)
- This growth in understanding is expressed in our sacred Tradition. So Tradition and Scripture have a very close connection and flow from the same divine well.

The new emphasis on the Scriptures found in *Dei Verbum* has changed Catholic prayer and spirituality, making us far more biblical in the ways in which we turn to God.

Vatican Council II: Divine Revelation

*A reflection question to take with you:

How does God speak to me and how do I know it is God?

Closing Psalm prayer (PowerPoint 23)

Creator of night and day,
May your divine word be
a lamp for our feet
and a light for our path.
As children of the light,
may we walk in the sure way
of your sacred teaching
all the days of our life.
To you be the glory for ever and ever.
--Amen