

Introduction

In the years since the Second Vatican Council there has been much discussion about a return to Patristic exegesis.¹ It must be questioned to what extent this is actually possible, since the Early Church had nothing of the scientific standard we have today. The Second Vatican Council had dramatic effects on Catholic thinking, representing what outsiders could see as an attempted lean in the progressive direction. This is certainly the case with respect to the Bible, which is now accepted as subject to principles of historical context etc. This is no trivial matter, because this means that the fundamental doctrines of Christianity developed using an apparently outdated exegetical outlook.² However, while naïve secularists would imagine the changes only as obviously modern, one can argue that some of them could entail a reclaiming of what had previously been lost, offering new ways to resolve the tension between modern scholarship and doctrine. It is tempting, then, for Catholics to speak of an Early Church far more critical in its thinking than the Church between Trent and Vatican I. Contrary to this, I propose to argue that the Early Church, at least in its exegetical views, had more in common with that tradition than with the Church today.

The effect of Vatican II in changing the Church's outlook on scripture occurred in two phases. Firstly, it gave concilia sanction to the progressive teachings of Pius XII, associating them with the historically momentous 'Vatican II', and secondly, it encouraged further directions in the post-concilia period.

¹ Maurice Gilbert, 'New Horizons and Present Needs: Exegesis since Vatican II', in *Vatican II Assessment and Perspectives: Twenty-Five Years After (1962-1987)*, ed. by René Latourelle, 3 vols (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), I, pp. 321-43 (p. 335-6).

² Frances Young, 'The 'Mind' of Scripture: Theological Readings of the Bible in the Fathers', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 7 (2) (2005), 126-41 (p. 137).

Leo XIII and the Tridentine Tradition

In order to assess the changes of Vatican II, it is necessary to define exactly what its views are to be compared against. The Church before the Council is known as the Post-Tridentine Church, whose foundation was laid at the Council of Trent in the Sixteenth Century. The First Vatican Council in 1869-70 can be viewed as a much more recent example of the same basic authoritarian structure. In the same manner, both stress the divine authorship of God of scripture, showing no concern for its human authors.³ Both also command submission to the interpretive authority of the Church “in matters of faith and morals”,⁴ raising no questions as to *how* the Bible can be correctly interpreted.

Subsequently, in 1893, Leo XIII issued the Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*. This Encyclical provides a far more detailed view of scripture that rests firmly on the shared attitude of the previous two Councils. Leo stresses that the Bible was uttered “in God’s own words,”⁵ and from this perspective he can state “that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true.”⁶ While the Encyclical improves on Vatican I by actually tackling the issue of how to read scripture, it still lays all the emphasis on the ‘right’ interpretation. In fact, it focuses primarily on the training of exegetes, using the tools of science to defend the faith

³ Trent, Session 4, First Decree, 8 April 1546 in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. by Norman P. Tanner, 2 vols (London: Sheed & Ward/Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), II: *Trent to Vatican II*, pp. 663-5 (p. 663); Vatican I, *Dei Filius*, 2 in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, p. 806.

⁴ As elaborated by Vatican I, *Dei Filius*, 2 in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, p. 806; Trent (Session 4, Second Decree in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* pp. 663-5 (p. 664)) reads: “in matters of faith and customs which are linked to the establishment of Christian doctrine.”

⁵ Leo XIII, Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, 3, 18 November 1893, in *The Papal Encyclicals 1878-1903*, ed. by Claudia Carlen (McGrath Publishing Company, 1981), pp. 325-39 (p. 327).

⁶ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20, in *The Papal Encyclicals* pp. 325-39 (p. 335).

against the rationalists.⁷ But Leo's appreciation of science is limited: "[theology] does not receive of other sciences as from a superior, but uses them as her inferiors or handmaids."⁸ In practice, the instruction for exegetes to base their work primarily on the Vulgate shows just how far from scientific his vision was.

Pius XII and the Second Vatican Council

Fifty years later, that attitude towards science had turned to honest appreciation. In 1943, Pius XII issued the Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Although it openly celebrates its predecessor, it demonstrates a strong consciousness of the changing times. It recognises the full human reality of the authors of scripture, and stresses the role of each author's personal traits, his "faculties and powers,"⁹ and the context of writing. It stresses the importance of textual criticism, reading scripture in the original language, and the "mode of writing."¹⁰

Over two decades later, in 1965, the Second Vatican Council published *Dei Verbum* (Its full title in English is 'Dogmatic Constitution of Divine Revelation') whose major contribution, for our purpose, was an inherently three-fold argument:

⁷ In the preface to "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (23 April 1993) <http://www.deiverbum2005.org/Interpretation/interpretation_e.pdf>, which will be examined later, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger points out (somewhat apologetically) that "at a time when liberalism was extremely sure of itself and much too intrusively dogmatic, Leo XIII was forced to express himself in a rather critical way, even though he did not exclude that which was positive from the new possibilities."

⁸ S. Greg. M. *Moral* xx., 9 (al. II) quoted in Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 16 in *The Papal Encyclicals* pp. 325-39 (p. 333).

⁹ Pius XII, Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, II, 3, 33, 30 September 1943, in *The Papal Encyclicals 1939-1958*, ed. by Claudia Carlen (McGrath Publishing Company, 1981), pp. 65-79 (p. 73).

¹⁰ Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, II, 3, 35, in *The Papal Encyclicals*, pp. 65-79 (p. 73).

1. “In the process of composition of the sacred books God chose and employed human agents, using their own powers and faculties, in such a way that they wrote as authors in the true sense, and yet God acted in and through them.”
2. “[Therefore], if the interpreter of holy scripture is to understand what God has wished to communicate to us, he must carefully investigate what meaning the biblical writers actually had in mind; that will also be what God chose to manifest through their words.”
3. Therefore, God’s written word cannot be separated from historical and cultural context: “due attention is needed both to the customary and characteristic ways of feeling, speaking and storytelling which were current in [the writer’s] time, and to the social conventions of the period.”¹¹

The Council, then, did not make any real contribution of its own to the principles already laid down by Paul XII. But it did turn the preaching of an encyclical into one of its own official constitutions, the significance of which can hardly be overestimated. The effect of the Council in the Catholic world has been enormous; it created what Greeley calls an ‘effervescence’ which spread beyond its sessions, encouraging change.¹² It is difficult to imagine, then, that its statements on Interpreting the Bible had no effect, regardless of their originality. Indeed, they would have played a key role in opening up the directions in Exegesis afterwards. It is to those directions that we now turn.

¹¹ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 3, 11-12 in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* pp. 975-7 (p. 976).

¹² Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Revolution: New Wine, Old Wineskins, and the Second Vatican Council* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004). Greeley was initially dismissive of the ‘revolutionary’ status which had already been given to the Council. After seeing all the evidence, he has since conceded that the event of Vatican was indeed a revolution.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission: an Example of Post-Conciliar Change

In 1993 the Pontifical Biblical Commission published an essay titled ‘The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church.’ This essay, which sees itself as continuing the work of *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu*,¹³ demonstrates how much more the Church’s exegesis has opened up since Vatican II. One of the limitations of *Dei Verbum* is that the empirical dimension of its exegetical approach, as Vanni¹⁴ points out, is a straight historical-literary method. “The interpretation” concludes that while that method (Diachronic) must be prioritised, it has limitations, and should be complemented by ‘Synchronic’ approaches such as “the rhetorical, narrative, semiotic and others.”¹⁵ It further acknowledges the modern contributions of psychology, sociology and anthropology, and gives some cautioned merit to feminist and liberationist approaches. It should be noted that the latter was a direct outcome of the Council itself.¹⁶ On the whole, it is most significant to note the sheer openness to science in comparison to *Providentissimus Deus*, and its view of science as inferior to scripture:

[Historical-Criticism] is a method which, when used in an objective manner, implies of itself no a priori. If its use is accompanied by a priori principles, that is not something pertaining to

¹³ Pontifical Biblical Commission, ‘The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church’, Preface, (23 April 1993) <http://www.deiverbum2005.org/Interpretation/interpretation_e.pdf> [Accessed 13 April 2010]

¹⁴ Ugo Vanni, ‘Exegesis and Actualization in the Light of *Dei Verbum*’, in *Vatican II Assessment and Perspectives: Twenty-Five Years After (1962-1987)*, ed. by René Latourelle, 3 vols (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), I, pp. 344-63 (p. 348).

¹⁵ Pontifical Biblical Commission, ‘The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church’, Conclusion.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, E, 14.

the method itself, but to certain hermeneutical choices which govern the interpretation and can be tendentious.¹⁷

The Example of the Fathers

The question then remains: between *Providentissimus Deus* and “The Interpretation”, which bares a closer resemblance to the understanding offered by the Fathers of the Early Church? Two of the greatest theologians of antiquity are considered: Augustine and Origen. It is these two that provide us each with a discussion of exegetical principles. It must be borne in mind however, that their actual exegetical work, which is beyond the span of this essay, shows different tendencies.¹⁸

Augustine is an appropriate starting point because he is frequently referred to in discussion of Exegesis, for example as an authority in the two Encyclicals above. In fact Augustine is key, because *Dei Verbum* refers to his principles no less than three times.¹⁹ Augustine’s approach to scripture is outlined in a text called *De Doctrina Christiana* (On Christian Doctrine). One of the cites from *Dei Verbum* refers to this, while a second important statement refers to *The City of God*. An additional key usage of *De Doctrina Christiana* occurs in Pius XII’s *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. These three references will be examined.

Dei Verbum states, in line with point 3 in the previous discussion, that

¹⁷ Ibid., I, A, 4.

¹⁸ Frances Young, ‘Interpretation of Scripture’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. by Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 846-63 (p. 855, 858).

¹⁹ As displayed in the footnotes of *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* pp. 975-7.

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.²⁰

The reader is referred to a chapter in *De Doctrina Christiana* titled “We Must Take into Consideration the Time at Which Anything Was Enjoyed or Allowed.” The Opening verse reads...

We must also be on our guard against supposing that what in the Old Testament, making allowance for the condition of those times, is not a crime or a vice even if we take it literally and not figuratively, can be transferred to the present time as a habit of life.²¹

The context of this passage is a discourse on sexual morality. The accompanying paragraph states simply that the true intent of scripture is to overthrow rather than uphold the outdated sexual practices (e.g. polygamy) reflected in the Old Testament, which is quite different to the Historical-Critical contention of *Dei Verbum*.

The assertion in *Dei Verbum* that refers to *The City of God* is that “in the Bible God has spoken through human agents to humans.”²² The corresponding verse from Augustine occurs within a complex argument. After explaining that the Kingdom of Saul was never meant to last forever, but rather that it symbolised the truly eternal kingdom, he goes on to analyse the verse “The Lord will seek Him a man” (1 Sam 13.14).²³ While the ‘man’, he argues, refers either to David or Jesus, “speaking through a man, [God] speaks as a

²⁰ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 3, 12 in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* pp. 975-7 (p. 976).

²¹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book III, 18, 26, (trans. by J. F. Shaw) in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Series I*, ed. by Philip Schaff, 14 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark/Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1886), II: *St Augustine's: City of God and Christian Doctrine*, pp. 513-97 (p. 564) <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.v.html>> [Accessed 1 May 2010].

²² Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 3, 12 in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* pp. 975-7 (p. 976).

²³ As quoted by Augustine and translated by Dods in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, pp. 1-511 (p. 346) <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.ii.html>> [Accessed 1 May 2010]

man, and in this sense seeks us.”²⁴ Here, Augustine does betray a sense of the human author of scripture. But his use of this is limited to a hermeneutic principle with no evident historicism.

Now we move on from Vatican II, and return to Pius XII. *Divino Afflante Spiritu* dedicates a small section to the importance of Biblical Hebrew and Greek, beginning its argument thus:

The Fathers of the Church in their time, especially Augustine, warmly recommended to the Catholic scholar, who undertook the investigation and explanation of the Sacred Scriptures, the study of the ancient languages and recourse to the original texts.²⁵

The document cites *De Doctrina Christiana*. Here, Augustine is dealing with the issue of how to find the meaning of obscure figurative signs, to what end he recommends “the knowledge of languages.”²⁶ Again, his contention does not appear to match the scientific attitude of the Encyclical (not that the Pope necessarily intended to mislead in that regard). In fact, Pius’ predecessor Leo XIII argued in much the same way that the Greek and Hebrew text (as opposed to the Vulgate) should be used “wherever there may be ambiguity or want of clearness.”²⁷

So Augustine does not appear to provide a good case for aligning Vatican II over Vatican I or *Providentissimus Deus* with the Fathers. Would a second attempt with another great figure yield a similar result?

²⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, Book XVII, 6, in *Ibid.*, (p. 346).

²⁵ Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, II, 1, 14, in *The Papal Encyclicals*, pp. 65-79 (p. 69).

²⁶ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book II, 16, 23, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, pp. 513-97 (p. 543).

²⁷ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 13, in *The Papal Encyclicals* pp. 325-39 (p. 330).

Origen is considered one of great figures of the Early Church. He also appears to be the first Christian biblical scholar. But in his own time he was controversial and his works ended up getting condemned as heretical. Typical of this was his view of inspired scripture. He was notorious for his heavily allegorical exegetical methods, which would later provoke the reactionary ‘Antiochene’ school of interpretation.²⁸ It should also be noted that while Augustine represents the Christian West, Origen and his opponents represent the East.

For our purposes, it is sufficient simply to examine his perspective on the authorship of the Bible. In Book IV of *De Principiis* (On First Principles), Origen is explicit:

If any one, moreover, consider the words of the prophets with all the zeal and reverence which they deserve, it is certain that, in the perusal and careful examination thus given them, he will feel his mind and senses touched by a divine breath, and will acknowledge that the words which he reads were no human utterances, but the language of God; and from his own emotions he will feel that these books were the composition of no human skill, nor of any mortal eloquence, but, so to speak, of a style that is divine.²⁹

²⁸ This school is often understood as a ‘literal’ one, but it did not restrict its vision to the ‘word’ of scripture. Rather, it was a reaction to the sort of unsubstantiated allegorisation characteristic of Origen and the associated ‘Alexandrian’ school. However, they did, against Origen as much as modern exegetes, hold an historical view of the beginning in Genesis. See Frances Young, ‘The Interpretation of Scripture’, in *The First Christian Theologians: an Introduction to Theology in the Early Church*, ed. by G. R. Evans (Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 24-38 (pp. 31-2).

²⁹ Origen, *De Principiis*, Book IV, 1, 6, (trans. into Latin by Rufinus, into English by Frederick Crombie) in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by A. Cleveland Coxe, American Edition, 9 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark/Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1885), IV: *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, pp. 349-82 (p. 354) <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf04.vi.v.vi.html>> [Accessed 1 May 1, 2010]. Once again, Young points out what is missing from Origen’s discussion of exegesis: “his theory does not enunciate the most significant aspect of his practice: namely, that it is philological analysis of the ‘letter’ which generates the ‘under-sense’. The important thing was to find logical moves from the ‘letter’, of which not a jot or a tittle was to be regarded as insignificant, to the meaning intended by the Holy Spirit.” Frances Young, ‘Interpretation of Scripture’, in *The Oxford Handbook*, pp. 846-63 (p. 855).

Once again, this patristic view sits much more comfortably with attitudes before Vatican II (and by extension Pius XII) than after.

Conclusion

The portrait given in these pages is merely a snapshot. The concepts of biblical inspiration and interpretation constitute a vast area within theology. While this approach to the modern side of the question is based on the most fundamentally relevant texts, and thus seems to answer the question in a sound and straight-forward way, it neglects in particular the more spiritual or hermeneutical dimensions of the subject. It does not examine, for example, the concept of ‘Actualisation’ i.e. the Word within scripture becoming real in the Life of the Church.³⁰ In evaluating the Patristic angle of the question, this approach has been far more limited. It considers two of the greatest theologians, one in the west and one in the East, for their methodological discussions but goes no further. Young points out that reading the Fathers’ actual work gives a different picture. It is difficult also not to notice the absence of tremendous figures like Saint Jerome in this discussion. This analysis has restricted itself to a mere case study in an infinitely greater matrix and makes no claim to give a complete answer. But it does provide a valid angle, and from that it concludes that the Second Vatican Council opened the Catholic world to a more open, dynamic and scientifically sincere view of the Bible, and that while perhaps this attitude may comprise certain qualities of Patristic teaching that the Church had previously lost touch with, the affiliated understanding of inspiration and interpretation (in a literal and mundane sense) steps very firmly away from the

³⁰ See Vanni, ‘Exegesis and Actualization in the Light of *Dei Verbum*’, pp. 344-63.

embarrassingly archaic methodologies available to the otherwise brilliant Fathers of the Early Church.

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This article provided a good general overview of how Vatican II influenced exegesis decades on. However, its use was limited by the fact that the primary source used for that purpose (i.e. "The Interpretation...") is more recent.

Greeley, Andrew, *The Catholic Revolution: New Wine, Old Wineskins, and the Second Vatican Council* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004)

Greeley's account of Vatican II helped me understand how vast its influence was, giving me a sound basis for arguing that it made a big difference to exegesis despite its lack of any particular innovation regarding Revelation.

Vanni, Ugo, 'Exegesis and Actualization in the Light of *Dei Verbum*', in *Vatican II Assessment and Perspectives: Twenty-Five Years After (1962-1987)*, ed. by René Latourelle, 3 vols (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), I, pp. 344-63

This article introduced me to the concept of Actualisation, as well as giving a good summary of *Dei Verbum* 3, 12.

Young, Frances, 'The Interpretation of Scripture', in *The First Christian Theologians: an Introduction to Theology in the Early Church*, ed. by G. R. Evans (Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 24-38

Frances Young appears to be the leading figure in Patristic exegesis. This chapter provided a good overview of that topic.

--- 'Interpretation of Scripture', in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. by Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 846-63

This entry in a handbook includes an excellent layout of the extent writings of the Church Fathers, and so helped me to select my primary sources for that half of my essay.

--- ‘The ‘Mind’ of Scripture: Theological Readings of the Bible in the Fathers’,

International Journal of Systematic Theology, 7 (2) (2005), 126-41

This article provided me with some perspective on the issues surrounding my question today, most explicitly the archaic standing of the methods which led to what is now official Catholic Doctrine.