Sacred Scripture at Vatican II

Francis J. Moloney, SDB
Francis J. Moloney, SDB, is a senior professorial fellow at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia.

Abstract: The documents of the Second Vatican Council are shot through with the language of the Bible, Christian liturgical traditions, and the fathers of the church. The church’s historical journey away from its earlier focus upon these sources was reversed at Vatican II. Two documents deal specifically with the use of the Word of God: Sacrosanctum Concilium (On the Liturgy) and Dei Verbum (On Revelation). \( sc \), the first document to appear (1963), insisted upon a broader and deeper use of the Word of God in the liturgical texts, and in a renewal of the lectionary. Vernacular celebration initiated a regular exposure to sacred Scripture and called for biblically based preaching. Promulgated toward the close of the council (1965), \( dv \) was an epoch-making statement on the function of revelation in the love affair between God and humankind. Crucial teachings upon the role and mutuality of Scripture, tradition, and the magisterium broke new ground in the history of Catholic thought. Not new, but freshly stated, Vatican II insisted upon the unique reception of Jesus Christ at the one table of the Eucharist and the Word. The decades since the council have struggled to respond to the council’s insistence upon the role of the Word of God at the heart of the Catholic Church. The challenge remains. It still remains to be faced in a Catholic world very different from the one that produced \( sc \) and \( dv \).

Keywords: Scripture, revelation, Vatican II, lectionary, Prayer of the Church

Some fifty years after the promulgation of the most important document on the Scriptures from the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), \( Dei Verbum \), it is time to look back and assess what emerged from that critical moment in Catholic Church history.\(^1\) Current reflection on Vatican II often debates whether “the word” of the council be followed, rather than its “spirit.”\(^2\) The following reflection attempts to affirm the ongoing importance of the “word” of the Council, as its “spirit” inevitably affects the life, teaching, and practice of the Catholic Church.

The fathers of Vatican II asked that the Scripture be returned to the centre of the life and practice of the Catholic Church:

It [the church] has always regarded and continues to regard the scriptures, taken together with sacred tradition, as the supreme rule of its faith.\(^3\)

Access to sacred Scripture ought to be widely available to the Christian faithful.\(^4\)
Taught by the holy spirit, the spouse of the incarnate Word, which is the church, strives to reach an increasingly more profound understanding of the sacred scriptures, in order to nourish its children with God’s words.5 This dream is yet to be realized.6 An opening sketch plots a potted history from the eleventh century to the pre-conciliar Catholic community. Two documents from the council that attended to the issue of the place and role of the Scriptures in the Church, Sacrosanctum Concilium and Dei Verbum, are then surveyed. An assessment of the reception and implementation of this teaching will follow, concluding with some speculation about the future. “The crucial process of reception, that all-important part of any church council, can take several generations. It continues today.”7

Some History

A turning point in the history of the church was the reform carried out by Pope Gregory VII (1028–1085), in the eleventh century.8 In order to protect the proper autonomy of the church and its mission, Gregory insisted that the pope had authority over all ecclesiastical offices and also over the authority of the secular princes themselves.9 Gregory set in motion a gradual yet inexorable shift away from a church whose foundation lay in the Scriptures, theological tradition, and sacramental practice to a church whose foundation lay in law. Gregory’s reforms preserved the autonomy of the church at a difficult time in European history. However, as one commentator has observed, “One may wonder whether the juridical means used to achieve this end may not have overshadowed the desired effect. The desired freedom was won, but the fundamental ‘sacramentalism’ of the church was somewhat forgotten in the face of the overriding insistence that the church is a juridically structured society.”10

The response to the Reformation at the Council of Trent (1545–1563) introduced significant reform, but it was accompanied by an increasing pattern of ecclesiastical defensiveness.11 The Protestants attacked the visible and institutional church (e.g., papacy, priesthood, sacraments), and this had to be defended. During the following century it was claimed that the church was a societas perfecta, a “perfect society.” This did not mean that the church was morally perfect, but that it was completely self-sufficient. In a stress of its institutional features, too little attention was given to the investigation of the church’s origins in the life and teaching of Jesus, its spiritual nature, in association with Jesus’s preaching of the reigning presence of God, and its mission as an expression of the Trinitarian missions of the Son and Holy Spirit from the Father. The Enlightenment, an intellectual movement that has produced so much that is good for the modern era, rejected as false what could not be proved and was very skeptical about a revealed religion. Revolutions in the United States of America (1775–1783), France (1789, 1848),
Germany (1848), Italy (1848–1849), and Russia (1905, 1917–1918) often aimed their anger against the Catholic Church. The church belonged to the ancien régime. In many ways, it had constructed it and had received many privileges from those political and social arrangements. The more modern movements promised much to an oppressed people asking for democracy. The Catholic Church responded by centralizing all authority in the papacy, culminating in the declaration of the infallibility of the pope at Vatican i in 1870. Most twentieth-century Roman Catholics lived “the spirit” of Vatican i that took teaching on papal infallibility further than the intentions of the Council. Associated with this, the church’s leadership did little to instruct the practising Catholics on the treasures of their faith, and their concomitant responsibilities. This led, inevitably, to a form of abdication of responsibility among Catholic lay people that persists.

It is crucial, however, to recall the more charismatic movements that emerged in the life of the church in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They produced Vatican ii. This period was marked by a great growth of religious congregations that broke from the monastic traditions to turn to the urgent needs of the people, especially the service of the poor and the missionary activity of the church. This was matched by the steady increase of lay participation in the church’s mission. A renewed appreciation of the passion for the Scriptures that dominated the teaching and writing of the fathers of the church (e.g., Origen [ca. 184–ca. 254], Augustine [354–430], Athanasius [296–373], and Cyril of Alexandria [378–444]), and the leadership of the popes in difficult times, especially Leo the Great (440–461) and Gregory the Great (590–604) entered the Catholic academy. These figures, among others, had been extremely formative of recent reflection upon the Catholic tradition.

After an initial hesitation to accept the critical approach to the Bible that had its beginnings in the Enlightenment and the English deist movement, in 1893, Pope Leo xiii issued Providentissimus Deus, urging Catholic scholars, with due caution, to embrace a critical reading of the Word of God, which, he insisted, was the very soul of theology. To mark the fiftieth anniversary of that epoch-making encyclical, in 1943 Pius xii invited all Catholic scholars to embrace more critical methods in his encyclical Divino Afflante Spiritu. Silently, and often behind closed doors, work on the biblical, liturgical, and patristic sources of Catholic life and faith had been increasing in depth and breadth across the latter half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries.

Dom Gueranger, osb, the abbot of Solesmes (1837–1875), set in motion a rebirth in interest in liturgical theology and practice. The figure of Marie-Joseph Lagrange, op, was an outstanding Catholic biblical scholar, associated with the foundation of the École Biblique de Jérusalem. On the basis of these and other scholars and institutions, the giants of Vatican ii were poised for the opportunity rethink the scriptural basis for all aspects of theology, liturgical life, and the mystery of the church itself, rooted in the mystery of the Trinity.
Bubbling below the surface of the life and practice of the pre-conciliar Catholic Church were movements asking for intellectual, liturgical, theological, and structural change. It would take Vatican II to bring these two aspects of the Catholic Church of the twentieth century together in a manner that saw an emergence of enthusiastic reformers. But they did not emerge from a vacuum. Naturally, the more legal and less biblically founded traditions continued. Biblical and liturgical renewal met steady opposition from those who saw the church as a perfect society, juridical, and governed by an infallible pope. For the first time in the church’s history, Vatican II saw the emergence of a previously silent group: bishops from the Third World, and strong figures from beyond the Iron Curtain. Since then, they have begun to raise a “new voice,” no one more so than for archbishop of Krakow, Poland, who was to become Pope John Paul II. This “voice” is hard to identify. One cannot speak of a single voice. Some (especially the African and former communist regime bishops) tend stoutly to defend traditional practices. However, given the tribal and complex religious backgrounds, some of these Catholic leaders (Africans, Indians, and Asians), are more open to dialogue, especially on liturgical diversity.

The Teaching and Recommendations of Vatican II

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium, was one of the first conciliar documents to appear, promulgated at the end of the second session on December 4, 1963. Ideological struggles within the council had begun to appear during the first session in 1962. A feature of this conflict between what has been called the conservative and the progressive elements in the council was the rejection of the Preparatory Commission’s schemes De Ecclesia and De Fontibus Revelationis, in the first session (November 1962). The fruit of bitter debates that ran through the course of the council, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum, was finally promulgated as the council came to an end after the fourth session. Paul VI promulgated it on November 18, 1965. Theological and pastoral maturation took place between the promulgation of Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963) and Dei Verbum (1965). Factions and ideological differences played into the formulation of documents. They are the result of compromise, even though all documents were accepted with huge majorities prior to their papal promulgation.

Sacrosanctum Concilium

When the conciliar document on the sacred liturgy was promulgated in late 1963 the entire Catholic Church was amazed by its boldness. Principles were stated in the document that promised to make the liturgy, so crucial to
Catholic faith and practice, understandable to all peoples and cultures. The introduction of the vernacular into liturgical celebrations, the renewal of the liturgical year, renewal of liturgical books, including the lectionary, permission for clergy to concelebrate, respect for local cultures, their music, and their rites, and an increased respect for differing forms of art and architecture were unexpected. These practices were only a dream for a handful of Catholics in the pre-conciliar period. However, the document still protects many pre-conciliar traditions: the primacy of the Latin Mass, the single celebrant, control of the Holy See, the control of a “competent territorial ecclesiastical authority” or a local Ordinary over all change, no matter how insignificant some of it may appear to us today.

A positive feature of this first Constitution to emerge from Vatican ii is its language, a new “literary form” for church documents never seen before. Almost every affirmation, either theological or pastoral, is inspired or supported by the use of biblical texts. This characteristic is an indication of the decision of the fathers of the council, responding to a desire of Pope John XXIII, to turn away from a juridical approach, to speak to the whole church in more biblical, patristic, and liturgical language. This practice continued and strengthened as the council unfolded. It is not a direct exhortation for the church to devote more attention to the Scriptures, but demonstrates what happens when the riches of the biblical text are well used in theological and pastoral discourse.

Sacrosanctum Concilium recognizes the central importance of Scripture in the readings, the Psalms, the hymns, and the preaching, and recommends “that warm and lively appreciation of sacred scripture to which the venerable tradition of both eastern and western rites gives testimony.” Living in the Catholic Church of the 1940s till the 1960s, my contemporaries have no memory of a “warm and lively appreciation for sacred scripture.” Biblical texts, following a one-year cycle, were read during Mass in Latin and were seldom the basis of a homily. Catholics popularly regarded the Bible as a Protestant book. In paragraph 35, the council gives a number of directives about the use of Scripture: there must be a richer selection of texts, preaching is to be more biblical, and Bible services are to be encouraged as vigils for important feasts, especially in those places where a priest is unavailable. A shadow of what will later be said appears in paragraph 48, where an instruction is given concerning the participants in the liturgy: “They should be formed by God’s word, and be nourished at the table of the Lord’s Body.” This is some distance from the “one table of the word of God word and the Body of Christ,” but it is an early indication of things to come. Finally, among the norms, there is a further repetition of the need for more Scripture in celebrations, and a more representative portion of the Scriptures in the lectionary.

The bulk of the document is made up of norms, carefully legislating who will be responsible for the new initiatives, many of which have subsequently
developed beyond anything the council had in mind. One lost opportunity is the chapter dedicated to the renewal of the celebration of the Divine Office. There is no recognition that the Office is a continuous and cyclic praying of the Scriptures, reflecting an ancient Jewish practice adopted by Christian monasticism. Instruction on the renewed “Prayer of the Church” bringing the Psalter, the biblical prayer of Israel, into the church’s prayer, would have been helpful to Catholics who have little knowledge of the role of the Psalms in the life of God’s people. Instead, attention is focused upon such matters as the obligation to recite the office, the need to read from the lives of the saints, and the need to recite the Office in Latin. Sacrosanctum Concilium gives more space to the liturgical year, sacred music, and sacred art and furnishings than to the use of Scripture in the life and liturgy of the church.

Nevertheless, given the centuries-long history of solid resistance to change within the Catholic tradition, this first document from Vatican II ushered in dramatic developments that irrevocably marked the post-conciliar church and changed the face of the liturgical practice of the Roman Church in a way not intended by the majority of the council fathers.

**Dei Verbum**

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation was one of the great battlefields of the council. The final document is an epoch-making statement on the communication that takes place between God and the human condition through Scripture and tradition. This is not the place to rehearse all the debates and difficulties. The Constitution still reflects unresolved tensions. Nevertheless, progress had taken place in the conciliar agenda between Sacrosanctum Concilium and Dei Verbum. The preface to the document states unequivocally that the council wishes “to set forth the authentic teaching on divine revelation and its transmission. For it wants the whole world to hear its summons to salvation, so that through hearing it may believe, through belief it may hope, through hope it may come to love.” The intimate link between revelation and the Christian commitment to faith, hope, and love is established in a way unheard of in earlier teaching on revelation.

Throughout the document, Scripture and tradition are intimately linked. Both serve “to make the people of God live their lives in holiness and increase their faith” and “converse with the spouse of his beloved Son.” The two different sources for revelation are now regarded as one. The theological principal is stated unequivocally in paragraph 9: “Sacred tradition and sacred scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. Flowing from the same divine well-spring, both of them merge, in a sense, and move towards the same goal.” This is a major contribution to the history of Roman Catholic thought. Chapters dealing with Scripture, its inspiration and interpretation, the Old Testament, and the New Testament follow. The council follows Pius XII’s Divino Afflante Spiritu Francis J. Moloney
Sacred Scripture at Vatican II

in endorsing the use of critical methods to interpret the Scriptures, but cautiously insists on the essential historicity of the gospels and their apostolic origins. It also asks for interpretation of the biblical text in the light of the fathers of West and East and the sacred liturgy. Correctly the council fathers insist that “no less attention must be devoted to the content and the unity of the whole of scripture, taking into account the tradition of the entire church and the analogy of faith.”

This teaching of *Dei Verbum* has led many to insist that the Catholic scholar should never push at the boundaries of interpretation, but work only under the guidance of the teaching office of the church. *Dei Verbum* 10 indicates that this need not always be the case:

But the task of giving an authentic interpretation of 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. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. The magisterium is not superior to the word of God, but is rather its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the holy Spirit, it listens to this devoutly, guards it reverently and expounds it faithfully.

This passage needs careful exegesis and depends a great deal upon the distinction made between “the word of God” and “the magisterium.” The teaching office of the church has come to be known (relatively recently) as the magisterium. It is important to understand that what is said in *Dei Verbum* 10 does not disrupt the unity between the word of God and the Scriptures in paragraph 9. The magisterium is a third element: the interpretative ministry of the church’s leadership, “exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.” This is evident in the structure of *Dei Verbum* itself when it deals with the transmission of revelation. It first presents Scripture, then the dual role of tradition in forming Scripture and handing it on, followed by the union between Scripture and tradition in a revelation that flows “from the same divine well-spring.” Finally, *Dei Verbum* 10 explains the role of the magisterium: listening humbly to the word of God that comes to it in both Scripture and tradition. The magisterium is not revelation, but humbly serves God’s self-revelation.

The council fathers dedicated the final chapter of *Dei Verbum* to “Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church.” This section of the document opens with one of the most memorable statements from Vatican II: “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as it has venerated the Body of the Lord, in that it never ceases, above all in the sacred liturgy, to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the table of the word of God and the Body of Christ.” The parallel between the reception of the Eucharist and the reception of God’s word from the same table strikes the Catholic mind and heart forcibly. There may have been a time when the Scriptures and the Eucharist were equally venerated, but it was not the case in
the pre-conciliar church. Dei Verbum asked that a series of initiatives and practices be put in place to see that the Scriptures be restored to their place of veneration, side by side with traditional Catholic veneration of the Eucharist:

- Provide access to the biblical text through accurate and correct translations
- Come to a deeper understanding of the Scriptures by reading them in the light of the patristic interpretations and the liturgy
- Make the Scriptures a source for theological reflection, and not just a tool: “The study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology”
- Ensure that all clergy have an adequate understanding of the Scriptures to enrich their preaching and pastoral ministry
- Commission the bishops to ensure that these norms are put into place

This rich section of Dei Verbum closes in dv 26 in a way that parallels its opening: “Just as from constant attendance at the eucharistic mystery the life of the church draws increase, a new impulse of spiritual life may be expected from an increased veneration of the word of God, which ‘stands forever’ (Is. 40:8; see 1 Peter 1:23–25).”

The long gestation that ran from the council’s beginnings in 1962 till its closing moments in 1965 enabled the fathers of the council to come to a greater awareness of the centrality of the Scriptures and to repeat the words of Saint Jerome: “Ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of Christ.” Their hope was that this conciliar document, assisted by the liturgical renewal initiated by Sacrosanctum Concilium, would set in motion a renewal of Catholic focus on the word of God.

Reception and Implementation

We may be too close to council to record the lasting fruits of Vatican II, and doubtless different parts of the Catholic world have responded differently. The South American, Asian, and African churches appear to be healthier than the traditionally powerful and wealthy churches of the West. I am able only to record my personal experiences, gained from my life in the Catholic Church on two continents, where I taught from 1999 to 2005. However, on this limited basis, aware of those limitations, some impressions can be shared. We must also be aware, especially in these exciting times, under the prophetic leadership of Pope Francis, that fifty years from now the following observations may show themselves to be provisional and only passing. Fifty years is a short time in the church’s story! Practising Catholics in the United States and in the Australian Catholic Church have not been significantly proactive in the biblical and liturgical renewal. Pre-conciliar American and Australian
Catholics were loyal to their parish, their priests, and unquestioningly accepted the decisions of their bishops, not to mention an infallible pope. Not much was expected of Vatican II. After the first session a senior Australian bishop (Bishop Muldoon of Sydney) announced that nothing had changed and nothing would change. This situation was challenged by the publication of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* at the end of the second session.

The council’s document on the liturgy was fundamental in developing a deep interest in the role of the word of God in the life and practice of the church. The gradual introduction of English into the celebration of Eucharist and the sacraments, and especially the eventual production of the post-conciliar lectionary, stirred the minds and imaginations of many. The first twenty years after the council were marked by great excitement and a growth of interest in the Scriptures. Practising Catholics began to hear, for the first time, from the historical, wisdom, and legislative texts of the Old Testament. Who were the prophets? When did they live and what was their role in the life and faith of Israel? Why are there four gospels? What are the differences between Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? Who was Paul? Why is he so important? By the time *Dei Verbum* was promulgated in late 1965 these questions were emerging. The idea that going to Mass was now a privileged moment when the church “receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and Christ’s body” led to an enthusiastic and excited response from the bulk of practising Catholics. It must be noted that such novelties were—at all times, as at the council itself—strongly rejected by a small but vociferous minority.

These early days led important initiatives from the bishops, the leaders of Religious congregations, and many lay groups. The biblical education provided by the seminaries was entirely reviewed. This was supported by groups of Catholic Religious leaders, supported by the bishops, to unite what had been very small “houses of formation” into a single (originally) Catholic theological institution, drawing rich resources from across all the earlier independent bodies. The Chicago Theological Union, the Washington Theological Union, and Catholic participation in the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley had their beginnings in these days and very quickly introduced important ecumenical relationships into biblical and theological education. Over the 1960s and 1970s the academic formation of a number of Catholic scholars in the best European and American universities reached a peak, and a number of internationally significant North American and Australian Catholic biblical scholars emerged.

In Australia, Religious congregations also gathered to form the Yarra Theological Union, based largely upon the structure and curriculum of the Chicago Theological Union. A smaller Catholic union, the association of a smaller group of Religious with local seminarians, directly dependent upon the bishops was founded in Melbourne: Catholic Theological College. As in the United States and Canada, the ecumenical association of these theological...
institutions with larger formerly Protestant academic degree-giving bodies, such as the Melbourne College of Divinity, first founded in 1910, and the newer ecumenical centres founded for similar purposes (Brisbane College of Divinity, Sydney College of Divinity, Adelaide College of Divinity) were a further challenge to excellence. The Protestant churches relied heavily on the expert and passionate use of the Scriptures in their life and practice. This rubbed off onto their new Catholic partners.

The increasing expertise spilled out to the people and to the ongoing formation of bishops and priests. Bishops, Religious, and lay groups invited significant international biblical scholars to run seminars that were heavily attended. The religious education curricula were rewritten in almost every diocese, focusing more intensely on the Scriptures. Many lay groups sprang up, from small Bible groups in the parishes, looking ahead to the lectionary readings of the following Sunday, to larger groups that followed biblical study programs like the Little Rock program. Those who had received formal training were in great demand and gave of themselves generously to gatherings of bishops, priests, Religious, educators, and people from all parts of the country. Well-informed popular commentaries were provided by the scholars in parish newsletters, and a number of books were published to guide both priests and people through the lectionary. It was not all plain sailing. Some Catholics objected to this Protestant-like enthusiasm for the Scriptures that shifted doctrine from centre-stage, and groups sprang up to oppose the renewal of religious education in the schools.

The initial fervour has run into hard times, as Christian practice has run into hard times in the developed world. It is difficult to pinpoint just when and where this enthusiasm ran out of steam. It was not dramatic but the result of gradual cultural change that has touched all aspects of life in the developed world. However outstanding the intellectual gifts and holiness of Pope John Paul II (1978–2005) and Pope Benedict XVI (2005–2013), church leadership encouraged a slowing enthusiasm and a strong focus upon decisions and directions determined by the holy father and other Vatican authorities. The startling newness that has accompanied the administration of Pope Francis is clear evidence of that historical reality. For thirty-five years attention shifted from the renewal initiated by Vatican II, to a leadership more attentive to a central authority, accompanied by ritual correctness. The singular most obvious sign of this return to “centralization” was the imposition of a new translation of the English Mass, more faithful to the Latin, upon all English-speaking Catholic communities in the world. The inappropriateness of this clumsy and sometimes despairingly opaque translation is universally recognized.

The lectionary is under review, as priests and people find the readings too long and without apparent internal logic. This could be a good opportunity for a resumption of some of the principles enunciated by Sacrosanctum Concilium and Dei Verbum, but the signs of the more broadly based biblical renewal requested by the council are lacking. National and local seminars devoted
to biblical questions have all but come to an end, and regular exchange of international biblical scholars is waning. Among some who have come to Australia, a few have been banned from speaking in various dioceses.

The lay-directed biblical centres still operating are prone to use evangelical texts and practices for their seminars, meetings, and publications. In Australia, the scholars trained in the 1960s and 1970s, now in their seventies, are still required to do their best, but their energies are diminishing. The situation is better in the United States and Canada, where many universities run major research centres and doctoral programs in biblical studies. However, even with these rich resources, in my years in the Biblical Studies Department, the majority of the students came from Protestant backgrounds. The presence of priests and Religious was minimal. I suspect that that the dramatic shortage of candidates for the priesthood and the religious life is a major reason for this phenomenon.

This is certainly the case in Australia. We experience an almost complete absence of young priests and Religious doing further studies and research in biblical studies. There is a small trickle of well-prepared Catholic lay people, trained overseas and now in the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy at Australian Catholic University, the University of Divinity, and other theological schools. But it is difficult to find employment in traditional seminaries and theological institutions that do not have the funds to pay a professional salary to a lay person with a family, or to support post-doctoral research programs. Finding an academic position once one has a qualification is almost impossible in Australia and increasingly difficult in North America.

The challenge of placing the Scriptures at the heart of the life of the church articulated in Sacrosanctum Concilium and Dei Verbum was the fruit of considerable conflict at the council. Now, almost fifty years after the council began, strange forces are at play within the Catholic community. Conflict is again in place, as at the council. The group described as “minority,” whose agenda was regularly defeated at the council, have had a firm hand on the helm of the Catholic Church at most levels of governance for thirty-five years. It will take time and courageous leadership to change this direction, and perhaps Pope Francis and his successors will provide it. An Ecumenical Council is the highest level of the church’s magisterium and must not be ignored.

Two significant publications from the Holy See show that the council’s teaching on the centrality of the Scriptures in the life of the church has not been received and implemented. The first is the 1993 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church. Second, Benedict xvi entrusted the 2008 Synod of Bishops with a theme: The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church. He subsequently released his fine post-synodal exhortation, Verbum Domini. Both documents, very different in scope and content, respond to the request of the agenda initiated by DV 21–26. The need for Benedict xvi to state his aim
“to point out fundamental approaches to a rediscovery of God’s word in
the life of the Church as a well-spring of constant renewal” indicates that,
more than fifty years after the promulgation of Sacrosanctum Concilium, this
rediscovery and renewal is yet to be achieved.

Recent Catholic leadership has strongly urged a return to ritual and
mystery, an insistence on unified dress, often asking for the ornate rather
than the practical, unified words and actions, ignoring the requests of episcopal
conferences for inculcated Eucharistic celebrations, and so forth. The same
leadership responds to conflicts that emerge in an increasingly complex world
with sometimes high-handed and poorly motivated magisterial pronounce-
ments. This is happening while the practising Catholic population is dwindling
dramatically. It is claimed that the largest Christian denomination in the United
States is made up of former Catholics. In a recently conducted Survey of
Religious Institutes in Australia, it has been calculated that 6,000 young
baptised Catholics reject Catholicism every year.

One could suggest that, despite all the hopes of the council fathers and
an initial exciting reception and implementation of the teaching of Vatican II
on Scripture, a long-term, coordinated, and committed engagement of the
Catholic Church with the word of God is either not happening or has not
borne fruit. Perhaps the initiative of Benedict XVI’s Verbum Domini may elicit
a response. It has been strongly supported by Pope Francis’s lengthy treatment
of the word of God and the homily in the life of the church in Evangelii
Gaudium. However, I suspect bishops, priests, Religious, and active Catholics
are worried by matters they consider more urgent for the ongoing life of the
church than the Scriptures. But we must not give up hope. As I wrote above,
fifty years is a short time in the history of the Catholic Church. Like the great
Council of Trent, which took centuries to generate the church dreamt of by those Catholic leaders who had to grapple with the shock of the Protestant
Reform, so will it also be with the great Vatican Council II.

Conclusion

Perhaps the word of God must be “caught not taught.” All four gospels, and
the Pauline tradition, tell the story of Jesus, albeit in their different ways. A
return to the gospel is a good place to start reading Jesus’s story, but reading
is not enough. It can be claimed that the radical living of gospel values has
never been practised by the great churches. Measured according to this
standard, we have failed as followers of Jesus: “For the Son of Man also
came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for
many.”

It is his story that gave birth to the Christian tradition, and the ongoing
telling of the scriptural story is essential to the ongoing life and relevance of
that tradition. As Yann Martel wrote in *Beatrice and Virgil*, “Stories—individual stories, family stories, national stories—are what stitch together the disparate elements of human existence into a coherent whole. We are story animals.” Mystery and ritual have their place, they are central to the *internal* ongoing life and practice of the Church. To tell Jesus’s story effectively, more is called for. We must “put on Christ” (Gal 3:27) or, as the author of 1 John would put it, “walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6). Paul inserts a hymn into his letter to the Philippians, most likely used by the Philippians themselves in their liturgies. He uses the hymn to instruct them on what it means to “have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,” telling of Jesus’s loving self-gift in Philippians 2:5–11. They are asked to put their lives where their words are. Once this process, the driving agenda of Pope Francis, is firmly in place *within* the Catholic Church, then the creative and life-giving power of the word of God will be visible to those *outside the Church.*

Regular practice of the Catholic faith is waning in the Western world. Some are pinning their hopes upon what is called “the Francis effect,” claiming that the present papacy is drawing former Catholics back to the church and generating interest in the Church from non-Catholics. I regard this as a passing fad, as (despite some signs of hope) major leaders in the Catholic hierarchy continue a winning battle *against* Francis’s agenda. Two crucial figures, the cardinal prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine and the Faith (Cardinal Gerhard Müller) and the cardinal prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and Sacraments (Cardinal Robert Sarah) are outstanding in this. The former, an appointment of Benedict XVI, was confirmed by Francis and the latter Francis’s appointment. In two crucial areas that touch upon the daily life of the Catholic Church, these two men continue to lead the church in ways that reject Francis’s agenda. They devote little or no attention to the sensitivities of the church at large. Conservative bishops continue to be appointed all over the world. The prophetic gestures of Francis are stimulating, but the day-to-day administration of the Catholic Church shows little interest in “the Francis effect.”

As this is the reality we must face, I suggest that the word of God should not primarily be a spoken word, but something that is *seen and experienced* in the way we live and love, inspired by our being nourished at the one table of the word of God and the body and blood of Christ. We cannot be Catholics unless we preach the gospel at all times (see 1 Cor 9:16; Rom 1:14; 2 Tim 4:2), but we are struggling to make that Word live in a world that those who constructed Vatican II never imagined possible. There is a serious disjuncture between Catholicism of the 1960s and that of the early third millennium that we must recognize. An important contribution of Vatican II to the Catholic Church of the late 1960s was *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes).* But that document addressed the world of the 1960s. We now face the dilemma of “the church in the postmodern world” of the third millennium.
Is it possible that we might bring Scripture back into the life and practice of the church by “telling the story” of Jesus better in our preaching, in our behaviour, in our commitment to our earth, and to education that is “sourced by the gospel”? We might thus better reflect the presence of Christ in the life and practice of our Catholic Church. It was the dream of the fathers of Vatican II, and it is time we returned to the dream.

Notes
1 The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum) was promulgated on November 18, 1965. The Latin title for Dei Verbum and Sacrosanctum Concilium will be provided in the text, but paragraph references will use the abbreviations dv and sc. All citations are taken from Austin Flannery, ed., The Basic Sixteen Documents. Vatican Council II. Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations. A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1995).
2 Those who ask for more attention to “the word” of the council suggest that what was actually said at the church at Vatican II is not known. See the influential comments of Joseph Ratzinger, The Ratzinger Report (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985), 29–42; Henri de Lubac, A Brief Catechism on Nature and Grace (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984), 235–260. Others regard this approach as freezing the council in the “world and words” of the 1960s and thus ask that “the spirit” of the council guide its interpretation and implementation in the third millennium. For further reflections on this rift among post-conciliar Catholics, see Neil Ormerod, “Vatican II: Continuity or Discontinuity? Toward an Ontology of Meaning,” Theological Studies 71 (2010): 609–636; and Richard R. Gaillardetz, The Church in the Making, Rediscovering Vatican II Series (New York: Paulist, 2006), 145–147.
3 Dei Verbum ( DV ) 21.
4 Ibid. 22.
5 Ibid. 23.
8 See Yves Congar, L’Église de saint Augustin à l’époque modern (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 102–112. For the summary that follows, see Gaillardetz, Church in the Making, 41–42.
9 Spectacularly symbolized by the submission of Henry VII (emperor of the Holy Roman Empire) to Gregory VII at Canossa in 1077.
12 Recourse to increasingly totalitarian form of government in the face of conflicting ideologies is complex. Simplistic historical analysis should be avoided. Some fifty years after Vatican I, for example, Germany and Italy readily accepted the regimes of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini.
13 As a result of the request from Vatican II that religious communities undertake renewal by carefully examining their academic origins (see Perfectae Caritatis 2), many studies of the religious congregations founded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have appeared.

14 Given the context of the late nineteenth century, Leo xiii’s openness to the centrality of the word of God to the life of the church is remarkable. The claim of *Dei Verbum* 24 that the study of the sacred page “should be the very soul of sacred theology” was first articulated in *Providentissimus Deus* 16. On these two encyclicals, see Francis J. Moloney, *Reading the New Testament in the Church: A Primer for Pastors, Religious Educators, and Believers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 9–12.


16 This terminology was widely used inside and outside the Council Hall, to refer to the ideological stances taken by different council fathers. O’Malley, *What Happened*, 292–93 recognizes this, but prefers to refer to the groups as “minority” (conservatives) and “majority” (progressives). A remarkable first-hand witness to these tensions, which did not ease as the Council progressed, is now available in the sprawling and highly personal Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, trans. Denis Minns et al. (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2012).

17 See *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (sc) 1–2.


19 *sc* 24.

20 *dv* 21.

21 *sc* 51.

22 For example, concelebration is permitted only for the Masses of Holy Thursday, during councils, synods, and bishops’ conferences, for the blessing of an abbot, conventual Mass and at priests’ meetings, regulated by the local bishop (para. 57). Although heavily reworked and rewritten, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is the only document from the Preparatory Commission, chaired by Cardinal Ottaviani, which survived the first session of the council. Its schemas on revelation and on the church were rejected in November 1961. Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, 829–830, witnesses his respect for Ottaviani: “Now the laws are being changed. He will have to change his norms. That will be difficult for him, but he will give himself to the new rules, and will see to their observance. There is a certain nobility of the faithful old servant” (recorded on October 30, 1965).

23 *sc* 83–101.

24 Ibid. 95.

25 Ibid. 97.


27 *sc* 102–111.

28 Ibid. 112–121.

29 Ibid. 122–129.

30 This is but one example of the tension within contemporary Catholicism between those who wish to interpret the council literally, asking for obedience to its “written word,” and those who wish to take the “spirit of the council” further in order to make the church and its practices more relevant to passing times (see above, and n2). Those who point to what *Sacrosanctum Concilium* actually “said” claim that many contemporary practices are aberrations neither mentioned nor approved by the council. This approach legitimates the current return to many pre-conciliar liturgical practices.

31 For a description of these conflicts that continued through all four sessions of the council, see O’Malley, *What Happened*, 144–152, 162, 226–229, 277–280, 291–301. See also, on

1 As with much of the council’s language, this moving expression comes from the patristic tradition. It is based upon Augustine, *De Catechizandis Rudibus* 4, 8 (pl 40, 316).

8 An unresolved tension is found in the words “both of them merge, in a sense” (*in unum quommodo coalescent*). In the light of the differences of opinion (some seeking a restatement of “two sources” and others “one source”) the fathers of the council wisely decided not to attempt a description of how the two merge into one. This is providential. We are dealing with the divine communication with the human. We do not know how this functions, but we are able to state that it happens, as in dv 9. See further, Joseph Ratzinger, “The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (London: Burns & Oates/Herder & Herder, 1967–1969), 3:190–96. See also *Verbum Domini*, 6–21, esp. 17–19.

11–13.

14 An unresolved tension is found in the words “both of them merge, in a sense” (*in unum quommodo coalescent*). In the light of the differences of opinion (some seeking a restatement of “two sources” and others “one source”) the fathers of the council wisely decided not to attempt a description of how the two merge into one. This is providential. We are dealing with the divine communication with the human. We do not know how this functions, but we are able to state that it happens, as in dv 9. See further, Joseph Ratzinger, “The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (London: Burns & Oates/Herder & Herder, 1967–1969), 3:190–96. See also *Verbum Domini*, 6–21, esp. 17–19.

11–13.

15 Ibid. 14–16.

16 Ibid. 17–20.

17 Ibid. 12.


23.

24 Ibid. 8.

25 Ibid. 9.

26 Ibid. 7–9.

27 Ibid. 21–26.

28 Ibid. 21.

29 Ibid. 22.

30 Ibid. 23.

31 Ibid. 24.

32 Ibid. 25a.

33 Ibid. 25b.

34 In *Verbum Domini*, 56, Benedict xvi cites the striking words of Saint Jerome: “When we approach the Mystery, if a crumb falls to the ground we are troubled. Yet when we are listening to the word of God, and God’s word and Christ’s flesh are being poured into our ears we pay no heed” (*Jerome, In Psalmum: ccl* 78, 337–338.

35 Cited in paragraph 25, from the Prologue to Jerome’s *Commentary on Isaiah* (pl 24,17).

36 This is not to say that the Australian Catholic Church, and especially that of the United States, have not produced outstanding Catholic biblical and theological leaders. Some
preceded the work of the council and played a role there, and much of it flourished in the post-conciliar period. In biblical scholarship, the names of the Canadians, David Stanley and Roderick McKenzie, and the Americans, Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland Murphy, come immediately to mind.

There were some impressive “alternative voices” in the United States. One thinks, for example, of Dorothy Day (1897–1980) and the Catholic Worker group. However prophetic she and the movement may have been, they did not “shape” American Catholicism in the pre-conciliar period. Her nemesis, Cardinal Spellman (1889–1967) did that more effectively in his period of ecclesiastical leadership as the cardinal-archbishop of New York (1939–1967). On the Australian Church, see John N. Molony, The Roman Mould of the Australian Church (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1967).

The names and numbers of such scholars from Canada and the United states are impressive. Their dominance of the 1990 publication of Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990), is a good indication of their preparation and skill. Sixty-eight of the seventy-four contributors to this volume were from the United States or Canada. Of the remaining six, four were Australians: Antony F. Campbell, sj, Brendan Byrne, sj, William J. Dalton, sj, and Francis J. Moloney, sod. The remaining non-North Americans were Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, op, of the École biblique et Archéologique de Jérusalem, Israel, and Frans Neirynck, of the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium.

Although not alone, outstanding in this respect has been the long commitment to supporting liturgical and biblical reform by the Liturgical Press in Collegeville, Minnesota, associated with the St. John’s Benedictine community and University.

As one example, during a lecture I was giving to a broad public audience on a gospel portrait of Mary, a group gathered at the back of the lecture theatre and recited the rosary out loud throughout the course of the lecture. They represented a Melbourne group called “Catholics United for the Faith.” Similar groups have emerged in the United States and Canada.

The *Editio Typica* was approved by the Congregation for Divine Worship and Sacraments on June 27, 2010, and the publication of the Roman Missal approved on March 25, 2011. Episcopal conferences in the various English-speaking regions determined the exact date of its implementation. In Australia, it took place on the First Sunday of Advent, 2011.

The document from the biblical commission offers expert instruction on ways in which the biblical text can be interpreted and applied to life in the Church. *Verbum Domini* is a lengthy theological/patristic/spiritual and pastoral application, worked out as a protracted application of John 1:1–18 (see *Verbum Domini*, 5), to the word of God itself (*Verbum Dei*), the Word in the Church (*Verbum in Ecclesia*), and the Word in the World (*Verbum Mundo*). The sections that deal explicitly with Scripture in the life of the church (paras. 72–89 (*The Word of God in the Life of the Church*), paras. 90–124 (*Verbum Mundo*) are challenging, but out of the reach of most contemporary Catholics and even many contemporary priests and bishops.

In an article in *National Catholic Reporter*, April 18, 2011, Thomas Reese reports the conclusions of recent research indicating that one-third of U.S. Catholics have left the church and that one out of every ten Americans is an ex-Catholic. Many of them have gone to Protestant churches. The reasons for this shift in allegiance are “spiritual sustenance, worship services and the Bible.”

Projects Office/Catholic Religious of Australia, 2010), 44. For reflections on the cultural shifts that have generated this situation, among both young and the not-so-young, see Moloney, “Word in the World,” 348–354.


71 Would that the energy and financial resources dedicated to the horror of the clerical abuse of minors were also devoted to re-establishing the word of God at the heart of the life and practice of the church.


73 The never-ending debate whether the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1–7:27) is a way of life, something unachievable but to be strived after, or an impossible dream, could be extended to all the gospels.

74 Mark 10:45. Vincent Taylor, The Gospel According to St. Mark, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1966), 444, claims, “This saying is one of the most important in the Gospels.”

75 Yann Martel, Beatrice and Virgil (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2010), 7.

76 The same rhetorical strategy is adopted by Paul when he inserts his tradition of Jesus’s final meal with his disciples (1 Cor 11:23–25) into his critique of the selfish practices of the Corinthian community. They are exhorted to “live” what they “celebrate” (see esp. v. 26). On this, see Francis J. Moloney, A Body Broken for a Broken People: Divorce, Remarriage, and the Eucharist (New York: Paulist, 2016), 41–69.

77 Among a number of instances, I refer to Cardinal Müller’s strong resistance to the challenge of the Encyclical Amoris Laetitia, especially on the divorced and the remarried, and Cardinal Sarah’s recent request (July 2016), that all priests return to the celebration of Mass ad orientem (i.e., back to the people). Readers will recall Cardinal Sarah’s rejection of Francis’s instruction that the feet of women could be washed at the foot-washing on Holy Thursday. The appointment of bishops is more difficult. The prefect of the Congregation of Bishops (Cardinal Marc Ouellet) is a well-known conservative, determined to maintain the status quo, even though he has now been joined by Archbishop Blaise Cupich. The latter will be one among many, including such powerful ultra-conservative figures as Cardinal George Pell, on the Congregation for Bishops.

78 dv 21, 26.

79 Promulgated on 7 December, 1965.

80 In this, Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’ of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), leads the way.

81 Catechism of the Catholic Church (Homebush: St. Paul Publications, 1994), 752, looking back to Dei Verbum, 21, 26, describes the Church: “She draws her life from the word and body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ’s body.” I would add “and so herself becomes Christ’s word.”