

Vatican Two and the Renewal of the Church

1. The Word of God

Vatican Two was called by Bl. John XXIII as a Council of renewal. In this series of lectures, which come as the Catholic Church is celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the completion of the Council, I pick out three themes from the Council that are proving crucial for the renewal of the Church: (1) The Word of God; (2) Charisms and the charismatic dimension of the Church; and (3) Christian Unity.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Council sought to restore the Word of God to its proper place in Catholic life. Before the Council, there was really no theology of the Word of God in the Catholic Church. This was historically due to the post-Reformation polemics producing an opposition between Word and sacrament, in which the Protestants focused on the Bible as the Word of God and the Catholics majored on the sacraments. In the forty years since the Council, we can see the beginnings of a Catholic theology of the Word.

Two documents of the Council particularly treat of the place of the Word of God:

The Constitution on the Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*)
The Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*)

SC treated the place of the Scriptures in the liturgy of the Church. DV is a Dogmatic Constitution that presents a renewed understanding of Divine Revelation, of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, and the character and place of the Bible in the life of the Church.

What is New as Official Teaching?

1. The liturgy of the Word is an indispensable part of the Mass.

“The two parts, which in a sense go to make up the Mass, .. the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship.” (SC, 56). There had been no mention of the liturgy of the Word in Pius XII’s encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947).

This conviction leads to a section on “The Word of God” in the Catechism under the heading “The Holy Spirit recalls the mystery of Christ”. See CCC, paras. 1100 – 1103. Here we find the key biblical idea that faith comes through hearing the Word (Rom. 10: 17). Here is the first link with the Renewal of the Church. Restoring the Word of God is central to the Renewal of the Church because the proclamation of the Word in faith produces faith in the hearers.

2. “Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church.” (DV, 10).

The Council is not content with the long-standing “Scripture **and** Tradition”, but seeks to emphasize their inter-connectedness.

There is a concern here in speaking of Tradition to distinguish between the apostolic origins (revelation was centred on Jesus himself, on his life and his teaching, it was not by way of writing) and the interpretation of the original revelation in subsequent generations.

3. While the Council manifests this effort at “balancing”, by distinguishing Scripture and Tradition and then holding them together in unity, there is another trend visible in the Council documents. This trend is to exalt Scripture to a higher place, and to insist on its unique irreplaceable role in the Church and in her life.
 - “Since they are inspired by God and committed to writing once and for all time, they present God’s own Word in an unalterable form, and they make the voice of the Holy Spirit sound again and again in the words of the apostles and prophets. It follows that all the preaching of the Church, as indeed the entire Christian religion, should be nourished and ruled by Sacred Scripture.” (DV, 21).
 - It is from the Scriptures that the “actions and signs [of the liturgy] derive their meaning” (SC, 24). In other words, if we do not understand the Scriptures deeply, we cannot understand the liturgy and sacraments correctly.
 - “Christianity is the religion of the ‘Word’ of God, a word which is ‘not a written and mute word, but the Word which is incarnate and living.’ If the Scriptures are not to remain a dead letter, Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, must, **through the Holy Spirit**, ‘open [our] minds to understand the Scriptures.’” (CCC, 108).

Notice too in DV and in the Catechism the teaching on the unique place of the Gospels. “The Gospels are the heart of all the Scriptures because they are our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Saviour.” (CCC, 125, citing DV, 18). Here we find the unique relationship between the Scriptures and the person of Jesus. The centrality of the Bible in Christian life is directly connected with the centrality of Jesus Christ, who “is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation” (DV, 2).

This focus on the centrality of Christ was carried further by John Paul II from the start of his pontificate, as we can see from his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (1979). There is a new density of biblical reflection in John Paul II’s

teaching, evident for example in the opening sections of *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) and *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), but also in many other documents (see the encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986).

4. “Access to sacred Scripture ought to be open wide to the Christian faithful.” (DV, 22)

This recommendation brings to an end the post-Reformation suspicion of Bible-reading by the faithful. We should see this as part of the Council’s teaching on the dignity and the role of the **laity** in the Church encouraging their full and active participation.

Consequences for the Renewal of the Church

1. It is the Holy Spirit who holds everything together

It is the recognition of the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to Christ, to the Church and to the Christian that enables a coherent understanding to emerge (a) in the documents of the magisterium and (b) in all the members of the Church.

Here in particular I draw attention to the links between the person of Jesus, his Body the Church, the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God, the sacraments as the enacted words of the Lord in the Church, and each member of the Church. Without this life-giving and whole-making work of the Holy Spirit, there can be no real renewal of the Church.

2. The Emergence of Evangelization as a Central Theme of Renewal

The term “evangelization” was not prominent at the Council, where the older term “apostolate” was more common. In the Decree on the Missionary Life of the Church (*Ad Gentes*), where the word “evangelization” is more used, it primarily means the work of missionaries and catechists. However, there are one or two places where the teaching anticipates later developments:

- evangelization is described as “the proclamation of Christ by word and the testimony of life” (LG, 35)
- “the whole church is missionary, and the work of evangelization [is] the fundamental task of the people of God” (AG, 35).

With the synod of 1974 and Paul VI’s post-synodal letter *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), evangelization enters into regular Catholic terminology. At first,

evangelization means the proclamation of the basic message about Jesus Christ¹, as we find a new realization that the faith is first communicated by the proclamation of Christ not by the teaching of all Catholic doctrine. As under John Paul II, there was more reflection on the distinction between *initial proclamation* and catechesis, the term “evangelization” came to refer to the Church’s whole ministry of proclamation at all stages and phases of life formation, and the terms “initial proclamation” and “primary proclamation” are used to describe the first stage of evangelization. The goal of the initial proclamation is an initial conversion. “Primary proclamation is addressed to non-believers and those living in religious indifference. Its functions are to proclaim the Gospel and to call for conversion.” (GDC, 61; cf. also 48, 88).

These developments would have been impossible without the opening up to the Scriptures at Vatican Two. There is a direct correlation between the centrality of the Scriptures, the centrality of Jesus, the initial proclamation of Jesus and conversion to God centred on Jesus.

At a celebration in Rome recently for the 40th anniversary of *Dei Verbum* Pope Benedict XVI gave thanks to God because "in recent times, thanks also to the effect of the Dogmatic Constitution 'Dei Verbum,' the fundamental importance of the Word of God has been more profoundly re-evaluated. This has led to renewal in the life of the Church, especially in preaching, catechesis, theology, spirituality, and in the very ecumenical journey itself. The Church must forever renew and rejuvenate herself, and the Word of God, which never ages or expires, is the privileged means to this end."

¹ “The subject of proclamation is Christ who was crucified, died and is risen: through him is accomplished our full and authentic liberation from evil, sin and death; through him God bestows "new life" that is divine and eternal. This is the "Good News" which changes man and his history, and which all peoples have a right to hear.” (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 44).