DEI VERBUM AND THE YEAR OF FAITH

The 1st sheet of our Year of Faith look at the Vatican II document
Dei Verbum, Divine Revelation
By Canon Mervyn Tower

INTRODUCTION

Dei Verbum responds to central questions that the Christian can pose, or others ask us about the Faith: How does God speak to us today? How do we know that the Scriptures are more than mere ancient texts? Is everything in the Bible true? Why are there so many contradictions in the Bible? Why do we still use the Old Testament as the God it portrays is like a God of war and vengeance in contrast to the God of love revealed by Jesus? Did Jesus really say and do that? Isn’t it true that Catholics are not really encouraged to read the Bible unlike Protestants for whom the Bible is central?

Dei Verbum, approved by the Bishops of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, is the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation – the highest grade of Conciliar teaching. As such, it builds upon and unfolds the Scriptures, the Apostolic Fathers, the teaching of previous Councils and the Magisterium (Teaching authority of the Pope and Bishops). This is stated in the Prologue where the Councils of Trent and Vatican I are specifically mentioned and it is witnessed in the footnotes to each section. Dei Verbum consists of six short chapters that explain the nature of God’s revelation and fundamental principles about how we are called to respond to that revelation as the Church community. Behind most of the statements is a history of complex theological debate that in some cases has been going on for centuries. Many comment that Dei Verbum is arguably the most important document of the entire output of Vatican II. Others point to its ‘unfinished agenda’. All agree that full implementation of Dei Verbum has had and continues to have a substantial influence upon the theology of the Church and the life of our parish communities. It is a crucial text for helping to build up our life of faith as individuals and communities.

1. DEI VERBUM CHAPTERS 1 AND 2 (1-10)

After a Prologue, the initial chapters are entitled ‘Divine Revelation’ (Chapter 1) and ‘The Transmission of Divine Revelation’ (Chapter 2). This continues the official response of the Church to the strands of nineteenth and twentieth century scholarship – mainly protestant and increasingly secular - that question the whole basis of revelation.

(a) From the beginning of the text, the Constitution points to its object and its aim with its opening words ‘Dei Verbum religiose audiens’ and quoting in full 1 John 1:2-3. The first two Latin words are well known – ‘The Word of God’ but the next two – ‘listening with reverence’ - are not normally pointed out. It is a reminder that the Word does not exist in a vacuum but needs a response – above all that of careful listening. But the next words are equally significant ‘fidenter proclamans’ – ‘faithfully proclaiming’. The Church’s role is to listen and proclaim. This is also true for each one of us. The purpose of the Constitution is then made clear: ‘To set forth the true doctrine on divine Revelation and its transmission’ so that ‘the whole world…may believe.’ (1)

(b) Chapter 1 talks of the ‘economy of God’s revelation’ which is ‘realized in words and deeds’. The ‘invisible God (cf. Colossians 1:15, 1 Timothy 1:17) addresses human beings as his friends (cf. Exodus 33:11; John 15:14-15) and moves among them (cf. Baruch 3:38) in order to invite and receive them into his own company.’ This is not the normal way in which we use the word ‘economy’ but here has its original meaning – the ‘entirety’. Very clearly it is stated that Christ is both the mediator and the sum total of revelation. There is no ambiguity - all is centred on Christ. (2) From this perspective, the text then mentions main themes of the Old Testament – the Creation, the Fall, the promise of redemption, Abraham, the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. These are seen to prepare the way for the Gospel – the definitive Word of God. (3, 4) This Chapter then reaffirms the definition of faith from Vatican I – “the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals” but points out that of course the grace of God is first necessary for this. (5) It also repeats Vatican I’s assertion that God can be known through the natural light of human reason but that revelation is necessary for the certainty of truth. (6)

(c) Chapter 2 then turns to the process of revelation. As throughout Dei Verbum, there is the affirmation that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is central, guaranteeing the Scriptures and Tradition. It defines the latter as the apostolic teaching which is continued through the Magisterium of the bishops with a “growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on”. (7, 8) Crucially, it states that Scripture and Tradition “flow out from the same divine wellspring”. (9) This gives a new formulation in the complex theological debate about whether there are two sources (Scripture and Tradition) or one source (Scripture) of revelation.

These first two chapters clearly point to major issues that are then spelt out in the following chapters. The Scripture references from the beginning open up to the seventy four that occur in the text as a whole. From the point of view of method and content, Revelation cannot be understood without the dynamic role of the Scriptures where we see God continually revealing himself to his creatures.