

C. *The Future Inheritance*

The Synoptic Gospels speak of an inheritance of eternal life as something to be received in the future (Matt 19:29; Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18). This is most so in Matthew (cf. Matt 5:5; 25:34), who also associated the future inheritance with the coming of the Son of Man (Matt 19:28; cf. Dan 7:13). Paul takes up the same notion of future inheritance (1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:21), and elsewhere throughout the NT future language is applied (Col 3:24; Eph 1:14; 18:5; Titus 3:7), while the future is accentuated in the terms of kingdom (1 Cor 6:9; Gal 5:21) and salvation (Heb 1:14).

The Acts of the Apostles deals with the Abrahamic inheritance in three passages (Acts 7:5; 13:19; 20:32), acknowledging the promise of land and its association with Canaan but proclaiming “the inheritance among all who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).

Hebrews also develops the Abrahamic theme, underscoring the patriarch’s faith that permitted him to look forward “to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:8–10). In effect, the promise is one of an eternal inheritance (Heb 9:15). Hebrews notes early on (Heb 1:2) that Christ is “heir of all things” even as he is the High Priest and mediator of the New Covenant.

Finally, the First Letter of Peter rounds out the theme of a future inheritance by assuring us that it is “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1 Pet 1:4). This inheritance, however, comes to us because “we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”

(1 Pet 1:3), connecting the promise of future life as an inheritance with the Resurrection.

INK Ancient forms of ink were made from wood, ivory, or other materials burned to create carbon that was then suspended in a gum or glue solution. Ink is mentioned specifically only in Jer 36:18; 2 Cor 3:3; 2 John 12; and 3 John 13.

INN A place of hospitality and lodging for the traveler, where caravans might rest for the night or where a traveler might find shelter (Gen 42:27, 43:21; Exod 4:24; cf. 2 Kgs 19:23; Josh 4:3).

In early Old Testament times, inns were scarce. They were not necessary, since Middle Eastern ideas of **hospitality** dictated that the occasional traveler could expect a welcome in any private home.

But in later centuries, as trade increased and travelers became more numerous, inns developed to accommodate strangers, especially in large towns or in isolated areas. The inns in rustic settings were typically well guarded because of the constant threat of bandits. The typical inn in a city offered lodging for guests, including their animals (1 Kgs 18:27; Luke 2:7, 10:34). The Persian Empire maintained a well-run road system with caravansaries or inns for travelers. The Roman Empire likewise had a massive network of rest stops, used chiefly for purposes of communication among the far-flung provinces of the empire. They were often dangerous places, where a traveler would have to be on constant guard against robbers; as Saint Paul tells us, travel was a dangerous

business (2 Cor 11:25–26). In the New Testament, an inn (Greek *kataluma*) is mentioned specifically at Bethlehem (Luke 2:7); the same word was used for the room used by Jesus and the disciples for the Last Supper (Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11). The Samaritan left the wounded traveler in an inn on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem (Luke 10:34; the Greek word here is *pandocheion*).

INNOCENTS, HOLY The male infants of Bethlehem and the surrounding area who were put to death by the command of King Herod the Great following the birth of Christ (Matt 2:16–18). The Magi had told Herod the Great of the birth of a king of the Jews, as indicated by the star in the East. When Herod asked where this child would be born, the Magi answered that the place would be Bethlehem of Judea. Thus, Herod ordered all male infants two years and under living in and around Bethlehem to be put to death. The exact number of children killed is impossible to know with certainty, and the event is not reported in any extra-biblical sources. Nevertheless, such an act was hardly out of character for a king who murdered his wife and three of his own sons.

I.N.R.I. The initials of the Latin superscription Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” placed above Jesus on the Cross. According to John’s Gospel (John 19:19–20; see also Matt 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38), the inscription was written in Hebrew (meaning probably Aramaic), in Latin, and in Greek.

INSPIRATION A theological term to describe the divine authorship of the Bible. It means that the Holy Spirit acted in and through the Bible’s human authors, moving them to write what God wished to communicate in written form. The result is that Scripture, in both content and expression, is truly the word of God.

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I. THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF INSPIRATION

A. *The Old Testament*

The Old Testament has no explicit teaching on the inspiration of Scripture. There is not a term in biblical Hebrew to describe it, nor do we find an examination of God’s role in producing the scriptural texts. Nevertheless, the OT lays the foundation for such a doctrine to emerge in later Judaism and the writings of the New Testament. For example, portions of Scripture such as the Law of Moses were venerated as sacred and authoritative because they were held to express the will of God for Israel. Likewise, it is clear that Yahweh often employed prophets as his human mouth-

piece to speak the word of God with binding authority (e.g., Deut 18:18–19; 2 Sam 23:2; Jer 1:9; Ezek 3:4; Hos 1:1). When this involved insight into the future or a revelation of truths previously unknown, one can speak of God illuminating the mind of the prophet in a supernatural way. Strictly speaking, prophetic inspiration is not exactly the same as biblical inspiration, but the two are related. The former is a grace to *speak* the word of God, the latter a grace to *write* the word of God. Only rarely are we told that Yahweh instructed his prophets to put their message into writing (e.g., Isa 30:8; Jer 36:1–2; Hab 2:2), and not until the first century A.D. do we have Jewish writers speaking of the divine “inspiration” (Greek, *epiphania*) of the OT writings (e.g., Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1:7).

B. The New Testament

The New Testament makes reference to the divine origin of the Bible and to the divine action of the Spirit on its human authors. Two passages are prominent in this regard. The first is 2 Tim 3:16–17, which reads: “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” The key expression in this passage is the Greek adjective *theopneustos*, translated as “inspired by God” but more precisely meaning “breathed forth by God” (rendered *divinitus inspirata*, “divinely breathed into/upon,” in the Latin Vulgate). Having proceeded from the mouth of God, the biblical books are uniquely suited for the moral and spiritual formation of God’s

people. Hence Paul insists that they are “sacred writings” whose purpose is to instruct the reader “for salvation” (2 Tim 3:15). The focus here is on the divine origin of the Bible without consideration of the human contribution. The second passage addresses more directly the process of inspiration as the action of God affected the sacred writer. The statement is found in 2 Pet 1:20–21, which reads: “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” Here the operative word is the Greek verb *pherō*, which means “move” or “carry along.” It can describe, as in the book of Acts, how rushing wind is borne along (Acts 2:2) and how it can drive sailing ships out to sea (Acts 27:15). Thus, prophetic speech, whether spoken or written down as part of Scripture, is divine speech that originates with God and comes to expression as the Spirit moves the human recipient to communicate it to others.

Among other verses of the NT relevant to inspiration, we are told that the Lord spoke through the biblical prophets (Matt 1:22; Luke 1:70) and that David spoke in or by the Spirit when composing the Psalms (Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16). The authors of the NT view the OT writings as nothing less than the “oracles of God” (Rom 3:2), which explains why an equation is sometimes made between what God says and what Scripture says (Matt 19:4–5; Acts 4:24–26; Heb 3:7). The word that God speaks in the Scriptures is the standard by which we must live (Matt 4:4). So, too, the word that comes

from God is always true (John 17:17), for he can never lie (Titus 1:2) and his Scriptures can never be annulled (John 10:35).

Though most of these passages are statements about the OT books, the divine origin of the NT was also accepted in earliest Christianity. In 1 Tim 5:18, for instance, a quotation from Deut 25:4 is coupled with a quotation from Luke 10:7, and both are cited to tell us what “scripture says.” Similarly, in 2 Pet 3:16, the “letters” of the apostle Paul are placed on a par with the OT writings, called “the other scriptures.” In a unique way, the book of Revelation claims to give us heavenly mysteries and prophecies that John wrote down in the book (Rev 1:1–3; 22:7, 10, 18–19).

II. THE DOCTRINE OF INSPIRATION

For the most part, the Catholic Church’s doctrine of inspiration was formulated within the one hundred years between Vatican I (1870) and Vatican II (1965). Now it is true that the Church Fathers held an extremely high view of Scripture as inspired revelation, but inspiration as such was not the subject of extensive theological analysis. So, too, the same exalted view of the Bible reigned throughout the Middle Ages, and although an effort was made among the medieval schoolmen to explain Scripture’s divine origin with the help of philosophical principles, a thoroughgoing study of inspiration still had not been undertaken. It was not until the 1800s, with the rise of modern historical criticism and the growing climate of intellectual skepticism, that the doctrine of inspiration was subjected to serious examination. Modern times have since

witnessed a stream of ecclesiastical statements issued to clarify the Church’s belief on inspiration and to condemn errors that are incompatible with it.

A. Divine Authorship

Faced with a diminishing reverence for the Bible among academics, as well as with recent theories of inspiration that departed from traditional notions, Vatican Council I set forth a definition of inspiration that would serve as an enduring benchmark of Catholic orthodoxy. The Council Fathers, echoing a similar formulation made at the Council of Trent, defined inspiration in this way:

These [books of the Bible] the Church holds to be sacred and canonical, not because, having been composed by simple human industry, they were later approved by her own authority, nor merely because they contain revelation without error, but because, having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God for their author and were delivered as such to the Church. (Dei Filius 2)

Inspiration thus means that God is the divine author of the books of Scripture, and this is why the Church reveres them as sacred and canonical. Such is the positive content of the doctrine. But one notices that this definition is set in opposition to two incorrect notions of inspiration. The mistaken views in question are those of the nineteenth-century theologians D. Haneburg and J. Jahn. Haneburg maintained a theory of *subsequent approval* whereby the Bible was written by human authors, and in a fully human way, but was later

approved by the Church. This theory, which the Council rejects, would mean that inspiration was not intrinsic to the text of Scripture but was something conferred upon it by the Church. Jahn maintained a theory of *negative assistance*, meaning that God prevented the biblical authors from stating anything in their writings that was untrue. This theory is also rejected by the Council, not because the Bible is brimming with misinformation, but because the Church's belief that Scripture is the word of God is left unaccounted for. Human writings that contain no misstatements of fact are still human writings, and one could hardly say that God speaks or expresses his will in them for that reason alone.

The definition of inspiration as divine authorship was reaffirmed by the Church several times since Vatican I. The point was made, for instance, in 1893 (Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* §41), in 1920 (Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paracliticus* §3), in 1943 (Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* §1), and again in 1965 (Vatican II, DV §11).

B. Human Authorship

The question of inspiration is not settled by the assertion that God is the author of the Bible. The fact is that Scripture was actually penned by human authors under the influence of the Spirit. Inspiration, then, is more fully described as a mystery of dual authorship—of God and man working in tandem to compose the biblical texts.

Historically, emphasis was always placed on God's role as the Bible's divine author. Modern studies, however, have given increased attention to the human contribution. This is true not only of biblical and theological schol-

arship but of ecclesiastical statements on the nature of inspiration, which maintain that the human authors wrote as instruments guided by the Holy Spirit. All now agree that the inspiring grace of the Spirit did not suppress the freedom or consciousness or personality of the sacred writers, nor were they merely passive, acting like stenographers taking dictation. Rather, the human authors of Scripture were genuine authors actively involved in all stages of the composition of the work. This aspect of inspiration was succinctly stated by Vatican II:

To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though he acted in and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written and no more. (DV §11)

The truth of this observation is borne out by the distinct styles and temperaments of the biblical authors. No one doubts, for instance, that the stamp of Paul's personality is pressed deeply into his letters, and that it differs quite noticeably from that of other authors such as Matthew or John or Peter or Jude.

Finally, Catholic tradition often speaks of God as the *principal author* of Scripture and the human writers as the *instrumental authors* of Scripture. This distinction has its roots in patristic theology but was given classic expression in medieval times by Saint Thomas Aquinas. The Church considers it a suitable (though not exhaustive) way of expressing the mystery of the Bible's dual authorship (see *Divino Afflante Spiritu* §19).

C. Scope and Extent

Following the divine and human authorship of the Bible, it remains to consider the extent of inspiration. The question is whether the totality of Scripture is inspired or whether inspiration applies only to select statements within it. Vatican I, again echoing words used by the Council of Trent, declared that inspiration extends to "the books of the Old and New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts" (*Dei Filius* 2). In other words, the Bible is fully inspired from beginning to end, embracing everything in between. This includes the deuterocanonical books that are part of the Catholic canon as well as the deuterocanonical portions of books that the Church likewise accepts as Scripture (e.g., the additions to Esther and Daniel).

Despite this conciliar definition, and most likely under pressure to deal with difficulties in the Bible, theologians writing in the aftermath of Vatican I still proposed a narrowing of the scope of inspiration. Theories to this effect were proposed by A. Rohling (1872), who would restrict inspiration to statements dealing with faith and morals; by F. Lenormant (1880), who would restrict it to revealed teachings unknowable by reason; and by Cardinal J. H. Newman (1884), who held that inspiration did not apply to passing comments (*obiter dicta*) made in Scripture insofar as these had no bearing on doctrinal or moral matters.

Still, the Church rejected all such attempts to restrict inspiration to select parts of Scripture. Pope Leo XIII led the way in 1893 by making this clarification:

But it is absolutely wrong and forbidden either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of Holy Scripture or to admit that the sacred writer has erred. For the system of those who, in order to rid themselves of these difficulties, do not hesitate to concede that divine inspiration regards the things of faith and morals and nothing beyond, because (as they wrongly think) in a question of the truth or falsehood of a passage, we should consider not so much what God has said as the reason and purpose that he had in mind in saying it—this system cannot be tolerated. (Providentissimus Deus §40)

Instead of endorsing a notion of partial inspiration, the pope affirmed a doctrine of plenary inspiration. This is the belief that the entire contents of the Bible are inspired—the whole as well as every part, no matter the subject each part may be said to deal with. Subsequent popes would reaffirm this in 1920 (Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paracliticus* §5) and again in 1943 (Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* §1).

Lastly, there is the question whether plenary inspiration amounts to plenary *verbal* inspiration. In other words, did the Spirit guide the biblical authors in their selection of the individual words of Scripture? A negative answer was returned at the end of the nineteenth century by the cardinal theologian J. B. Franzelin. He promoted a theory sometimes called "content inspiration," according to which the Spirit supplied the sacred writers with the *ideas* to be communicated in the Bible but left it to the writers' discretion to express those ideas in suitable words. On this view, Scripture conveys an inspired message in noninspired language. Now, the cardinal did maintain that

the Spirit protected the human authors in a negative way from using unsuitable words, but the positive choice of words was still a fundamentally human choice.

Franzelini's theory of nonverbal inspiration quickly faced a barrage of criticism at the beginning of the twentieth century, and so it found few adherents. And although the Church never officially rejected or even addressed his views explicitly, most have thought it a deficient theory of inspiration, one that simplistically and artificially separates words and ideas.

From the standpoint of Church teaching, there has never been a solemn definition to specify that God inspired every individual word of the Bible. Nevertheless, there are several pointers that suggest plenary verbal inspiration is an authentically Catholic view.

Consider the following: (1) Both Jesus and the apostle Paul make arguments about the saving plan of God that hinge on the importance and meaning of individual words expressed in the Bible (see, e.g., John 10:34–35 and Gal 3:16).

(2) The Council of Trent, Vatican I, and Pope Leo XIII have all described the inspiration of Sacred Scripture in terms of “dictation.” Since it is otherwise clear that the human authors were fully and freely engaged in the processes of writing the Bible, and every indication suggests that the influence of inspiration was imperceptible to their human consciousness, it appears certain that a mechanical or stenographic dictation is not envisioned. Rather, the word “dictation” indicates that God played a decisive role in selecting the words and phrases that would be used to communicate his message. (3) Catholic tradition often refers to the

Bible as the inspired “word of God.” However, in a few Church pronouncements, Scripture is said to express the very words of God. For example, Pope Leo XIII says that the promises of the Bible are uttered *ipsis Dei nomine et verbis*, “in God’s name and in his own words” (*Providentissimus Deus* §6). Likewise, Pius XII says that Scripture gives us *Dei verba humanis linguis expressa*, “the words of God expressed in human language” (*Divino Afflante Spiritu* §20). This latter statement was reused in the Vatican II document on divine revelation (see DV §13). Given these pronouncements, it is fully in line with Catholic teaching to say that Scripture is the word of God in both content and expression.

III. THE EFFECTS OF INSPIRATION

There are numerous effects of inspiration that are open to theological investigation. One is the *canonicity* of Scripture. Because the Bible is the written word of God, composed under the influence of the Holy Spirit, its books are likewise holy, set apart from other written documents and uniquely suited for liturgical proclamation and prayer. Thus, when the Church canonized the books of the OT and NT, she simply recognized the divine holiness that is inherent in them. Another effect is the *sacramentality* of Scripture. That is to say, the Bible not only reveals the will of God for his people, but God reveals himself to his people in such a way that reading and contemplation of Scripture can bring about a transforming encounter with the Lord. Likewise, the *authority* of the Bible is a consequence of its inspiration. Being the word of God ex-

pressed in the very words of God, it is the primary source of the Church’s teachings on faith and life. Vatican II thus urges that Scripture should be “the very soul” of sacred theology (DV §24).

A. Inerrancy in History

The most debated effect of inspiration is *inerrancy*; the belief that Scripture is trustworthy and true, untainted by anything false, erroneous, or deceptive. This follows logically from the divine authorship of the Bible—if God is its primary author, and God himself is the perfection of truth, then all that Scripture claims to be true must necessarily be true. The ancient Church believed this in no uncertain terms. As early as the second century, theologians declared that Scripture is entirely perfect (Saint Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2:28,2) and true (Saint Clement of Rome, *1 Clem.* 45:2). Despite apparent tensions within, it never contradicts itself (Saint Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 65). Similar sentiments were expressed throughout the patristic and medieval periods, all the way up to the European Enlightenment when the sweeping consensus of Christian tradition was first seriously challenged.

The occasion for this confrontation was the birth of historical criticism, which turned a spotlight on numerous difficulties in the Bible touching on historical, geographical, scientific, and moral matters. Historically, these had always been viewed as “apparent discrepancies,” difficulties that God wished to reside in Scripture as a way of inducing humility in the reader. Of course, much effort was spent on solving the riddles posed by problematic pas-

sages, but no one in ancient Christian times concluded that the Bible was in error. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, scholars of various stripes and persuasions began to disparage the Bible for containing “real discrepancies” of both fact and perspective.

B. Inerrancy in Papal Teaching

In the midst of this emerging crisis, Pope Leo XIII issued a strong and decisive statement on biblical inerrancy that reaffirmed the Church’s long-standing tradition. Beginning with the premise that God is the author of Scripture, he stated:

For all the books that the Church receives as sacred and canonical are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Spirit. And so far is it from being possible that any error can coexist with inspiration, 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. (Providentissimus Deus §40)

This is the Church’s first official declaration of Scripture’s unlimited inerrancy. And yet, because some scholars felt the pope’s teaching was inadequate, there arose a number of theories of limited inerrancy that said, for instance, that errors could be attributed to the human authors of Scripture rather than its divine author, or else they restricted the scope of inerrancy to the Bible’s religious truths and excluded from its realm statements that made reference to profane matters. For this reason,

Pope Benedict XV strongly reaffirmed Pope Leo's teaching regarding the Bible's "absolute immunity from error" and added, "We can never conclude that there is any error in Sacred Scripture" (*Spiritus Paraclitici* §5). Likewise, Pope Pius XII reaffirmed Leo's doctrinal stance that the Bible was free "from any error whatsoever" and reiterated that its truth could not be restricted "to matters of faith and morals" (*Divino Affluente Spiritu* §1). In fact, due to an ongoing resistance to this teaching, Pius was forced to address the issue again less than a decade later, when he lamented, "Some go so far as to . . . put forward again the opinion, already often condemned, that asserts that immunity from error extends only to those parts of the Bible that treat of God or of moral and religious matters" (*Humani Generis* §22). Such is the clear and constant teaching of the modern popes on biblical inerrancy.

C. Inerrancy at Vatican II

The most recent statement on inerrancy was issued at Vatican II in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, issued in 1965. Oddly, the wording of this key document, which basically summarizes the Church's teaching on Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, is claimed by many to represent a move away from the classical doctrine of inerrancy advanced by the popes. The relevant statement reads as follows:

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers should be regarded as asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that we must acknowledge the Books of Scripture as teaching firmly, faithfully, and

without error the truth that God wished to be recorded in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation. (DV §11)

The question is whether Vatican II is expounding a doctrine of unlimited inerrancy, in continuity with previous magisterial teaching, or a position of limited inerrancy, which would constitute a departure from the doctrinal tradition of virtually all preceding centuries. Many who argue for the latter detect an innovative change in magisterial perspective in the phrase "for the sake of our salvation." The claim is that truth is given "without error" only insofar as it directly concerns "our salvation." It is said on the basis of this statement that the Church no longer commits herself to insisting on the truthfulness of nonsalvific matters contained in the Bible. By implication, statements made about history, geography, and similar nonreligious subjects are now said to fall outside the scope of inerrancy.

Though numerous scholars maintain this interpretation and have come to embrace a limited inerrancy view, there is reason to think this is a misunderstanding of the Council's intention. Indeed, there are several indicators that Vatican II's formulation stands in historical continuity with earlier papal teachings on unlimited inerrancy. Consider the following points.

1. The disputed expression "for the sake of our salvation" (Latin, *nostrae salutis causa*) is a prepositional phrase used as an adverbial phrase modifying "recorded" (Latin, *consignari*). In other words, it tells us *why* God wished truth to be recorded in the Bible, namely, to facilitate our salvation. It is not

an adjectival phrase that modifies the noun "truth." In fact, it should be noted that the penultimate schema of *Dei Verbum* did refer to "saving truth" (Latin, *veritatem salvarem*), but at the request of numerous Council Fathers and the urging of Pope Paul VI, it was amended to read "truth" (Latin, *veritatem*) alone, so that its scope would not be restricted by the adjective "saving" to matters of faith and morals and nothing beyond. The final and official wording of the Constitution thus tells us the purpose of inerrancy, not its extent.

2. Attached to *Dei Verbum*'s statement on the truth of Sacred Scripture is a footnote citing earlier Church teachings—the single longest footnote in the entire Constitution. Included are statements from Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Council of Trent, Pope Leo XIII, and Pope Pius XII, all of which affirm the Bible's divine inspiration and complete freedom from error. Since virtually all the footnotes running throughout the Constitution highlight the continuity of the document with earlier ecclesiastical teaching, it is highly improbable that the expression "for the sake of salvation" represents a departure from the Church's constant belief in unlimited inerrancy.

3. Pope Leo XIII called the doctrine of unlimited inerrancy "the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church" (*Providentissimus Deus* §41). This was the view of patristic and medieval theologians, and it was taught authoritatively by popes Leo XIII, Benedict XV, and Pius XII. There is thus an unbroken line of continuity from earliest Christianity to the middle of the twentieth century on what it

means to say that the Bible is free from error. Surely the Council Fathers at Vatican II had a grave obligation to alert the faithful if in fact a new understanding of inerrancy was being advanced in 1965. That they did not is a telling indication that they intended no real change of position from classical Catholic teaching on this subject.

In all probability, then, given the history of the doctrine and the points considered above, the official Catholic teaching remains one of unlimited inerrancy. Vatican II has issued no repeal of this teaching, neither has it given us signs of a real departure from the solemn decrees of the modern popes. One can legitimately speak of a new emphasis introduced by the Council but not a new understanding of the doctrine. Only in this limited sense has doctrinal development taken place regarding inerrancy.

D. Inerrancy in Practical Terms

Unlimited inerrancy is the belief that the Scripture is completely and comprehensively true in all that it intentionally affirms. Nothing within its pages is factually erroneous, nor will one find there anything to deceive or mislead. With respect to its content, the Bible is a reflection of the mind of God, who is the perfection of Truth.

What this means on a practical level requires explanation, lest the Catholic position be confused with the similar teaching of Protestant fundamentalism. Fundamentalists believe in the full inerrancy of the Bible but without regard for the literary genres employed in Scripture or the intention of its original

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human authors. That is, they tend to interpret the words of the Bible at face value—literally rather than literally according to the type of writing used to express the author's intent. This often leads to grave misunderstandings, especially when the Bible is said to teach elements of science that are at variance with modern findings.

According to Catholic teaching on inspiration and inerrancy, the Bible does not make strictly scientific statements. Rather, when the writers of Scripture talk of the natural world, they speak either “figuratively” or “phenomenologically”; that is, according to the way things appear to the senses. References to the rising of the sun, for example, are not actual scientific assertions that insist the earth is stationary and the sun follows an ascending and descending course of motion. Such expressions are based on sense perception and common experience, and many are still in use today. Saint Augustine, whose view on this was endorsed in modern papal teaching, holds that Scripture was not written to tell us about “the essential nature of the things of the visible universe” (*Gen. Lit.*, 9.20, quoted in both *Providentissimus Deus* §39 and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* §3). Thus, since the Bible makes no properly scientific assertions, it cannot be charged with teaching error on scientific matters.

The situation is different, though, when it comes to historical matters. The Bible makes countless assertions about events that transpired in ancient times, and these do indeed come under the mantle of inerrancy. In part, this is because the words and deeds of God in history are inextricably bound together in

Scripture; that is, God reveals himself and accomplishes our salvation through historical actions as well as through written and spoken words (see DV §2). The record of these events must necessarily be trustworthy and true or else the revelation of God would not be successfully communicated. Likewise, one cannot attempt to separate saving history from profane history in the Bible, for all events that appear in Scripture are providentially ordered to the goal of our salvation. For this reason, magisterial teachings have consistently taught that the Bible is inerrant in its presentation of historical events. Pope Benedict XV, for example, censures those who deny that “the historical portions of Scripture do not rest on the absolute truth of the facts,” since those who hold this position are “out of harmony with the Church’s teaching” (*Spiritus Paraclitis* §6). The idea is that inspiration guarantees the factual accuracy of the historical statements of the Bible so long as a historiographical intent on the part of the author can be demonstrated.

Finally, the doctrine of unlimited inerrancy is not a denial that difficulties remain in our interpretation of the Bible. There are many passages that seem to contradict one another, many that appear to be at variance with non-biblical sources, and even a few that strike us as unworthy of the character of God. Yet, these problematic verses are not misstatements shot wide of the truth. They are rather an invitation to humility: Saint Augustine wisely observed that when one stumbles across an apparent discrepancy in the Bible, he should assume that either the text was miscopied, the original

language was mistranslated, or the interpreter has simply failed to understand its meaning (see *Letters* 82). Under no circumstances is it correct to claim that the Bible is in error.

INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

The effort to ascertain the meaning of the Bible intended by its divine and human authors. At one level, biblical interpretation makes use of historical and literary tools, for attention must be given to the historical context in which the biblical books were written as well as the literary conventions employed at the time of their composition. At another, biblical interpretation is a theological endeavor, which means the interpreter must be aware that God is speaking through the medium of human words and that often he intends a spiritual level of meaning that stretches beyond the horizon of the human writer’s intention. On both levels, authentic interpretation can take place only within the framework of the Church’s faith.

I. The Senses of Scripture

A. The Literal Sense

B. The Spiritual Sense

II. Principles of Scriptural Interpretation

A. Criteria for Authentic Interpretation

B. The Church as Final Interpreter

I. THE SENSES OF SCRIPTURE

Catholic exegesis recognizes both a literal and a spiritual sense of Scripture. The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of the Bible in accordance with the literary genre in which they were written. The spiritual sense is

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the meaning that God has invested, not in the words of the Bible per se, but in the historical realities that the words of the Bible describe. This spiritual meaning is subdivided into the allegorical sense, the moral or tropological sense, and the anagogical sense. A medieval couplet originating with Augustine of Dacia (d. 1282) offers a summary description of the four senses of Scripture and their respective spheres of reference:

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.*

The letter teaches events, allegory what you should believe,
the moral meaning what you should do,
anagogy what you should aim for.

A. The Literal Sense

The literal sense is the foundational sense of Scripture; the spiritual senses presuppose it and are built upon it. It follows that the first priority of biblical interpretation must be to ascertain the literal meaning of its words. Theological scholarship has long maintained this perspective (e.g., Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia.1.10), and in modern times the point was authoritatively restated by Pius XII: “Let the interpreters bear in mind that their foremost and greatest endeavor should be to discern and define clearly that sense of the biblical words which is called literal” (*Divino Afflante Spiritu* §23; cf. CCC II5–16).

That said, it is crucial to understand what this first step entails. It means interpreting the literal words of the text, but not necessarily in a literal way. In point of fact, the *literal* sense