

On The Task of Interpreting the Bible

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Our approach to scriptural exegesis or interpretation is literal and historical, first and foremost.

As Hugh of St. Victor says: "*Historia fundamentum est.*" History is fundamental. It is the foundation of our approach to Scripture.

But you do not have access to the truth about biblical history without the words of the Scripture. *Dei Verbum*, Vatican II's constitution on divine revelation, refers to "the inner unity of words and deeds in history." That is so important: God speaks and then God acts. God's speech interprets what he has done so that we understand the meaning of what he has done.

Why has God done the things that he has done in history? One word: Love. In Deuteronomy 4, Moses summarized the whole history of God's dealings with mankind and with Israel, in particular, by saying that everything was done, "because he loved your fathers and chose their descendants after them."

God does what he does and says what he says in history, because he loves. It is more than words and propositions. Love requires that inner unity of word and deed. It is the integrity of the divine self-gift that really validates the truth of his love as he has expressed it in history.

This is an understanding that we take into exegesis even when we begin with the seemingly mundane action of trying to understand the literal meaning of a text.

We have to remember, first and foremost, that the Bible is, as *Dei Verbum* tells us, the product of both God and the human authors. This is a point that fundamentalists miss: God is the principal author of scripture but the human authors are no less authors. This is a mystery, the mystery of divine inspiration. The mystery of the divine inspiration does not dispense with human authorship, so we cannot dispense with hard literary analysis. We have to go back and see that these human writers are, themselves, true authors.

We apply the classical literary tools, analyzing how the human authors of Scripture used grammar, logic and rhetoric. Grammar looks at the meaning of words and combinations of words. Logic looks at the truth that is conveyed by those words when they are combined in sentences. Rhetoric looks at how the persuasive power is effected so that the meaning of words and their truth is delivered in a way that is convincing and persuasive.

In doing this, we avoid “literalism.” Because while we analyze grammar, logic and rhetoric, we also look for the figurative; we identify figures of speech, literary devices, metaphors, simile, synecdoche — all the techniques that really enhance human speech and make communication something that is wholly humanistic. We’re never in a rush to get beyond the literal. We really spend time in the literary to see how the words of the text signify things at many, many different levels.

But we also recognize that the *litera* is a *signum* — that the letter, the word, the sentence, the paragraph, the book, is itself a set of signs and that the *signatum*, the thing signified, is a truth of history. Not all “truths” are historical events, of course. The ethical realities conveyed in the Book of Proverbs aren’t “events,” because the Proverbs as wisdom literature does not aim to give us an historical narrative. Nevertheless to understand the ethical truths that Proverbs convey requires us to understand the historical context of the Davidic covenant and the Solomonic tradition in order to really understand their literary sense and grasp their historical truth.

We have to do the same kind of historical analysis whenever we try to identify literary forms, such as parable, song or poetry, or when we try to identify literary figures and devices.

Ultimately, we want to see how the literary sense of the text conveys historical truth — either the truth of an event, such as the crucifixion, or the truth of a created reality such as water, light, mountains, trees, or the way the text conveys ethical and other truths about human nature.

So we always situate the literary sense within a historical context.

And, just as we have to understand the literary in terms of the grammatical, the logical and the rhetorical, so we have to understand the historical in terms of time, culture and religion.

In terms of time, we have to understand the period and the events that took place within that period. We have to look at the culture in order to capture the historical background, the customs and so forth. But with the Bible, you cannot stop at the historical and the cultural as you can in reading other books: Because to really understand the literal words of the texts in their historical and cultural context, we have to attend to the religious understanding what the authors of the Bible and their audience brought to the text.

In other words: Whether you believe that God is speaking in Scripture or not, you are not going to understand fully what the human writers intended to convey unless you read their writings on their own terms — and their own terms are inescapably religious.

An example: When you see the word “temple” in Scripture, you cannot simply think of a large building with a dome where people go to pray. The literary sign, “temple,” for the biblical writer, conveys far more than the historical reality of a sacred architecture. The Temple for ancient Israel was the central bank as well as the central sanctuary; it was the place of divine government as well as the place of divine worship. It was the place where you got credit as well as where you received the creed. It was Wall Street, the White House, Oxford and the Vatican all rolled into one.

If you stop at the historical and the literary reading of the texts, and do not attend to the religious meaning, you will miss the basic literal meaning of all sorts of scripture passages.

So, we study the literary sense, which gives us the historical truth of events, ideas and concepts, and the integral meaning of these events, ideas and concepts is religious.

To read the Bible in the terms in which it is written, we have to debunk the modern notion that religion is something individualized, private.

For the writers of the Bible, as for much of the classical world: life was essentially religious. Cicero understood this in ancient Rome. For him, *religio*, religion, was a natural virtue, the *virtus virtutum*, the “virtue of virtues,” the only virtue that would unite and integrate all of human life—the interior, the exterior, the personal and the social, the private and the public.

In ancient Israel, too, you had this understanding of the essentially religious meaning of life. When we read the Bible, then, we are reading the words of people who were trying to convey, through literary means, historical truths that impart religious meaning of human life. History, for the writers of the Bible, men like Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, makes no sense apart from God.

The “literal” meaning of their prophetic books, then, is that Israel’s victories and successes, its defeats and exile, its captivity and deliverance — its entire history — has a religious meaning. But this religious meaning was not something that the biblical writers “read into” the history of Israel. Understanding the biblical writers on their own terms, we have to acknowledge that they believed that God was both the beginning and the end of all history and that without reference to God’s words and deeds you cannot really understand the integral meaning of what has happened or is happening, and you cannot understand the teleological goal, the purpose toward which all of these historical events and processes are directed.

We think about the mystery of the inspiration of Scripture in similar terms. In the same way that the divine and the human interpenetrate in history without detracting from or diminishing the freedom and powers of the human agents of history, the written Word of God has both divine and human authors but this does not in any way diminish the human dimension of the Word.

This way of thinking flows directly from the mystery of the incarnation. The mystery of the Word incarnate is the fact that Christ is fully human, body and soul, that he experienced human bodily life at every level — the five senses, the human emotions, and all the rest. At the same time he experienced human life at the psychological level of the soul, the intellect and the will. This truly human experience was not diminished by his divinity, but was enhanced. Being divine did not make him less human, it made him capable of experiencing the human more fully.

In the same way, the human writers are enhanced by the charism that they received from the Holy Spirit, even though they might not be conscious of it. And as there is nothing human that is alien to Christ except sin, there is nothing human that is alien to Scripture except error.

In the inspiration of Scripture, we see grace building upon nature. More than that, we see the deepest desires of human nature being fulfilled by grace in a way that surpasses the limits of all natural human longing. That is something beautiful: Grace not only satisfies and fulfills our longings, it transcends them to an infinite extent. In a certain sense, we can say that grace gives us what “eye hath not seen nor ear heard nor has it ever entered into the heart of man.”

We have to respect the mystery of inspiration when we go about the task of exegesis or interpretation. We have to have faith in what the writers themselves say: that they wish to convey to us, not their own agendas or personal take on matters, but the divine perspective.

For the exegete, faith does not abolish reason or replace it. Faith builds upon reason as grace builds upon nature. Faith presupposes reason and builds upon it for the purpose of healing the defects of sin and error, of perfecting it so that it can reason most reasonably — so that we can actually reason about things that reason could never know or demonstrate on its own.

At this level, the task of interpretation is taken up and enveloped in a spiritual grace, a charism of inspiration. Divine inspiration does not simply terminate with the death of the last biblical author. True, inspiration *qua* inspiration is a property that is only attributed to the authors of scripture. But inasmuch as the Church is animated by the same Spirit who was the inspirator of the biblical writers, in the Church’s liturgy and in its dogmas and doctrines we find the literary sense and historical truths of the scripture are unfolded in such a way as to reveal that the religious meaning of salvation history, which is ongoing.

When we read the Scriptures “in the Spirit in which they were written,” as *Dei Verbum* tells us we must, their religious meaning deepens and enlarges it so that it is as if we ourselves are standing in the middle of a stream of salvation history, as Ezekiel was in Ezekiel 47: the water starts at ankle-deep, then rises to knee-deep and then waist-deep. Eventually, it is too deep to sound the depths. That is what the exegete finds when he or she is exegeting the literal sense and the historical truth of the text, seeking the religious and theological meaning.

When we read with this faith, the religious meaning of history is picked up and elevated through the Holy Spirit. We see that the human writers of Scripture used words to convey the truth of what God is doing in history. We see that, as the *Catechism* says, the words of Scripture are signs and that the events and realities signified by those words, are themselves signs and mysteries.

What the Church calls the “spiritual senses” of Scripture, builds upon the literal and historical senses. Not like oil upon water, but like water becoming wine. A transformative process takes place. The spiritual sense transforms the literary and historical meaning of the text. Wine retains certain common elements and characteristics with water, but it is something greater than water. In the same way, the spiritual senses give us a metaphysical realism, a realism that embraces the historical but rises above it, giving us a much greater meaning.

So when John 2 tells us that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament promised the Temple to be, we understand that Jesus is something infinitely greater than the Temple. And we understand that Christ’s fulfillment of the Temple does not terminate with him or his body.

Christ extends his fulfillment of the Temple — through the Church — to each Christian. So, the Church is the Temple, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3, and each one of us is a temple, as he says in 1 Corinthians 6.

And the spiritual reading of Scripture enables us to understand that what is true in the state of grace on earth is amplified and infinitely fulfilled in the state of glory in heaven. In Revelation, the New Jerusalem is shaped like the Holy of Holies in the original Temple at Jerusalem. The Holy of Holies on earth was unapproachable and yet it is what all of us will possess forever in the perfect Temple of the celestial Jerusalem.

So, for us, the exegetical process is rooted in an epistemological optimism that would be impossible apart from the incarnation.

The incarnational principle also gives us the sacramental principle. This in turn, underwrites a sacramental hermeneutic through which we learn that the Word of God is not only the Word incarnate. The eternally generated speech act of God, the eternal Word, becomes incarnate: time and eternity intersect, God and man are married, heaven and earth are united fruitfully. The mystery of the Word incarnate gives us the mystery of the Word inspired — the mystery of the Word eternally generated is actualized and made hermeneutically fruitful in a way that exceeds all natural imaginings and desirings.

Ultimately, the exegete is not only one who must master grammar, logic and rhetoric. He must master all of the relevant events of history, the cultural background through geography, archeology and extra-biblical sources. He must master religion as well, studying Eliade and all of the inescapably religious dimensions of human existence and socio-political life in antiquity. Ultimately, however, the exegete must become a mystic, must become what he reads, in communion with the divine in his midst, aware of and a part of the divine economy that envelopes each one of us and is unfolded in the Scripture.

The exegete has to be like Ezekiel and John in Revelation. He has to “eat” the sacred texts. He has to assimilate the Word as food. He has to find the bread of life in Scripture just as he finds it in the Eucharist.

'Sacred Chain' of Church Teaching on Scripture and Revelation

I.

Scripture in God's Plan of Revelation

The written Word of God comes to us as part of a broader pattern of God's revelation of himself in history. This self-revelation of God, in turn, is part of what the Apostle Paul and the early Church fathers called a divine economy of salvation, an orderly plan by which God intends to invite all men and women into intimate new life with himself.

In his goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will (Eph 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (Eph 2:18; 2 Pt 1:4).

Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (Col 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of his love speaks to men as friends (Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14-15) and lives among them (Bar 3:38), so that he may invite and take them into fellowship with himself.

This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation.

Dei Verbum, no. 2
Second Vatican Council
Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation

The ultimate end of the whole *divine economy* is the entry of God's creatures into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity (Jn 17:21-23).

Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 260

The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means by which the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 234

The divine plan of Revelation is realized simultaneously "by deeds and words which are intrinsically bound up with each other" (*Dei Verbum*, no. 2) and shed light on each another.

It involves a specific *divine pedagogy*: God communicates himself to man gradually. he prepares him to welcome by stages the supernatural Revelation that is to culminate in the person and mission of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons repeatedly speaks of this divine pedagogy using the image of God and man becoming accustomed to one another: The Word of God dwelt in man and became the Son of man in order to accustom man to perceive God and to accustom God to dwell in man, according to the Father's pleasure.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 53

In God's pedagogy of words and deeds, the written Word of God, put down in writing by human authors inspired by the Spirit of God, prepared humanity for the revelation of the Word of God in the flesh. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is the full and final word of God's self-revelation, the focal point of the divine pedagogy, and the crux of the divine economy.

In order to reveal himself to men, in the condescension of his goodness God speaks to them in human words.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 53

It is true that putting God's words into writing, through the charism of scriptural inspiration, was the first step toward the incarnation of the Word of God. These written words, in fact, were an abiding means of communication and communion between the chosen people and their one Lord. On the other hand, it is because of the prophetic aspect of these words that it was possible to recognize the fulfillment of God's plan when "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn 1:14).

Pope John Paul II
Address to Pontifical Biblical Commission
April 23, 1993

In carefully planning and preparing the salvation of the whole human race the God of infinite love, by a special dispensation, chose for himself a people to whom he would entrust his promises. First he entered into a covenant with Abraham (Gen 15:18) and, through Moses, with the people of Israel (Ex 24:8). To this people which he had acquired for himself, he so manifested himself through words and deeds as the one true and living God that Israel came to know by experience the ways of God with men. Then too, when God himself spoke to them through the mouth of the prophets, Israel daily gained a deeper and clearer understanding of his ways and made them more widely known among the nations (Ps 21:29; 95:1-3; Is 2:1-5; Jer 3:17). The plan of salvation foretold by the sacred authors, recounted and explained by them, is found as the

true word of God in the books of the Old Testament....The principal purpose to which the plan of the old covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming of Christ, the redeemer of all and of the messianic kingdom, to announce this coming by prophecy (Lk 24:44; Jn 5:39; 1 Pt 1:10), and to indicate its meaning through various types (1 Cor 10:12). Now the books of the Old Testament...though they also contain some things which are incomplete and temporary, nevertheless show us true divine pedagogy.

Dei Verbum, nos. 14,15

Then, after speaking in many and varied ways through the prophets, "now at last in these days God has spoken to us in his Son" (heb. 1:1-2). For he sent his Son, the eternal Word, who enlightens all men, so that he might dwell among men and tell them of the innermost being of God (Jn 1:1-18).

Jesus Christ, therefore, the Word made flesh, was sent as "a man to men" (Epistle to Diognetus). he "speaks the words of God" (Jn 3:34), and completes the work of salvation which his Father gave him to do (Jn 5:36; Rev 17:4). To see Jesus is to see his Father (Jn 14:9).

For this reason Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making himself present and manifesting himself: through his words and deeds, his signs and wonders, but especially through his death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth. Moreover he confirmed with divine testimony what revelation proclaimed, that God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal.

Dei Verbum, no. 4

The Word of God comes to us from the Church that Jesus established to continue the accomplishment of his work, proclaiming the revelation of God to the ends of the earth and bringing all men and women into new relationship with God. The written Word, along with the unwritten traditions handed on by Jesus to his apostles and their successors, form a single Word of God, a saving and life-giving word of truth to be handed on to all generations.

After the heavenly glorification of the humanity of the Word made flesh, it is again due to written words that his stay among us is attested to in an abiding way. Joined to the inspired writings of the first covenant, the inspired writings of the new covenant are a verifiable means of communication and communion between the believing people and God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This means certainly can never be separated from the stream of spiritual life that flows from the heart of Jesus crucified and which spreads through the Church's sacraments.

*Pope John Paul II
Address of April 23, 1993*

In his gracious goodness, God has seen to it that what he had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity and be handed on to all generations.

Dei Verbum, no. 7

The gospel was promised of old through the prophets in the Sacred Scriptures. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, first promulgated it from his own lips. he in turn ordered that it be preached by his Apostles to all creatures, as the fountain of all saving truth and moral discipline....This truth and discipline are contained in the written books and the unwritten traditions which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the Apostles by the dictates of the Holy Spirit, have come down even unto us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand.

Decree of Reception of the Sacred Books and Apostolic Traditions
Council of Trent (1546)

In order to keep the Gospel forever whole and alive within the Church, the Apostles left bishops as their successors, "handing over" to them "the authority to teach in their own place" (St. Irenaeus).

Dei Verbum, no. 7

Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end.

For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known....

Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. Holding fast to this deposit the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers (Acts 2:42).

Dei Verbum, no. 9,10

The establishment of the "canon" of Scripture, the list of books that are truly the inspired Word of God, was an act of the Church, acting under the authority Christ gave to his apostles and their successors, and guided by the Holy Spirit.

It was by the apostolic Tradition that the Church discerned which writings are to be included in the list of the sacred books. This complete list is called the canon of Scripture.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 120

Now indeed we must treat of the divine Scriptures, what the universal Catholic Church accepts and what she ought to shun.

Council of Rome (382)

[The Church] professes one and the same God as the author of the Old and New Testament, that is, of the Law and the Prophets and the Gospel, since the saints of both Testaments have spoken with the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, whose books, which are contained under the following titles it accepts and venerates.

Council of Florence (1442)

The Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah and Malachi.

The New Testament: the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the Acts of the Apostles, the Letters of St. Paul to the Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, the Letter to the Hebrews, the Letters of James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, and Jude, and Revelation (the Apocalypse).

Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 120

In the divine economy revealed by Jesus Christ, there is an intimate connection between the Word of God proclaimed by the Church and the liturgy and sacraments, where the promises of Christ are remembered, celebrated and communicated. That is why the Word is called the bread of life, because it leads people to the sacraments and nourishes them, communicating to them the blessings of salvation and new life that God has offered to us as the goal of his divine economy.

Just as Christ was sent by the Father, so also he sent the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit. This he did that...that they might accomplish the work of salvation which they had proclaimed, by means of sacrifice and sacraments, around which the entire liturgical life revolves....

For that reason, on the very day of Pentecost, when the Church appeared before the world, "those who received the word" of Peter "were baptized." And "they continued steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles and in the communion of the breaking of bread and in prayers . . . praising God and being in favor with all the people" (Acts 2:41-47).

From that time onwards the Church has never failed to come together to celebrate the paschal mystery: reading those things "which were in all the scriptures concerning him" (Lk 24:27), celebrating the eucharist in which "the victory and triumph of his death are again made present" (*Council of Trent*), and at the same time giving thanks "to God for his unspeakable gift" (2 Cor 9:15) in Christ Jesus, "in praise of his glory" (Eph 1:12), through the power of the Holy Spirit.

To accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations....By his power he is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. he is present in his Word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church.

Sacrosanctum Concilium, nos. 6, 7
Second Vatican Council
Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body....

In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: "For the word of God is living and active" (heb 4:12) and "it has power to build you up and give you your heritage among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32; 1 Th 2:13)

Dei Verbum, no. 21

II.

The Bible in the Church: Inspiration and Interpretation

The written Word of God can be likened to the Word of God made flesh — an indivisible unity of divine and human that comes to us as a gift, given for our salvation out of the loving condescension of God.

In Sacred Scripture, therefore, while the truth and holiness of God always remains intact, the marvelous "condescension" of eternal wisdom is clearly shown, "that we may learn the gentle kindness of God, which words cannot express, and how far he has gone in adapting his language with thoughtful concern for our weak human nature." (St. John Chrysostom) For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when he took to himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men.

Dei Verbum, no. 13

With his customary wisdom, the Angelic Doctor (St. Thomas Aquinas) already observed in these words: "In Scripture divine things are presented to us in the manner which is in common use amongst men." For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, "except sin" (heb 4:15), so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error. In this consists that "condescension" of the God of

providence, which St. John Chrysostom extolled with the highest praise and repeatedly declared to be found in the Sacred Books.

Pope Pius XII
Divino Afflante Spiritu, no. 37
Encyclical Letter on Promoting Bible Studies (1943)

God is the author of sacred Scripture, inspiring human authors writing under their own power and skill to communicate without error the divine truths he intends for our salvation.

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....All the books which 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 co-exist 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. This is the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church....

hence, because the Holy Ghost employed men as his instruments, we cannot therefore say that it was these inspired instruments who, perchance, have fallen into error, and not the primary author. For, by supernatural power, he so moved and impelled them to write — he was so present to them — that the things which he ordered, and those only, they, first, rightly understood, then willed faithfully to write down, and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth. Otherwise, it could not be said that he was the Author of the entire Scripture....

Pope Leo XIII
Providentissimus Deus, no. 20
Encyclical Letter on the Study of Holy Scripture (1893)

Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (Jn 20:31; 2 Tm 3:16; 2 Pt 1:19-20, 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which he wanted.

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings (5) for the sake of salvation. Therefore "all Scripture is divinely inspired and has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, for reformation of manners and discipline in right living, so that the man who belongs to God may be efficient and equipped for good work of every kind" (2 Tm 3:16-17, Greek text).

Dei Verbum, no. 20

There can never, indeed, be any real discrepancy between the theologian and the physicist, as long as each confines himself within his own lines...We must remember, first, that the sacred writers, or to speak more accurately, the Holy Spirit, "who spoke by them, did not intend to teach men...things in no way profitable unto salvation" (St. Augustine)...The principles here laid down will apply cognate sciences, and especially to history.

Pope Leo XIII
Providentissimus Deus, nos. 19, 20

Because Scripture has "dual authorship" — both human and divine — in reading and interpreting the texts we have to seek both the meaning intended by the human authors and the meaning intended by God, the divine author. This means that Catholic exegetes, or interpreters, must study the literary and historical contexts of the sacred writings as well as the "spiritual sense" of the text, always mindful that the Church has been given the final authority to interpret Scripture.

In Sacred Scripture, God speaks to man in a human way. To interpret Scripture correctly, the reader must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm, and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 109

Catholic exegetes [must] remain in full harmony with the mystery of the Incarnation, a mystery of the union of the divine and the human in a determinate historical life. The earthly life of Jesus is not defined only by the places and dates at the beginning of the first century in Judea and Galilee, but also by his deep roots in the long history of a small nation of the ancient Near East, with its weaknesses and its greatness, with its men of God and its sinners, with its slow cultural evolution and its political misadventures, with its defeats and its victories, with its longing for peace and the kingdom of God. The Church of Christ takes the realism of the incarnation seriously, and this is why she attaches great importance to the "historico-critical" study of the Bible.

Pope John Paul II
Address to Pontifical Biblical Commission

To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to "literary forms." For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which

prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.

Dei Verbum, no. 12

In this work let interpreters keep in mind that their greatest care should be to discern and define what the so-called literal sense of the language of the Bible is. Let them bring out this literal meaning of the words with all diligence through a knowledge of languages, employing the aid of the context and of comparison with similar passages; indeed, all these are customarily used for assistance in the interpretation of profane writers also, so that the mind of the author may become quite clear....

[Also] let the interpreter with all care and without neglect of the light which the more recent investigations have shed, strive to discern what the real character and condition of life of the sacred writer were; in what age he flourished; what sources he used whether written or oral, and what forms of expression he employed. Thus he will be able to know better who the sacred writer was, and what he wished to indicate by his writing....

Pope Pius XII

Divino Afflante Spiritu, no. 23

Encyclical Letter on the 50th anniversary of *Providentissimus Deus* (1943)

Nevertheless, this study is not enough. In order to respect the coherence of the Church's faith and of Scriptural inspiration, Catholic exegesis must be careful not to limit itself to the human aspects of the biblical texts. First and foremost, it must help the Christian people more dearly perceive the word of God in these texts so that they can better accept them in order to live in full communion with God. To this end it is obviously necessary that the exegete himself perceive the divine word in the texts. He can do this only if his intellectual work is sustained by a vigorous spiritual life. Without this support, exegetical research remains incomplete; it loses sight of its main purpose and is confined to secondary tasks. It can even become a sort of escape. Scientific study of the merely human aspects of the texts can make the exegete forget that the word of God invites each person to come out of himself to live in faith and love.

Pope John Paul II

Address to Pontifical Biblical Commission

According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two *senses* of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral and anagogical senses.... The *literal sense* is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation: "All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal" (St. Thomas Aquinas).

The *spiritual sense*. Thanks to the unity of God's plan, not only the text of Scripture but also the realities and events about which it speaks can be signs: The *allegorical sense*. We can acquire a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance in Christ; thus the crossing of the Red Sea is a sign or type of Christ's victory and also of Christian Baptism (1 Cor 10:2). The *moral sense*. The events reported in Scripture ought to lead us to act justly. As St. Paul says, they were written "for our instruction" (1 Cor 10:11; Heb 3:1-4:11). The *anagogical sense* (Greek: anagoge, "leading"). We can view realities and events in terms of their eternal

significance, leading us toward our true homeland: thus the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev 21:1; 22:5).

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 115-118

Since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith. It is the task of exegetes to work according to these rules toward a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture, so that through preparatory study the judgment of the Church may mature. For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God.

Dei Verbum, no. 12

Interpretation of the inspired Scripture must be attentive above all to what God wants to reveal through the sacred authors for our salvation. What comes from the Spirit is not fully "understood except by the Spirit's Action" (Origen).

Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 137

The Second Vatican Council indicates three criteria for interpreting Scripture in accordance with the Spirit who inspired it:

1. *Be especially attentive "to the content and unity of the whole Scripture."* Different as the books which compose it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart, open since his Passover: "The phrase 'heart of Christ' can refer to Sacred Scripture, which makes known his heart, closed before the Passion, as the Scripture was obscure. But the Scripture has been opened since the Passion; since those who from then on have understood it, consider and discern in what way the prophecies must be interpreted" (St. Thomas Aquinas).

2. *Read the Scripture within "the living Tradition of the whole Church."* According to a saying of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture ("according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the Church" (Origen).

3. *Be attentive to the analogy of faith* (Rom 12:6). By "analogy of faith" we mean the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of Revelation.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 111-114/37

Moreover, let the exegetes of Sacred Scriptures, mindful of the fact that they are dealing with the divinely inspired word, no less diligently take into account the explanations and declarations of the magisterium of the Church, and likewise the explanation given by the Holy Fathers, and also

the "analogy of faith," as Leo XIII in the encyclical letter, *Providentissimus Deus*, very wisely notes....

Surely, all spiritual meaning is not excluded from Sacred Scripture. For what was said and done in the Old Testament was most wisely so ordered and disposed by God that past events in a spiritual manner presignified what would take place in the new covenant of grace. So the exegete, just as he should find and expound the so-called literal significance of the words, which the sacred writer intended and expressed, so also he should the spiritual significance, provided it can be rightly established that it was given by God. For God alone could know this spiritual significance and reveal it to us. Indeed, the divine Savior himself indicates such a sense to us in the Holy Gospels and teaches us; the apostles, also, imitating the example of the Master, in speaking and writing profess this; so does the teaching handed down by the Church; finally, the ancient practice of the liturgy declares, wherever that famous pronouncement can rightly be applied: "The law of praying is the law of believing."

Pope Pius XII
Divino Afflante Spiritu, nos. 24-26

All Sacred Scripture is but one book, and this one book is Christ, "because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ" (Hugh of St. Victor).

Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 134

The Church, as early as apostolic times (1 Cor 10:6, 11; heb 10:1; 1 Pt 3:21), and then constantly in her Tradition, has illuminated the unity of the divine plan in the two Testaments through typology, which discerns in God's works of the Old Covenant prefigurations of what he accomplished in the fullness of time in the person of his incarnate Son.

Christians therefore read the Old Testament in the light of Christ crucified and risen. Such typological reading discloses the inexhaustible content of the Old Testament; but it must not make us forget that the Old Testament retains its own intrinsic value as Revelation reaffirmed by our Lord himself (Mk 12:29-31). Besides, the New Testament has to be read in the light of the Old. Early Christian catechesis made constant use of the Old Testament (1 Cor 5:6-8; 10:1-11). As an old saying put it, the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New (St. Augustine)

Typology indicates the dynamic movement toward the fulfilment of the divine plan when "God [will] be everything to everyone" (1 Cor 15:28). Nor do the calling of the patriarchs and the exodus from Egypt, for example, lose their own value in God's plan, from the mere fact that they were intermediate stages.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 128-130

It is on this harmony of the two Testaments that the Paschal catechesis of the Lord is built (Lk 24:13-49), and then, that of the Apostles and the Fathers of the Church. This catechesis unveils what lay hidden under the letter of the Old Testament: the mystery of Christ.

It is called "typological" because it reveals the newness of Christ on the basis of the "figures" (types) which announce him in the deeds, words, and symbols of the first covenant. By this re-reading in the Spirit of Truth, starting from Christ, the figures are unveiled (2 Cor 3:14-

16). Thus the flood and Noah's ark prefigured salvation by Baptism (1 Pet 3:21), as did the cloud and the crossing of the Red Sea. Water from the rock was the figure of the spiritual gifts of Christ, and manna in the desert prefigured the Eucharist, "the true bread from heaven" (Jn 6:32; 1 Cor 10:1-6).

Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1094

God has delivered the Holy Scriptures to the Church, and...St. Irenaeus long since laid down that ...Holy Scripture was safely interpreted by those who had the Apostolic succession....The analogy of faith should be followed, and Catholic doctrine, as authoritatively proposed by the Church, should be held as the supreme law; for, seeing that the same God is the author both of the Sacred Books and of the doctrine committed to the Church, it is clearly impossible that any teaching can by legitimate means be extracted from the former, which shall in any respect be at variance with the latter.

Pope Leo XIII

Providentissimus Deus, no. 14

The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.

It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.

Dei Verbum, no. 10

III.

The Bible in the Church: Theology, Prayer and Devotion

Scripture, which gives us a true encounter with the living God, is the fountain and source of all theology, prayer and devotion. Not a day should go by in the life of a Catholic without a personal encounter with the Word of God that begins with prayer and leads to prayer. No homily should be prepared without first praying over and studying the Scriptures.

St. Jerome says, "To be ignorant of the Scripture is not to know Christ." In its pages his Image stands out, living and breathing; diffusing everywhere around consolation in trouble, encouragement to virtue and attraction to the love of God....

The Holy Fathers well knew all this by practical experience, and they never cease to extol the sacred Scripture and its fruits. In innumerable passages of their writings we find them applying to it such phrases as "an inexhaustible treasury of heavenly doctrine" (St. John Chrysostom) or "an overflowing fountain of salvation" (St. Athanasius) or putting it before us as fertile pastures and beautiful gardens in which the flock of the Lord is marvellously refreshed and delighted (St. Augustine)

For the saving and for the perfection of ourselves and of others there is at hand the very best of help in the Holy Scriptures, as the Book of Psalms, among others, so constantly insists; but those only will find it who bring to this divine reading not only docility and attention, but also piety and an innocent life. For the Sacred Scripture is not like other books. Dictated by the Holy Spirit, it contains things of the deepest importance, which in many instances are most difficult and obscure. To understand and explain such things there is always required the "coming" of the same Holy Spirit; that is to say, his light and his grace; and these, as the Royal Psalmist so frequently insists, are to be sought by humble prayer and guarded by holiness of life. [And] it is well to recall how, from the beginning of Christianity, all who have been renowned for holiness of life and sacred learning have given their deep and constant attention to Holy Scripture.

Pope Leo XIII
Providentissimus Deus, nos. 3,5,7

"To live amidst these things, to meditate these things, to know nothing else, to seek nothing else, does it not seem to you already here below a foretaste of the heavenly kingdom?" (St. Jerome). Let also the minds of the faithful be nourished with this same food, that they may draw from thence the knowledge and love of God and the progress in perfection and the happiness of their own individual souls. Let, then, the interpreters of the Divine Oracles devote themselves to this holy practice with all their heart. "Let them pray, that they may understand" (St. Augustine) let them labor to penetrate ever more deeply into the secrets of the Sacred Pages; let them teach and preach, in order to open to others also the treasures of the word of God.

Pope Pius XII
Divino Afflante Spiritu, no. 60

Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation. By scrutinizing in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word. For the Sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and since they are inspired really are the word of God; and so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology. (Epistle to Diognetus) By the same word of Scripture the ministry of the word also, that is, pastoral preaching, catechetics and all Christian instruction, in which the liturgical homily must hold the foremost place, is nourished in a healthy way and flourishes in a holy way.

Dei Verbum, no. 24

The priest is first of all a minister of the word of God. he is consecrated and sent forth to proclaim the good news of the kingdom to all, calling every person to the obedience of faith and leading believers to an ever increasing knowledge of and communion in the mystery of God, as

revealed and communicated to us in Christ. For this reason, the priest himself ought first of all to develop a great personal familiarity with the word of God. Knowledge of its linguistic or exegetical aspects, though certainly necessary, is not enough. He needs to approach the word with a docile and prayerful heart so that it may deeply penetrate his thoughts and feelings and bring about a new outlook in him "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16) — such that his words and his choices and attitudes may become ever more a reflection, a proclamation and a witness to the Gospel. Only if he "abides" in the word will the priest become a perfect disciple of the Lord. Only then will he know the truth and be set truly free, overcoming every conditioning which is contrary or foreign to the Gospel (cf. Jn. 8:31-32).

Pope John Paul II
Pastores Dabo Vobis, no. 26
Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on
The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day (1987)

"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14:6). With these words, Jesus presents himself as the one path which leads to holiness. But a specific knowledge of this way comes chiefly through the word of God which the Church proclaims in her preaching. Therefore, the Church in America "must give a clear priority to prayerful reflection on Sacred Scripture by all the faithful." This reading of the Bible, accompanied by prayer, is known in the tradition of the Church as *lectio divina*, and it is a practice to be encouraged among all Christians. For priests, the *lectio divina* must be a basic feature of the preparation of their homilies, especially the Sunday homily.

Pope John Paul II
Ecclesia in America, no. 31
Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation
On the Encounter with the Living Jesus Christ:
The Way to Conversion, Communion and Solidarity in America (1999)

Catechesis must be impregnated and penetrated by the thought, the spirit and the outlook of the Bible and the Gospels through assiduous contact with the texts themselves; but it is also a reminder that catechesis will be all the richer and more effective for reading the texts with the intelligence and the heart of the Church and for drawing inspiration from the 2,000 years of the Church's reflection and life. The Church's teaching, liturgy and life spring from this source and lead back to it, under the guidance of the pastors and, in particular, of the doctrinal magisterium entrusted to them by the Lord.

Pope John Paul II
Catechesi Tradendae, no. 27
Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on
Catechesis in Our Day (1979)

All the Christian faithful [should]...to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the "excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:8). "For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (St. Jerome). Therefore, they should gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text

itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose and other aids... And let them remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for "we speak to him when we pray; we hear him when we read the divine saying" (St. Ambrose).

Dei Verbum, no. 25