

Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Lessons from Vatican II's Constitution *Dei verbum* for Contemporary Theology

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Abstract: For Roman Catholic systematic theology, any reflection on the relation between revelation, Scripture and tradition has to take into account the dogmatic constitution of the Second Vatican Council concerning this theme: *Dei verbum*. In this document, the dialogical nature of these fundamental theological concepts has been accentuated. Revelation, but also Scripture and tradition, are historical dynamic givens that reveal a salvific God at work in our history, both through Christ and in the Spirit. In conversation with Joseph Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, both the coming into being of this document and its main assets are discussed. Moreover, it will be *Dei verbum's* reception, and especially the difficulties subsequently encountered to uphold and institutionally anchor the dialogical nature of revelation, tradition, theology and the magisterium that are also commented upon. Inasmuch, however, as *Dei verbum* has become a part of tradition for the Roman Catholic Church, a reading and rereading of this tradition requires the same dialogical hermeneutical principles which *Dei verbum* itself presents and requires.

For more than one reason, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei verbum*), promulgated at the Second Vatican Council in 1965, offers an interesting point of reference from which to reflect on the relation between revelation, Scripture and tradition within a Roman Catholic systematic-theological perspective.¹ The way in which this document came into being, its position in the discussions of the day, as well as the manner in which it elaborates on revelation, Scripture and tradition,

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1 For the official text of *Dei verbum* (references to which identified hereafter as DV), see *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966), pp. 817–36. The academically most widely accepted English translation is to be found in Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils. Vol. II: Trent to Vatican II* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), pp. 971–81.

should be mentioned as worthwhile occasions for reflection. In addition, the reception of *Dei verbum*'s insights into both church and theology invites further reflection, especially when framed within the broader discussion of the reception of the Second Vatican Council as a whole in Roman Catholicism today. Finally, this dogmatic constitution is not only to be considered as a normative statement on revelation, but – in view of its status as a conciliar constitution – also as revelatory in itself, inviting both commentary and interpretation within today's context. In this contribution, I would like to point to the consequences of the concepts of revelation and tradition developed in *Dei verbum*, especially in view of today's theological agenda. In order to both enlighten and challenge our reflections, I will call upon a theological sparring partner – a resource, it would seem, above suspicion – who had himself taken part in the drafting of *Dei verbum*, and who to a large extent has taken on important responsibilities in its contemporary reception on the part of the ecclesial magisterium: Joseph Ratzinger, today's Pope Benedict XVI.²

As to the structure of this contribution, I will move from a discussion of the crafting of *Dei verbum* and some reflections on its innovative character to the challenges it presents to systematic theology today. First, I will consider the rejection of the preparatory text 'on the sources of revelation' that was produced before the council (§ 1). Next, I will deal with the historical-dynamic and christological-pneumatological concept of revelation (§ 2), and consequently of tradition (§ 3), that is developed in the document, as well as the place of Scripture in all of this. I will conclude these reflections on *Dei verbum*'s innovative character by pointing to some of its features which may offer us stepping stones towards a more critical-hermeneutical engagement with Scripture and tradition, theology and the magisterium (§ 4). While in passing already referring to Ratzinger's initial comments on *Dei verbum*, I will explicitly mention two of his criticisms of this constitution (§ 5); these will enable us to make the transition to the reception of its teaching on revelation, Scripture and tradition in post-conciliar Roman Catholicism – a reception in which our theological sparring partner, both as a theologian and as a church official, has played a major role. In the framework of this contribution, we will only be able to hint at some crucial issues that marked this reception process (§ 6). In our concluding remarks, where we will touch on the issue of the reception of Vatican II as a whole, we will make a plea for the further development of *Dei verbum*'s (and Vatican II's) dialogical intuition on revelation, Scripture and tradition, and this of

2 Also, on earlier occasions, I have entered into conversation with the theology of Joseph Ratzinger and the discussion of its pertinence for contemporary theological challenges; see, e.g. L. Boeve, 'Europe in Crisis: A Question of Belief or Unbelief? Perspectives from the Vatican', *Modern Theology* 23 (2007), pp. 205–27; and L. Boeve and G. Mannion, eds., *The Ratzinger Reader* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010). In relation to the present contribution, I dealt with Ratzinger's views on Vatican II, revelation and tradition in my '“La vraie réception de Vatican II n'a pas encore commencé”. Joseph Ratzinger, révélation et autorité de Vatican II', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 85 (2009), pp. 305–39.

course under the conditions of today's context (§ 7), because it would seem that today precisely this innovative insight of Vatican II tends to be downplayed.

The significance of the rejection of the preparatory schema

De fontibus revelationis

When one considers the rejection, during the council's opening session in 1962, of the preparatory document *De fontibus revelationis*, it is important to note that this not only impacted subsequent discussions on revelation, Scripture and tradition, but it also influenced the dynamics of the whole council as such. Already on 25 September 1964, Archbishop Florit from Florence remarked that the history of the coming-into-being of the constitution to be promulgated on 18 November 1965 'constitutes a certain unity with the history of the Council itself, both as regards its intrinsic importance, and as regards the happenings which have occurred to it'.³ Indeed, the refutation of the preparatory scheme 'is generally considered to be a benchmark moment, a symbolic incident that signalled the separation of the Council from the influence of the Curia – or at least from the clutches of the Holy Office'.⁴ When put to a vote, the preparatory schema, which was drafted by the preparatory Theological Commission supervised by Cardinal Ottaviani, then prefect of the Holy Office, met with much resistance.⁵ Some 62 per cent of the bishops evaluated the preparatory schema as unfitting to develop a constitution on revelation. Although this, according to conciliar rules, did not constitute the necessary two-thirds majority to withdraw the preparatory schema, Pope John XXIII nevertheless decided to do so, and installed a 'mixed' theological commission to prepare a new proposal.⁶

3 E. Florit, 'Relatio super cap. I et cap. II schematis constitutionis "de divina revelatione"', in *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1962–99), vol. III/3 (1974), p. 131 (translation mine). In the first commentaries on the constitution after the Council (e.g. Joseph Ratzinger's – see below), as well as in more recent scholarly dealings with *Dei verbum*, Florit's observation has been reconfirmed (see, e.g. K. Schelkens, *Catholic Theology of Revelation on the Eve of Vatican II: A Redaction History of the Schema De fontibus revelationis (1960–62)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010, p. 2)).

4 Schelkens, *Catholic Theology of Revelation on the Eve of Vatican II*, p. 2.

5 The text of the schema is available in *Acta Synodalia*, I/3 (1962), pp. 14–26.

6 The membership of this 'mixed commission' consisted of members from the preparatory Theological Commission, and from the Secretariat for Christian Unity which played a pivotal role in the events around the refutation of the preparatory scheme. The criticism of theologians such as Edward Schillebeeckx, Karl Rahner and Yves Congar was also very influential in these events. For more information regarding this and the redaction process of *Dei verbum*, see R. Burigana, *La bibbia nel concilio. La redazione della costituzione 'Dei verbum' del Vaticano II* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), pp. 110–14; G. Alberigo and J.A. Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2 (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), pp. 69–93, 233–66; the contribution of Helmut Hoping on *Dei verbum* in P. Hünermann & J. Hilberath, eds., *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, vol. 3 (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), pp. 716–35.

An explicit interpretation of these events is offered by the then 35-year-old theological advisor of the Archbishop of Cologne Cardinal Josef Frings: Joseph Ratzinger. In his comments on the first session of the Council, this young theologian (later also an official *peritus* of the council) assessed the preparatory schema as anti-modern, rigid and bearing witness to ‘a theology of negations and prohibitions’.⁷ It reflected too much the Roman Neo-scholastic theology and dealt in a very defensive way with the discussions and controversies of the past: a disequilibrium between tradition and Scripture to the advantage of the former; a verbalist conception of Scripture’s inspiration; a very strict interpretation of its inerrancy (in religious as well as in secular affairs); a naive historicist view of the gospels; and, because of this, an over-critical attitude towards, and even condemnation of, modern exegesis. The issue at hand in the discussions and refutation of the preparatory schema, therefore, was the following:

Should one continue the antimodernist attitude, the politics of closure, of condemnation, of defensiveness, until one ends in complete fearful refusal, or shall the church, once the necessary distinctions are made, turn to a new page, and step into a new, positive encounter with her sources, with her brothers, with the world of today?⁸

In answering this question, Ratzinger concluded: precisely because the council chose the second option, Vatican II was called to be more than the continuation of Trent and Vatican I, but to engage in a more timely development of the issues at stake.⁹

7 See J. Ratzinger, *Die erste Sitzungsperiode des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils: ein Rückblick* (Cologne: Bachem, 1963), pp. 38–41 (translations from Ratzinger’s texts referred to in German are mine). See also the text of his evaluation of the schema, which he presented at the request of Cardinal Frings, on 10 October 1962, to the German-speaking bishops gathered in Rome, which was published in *Gregorianum* 89 (2008), pp. 233–311, and in *Mitteilungen Institut Papst Benedict XVI* 2 (2009), pp. 36–48.

Whether this thoroughly negative assessment of the preparatory schema by the conciliar majority has done justice to the document itself is not a question we will here pursue. A very nuanced answer to this question is offered in Schelkens, *Catholic Theology of Revelation on the Eve of Vatican II*, pp. 272–9. In addition, the ‘older’ Ratzinger, on looking back upon this period in his 1998 memoir, presents us with a more nuanced appraisal of the schema, and even dissociates himself from those who pleaded for its radical rejection. J. Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs (1927–1977)* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), pp. 121–9. It is quite a different story, definitely with a different tonality, that we read here, especially if we compare these pages with his notes written at the time of the council.

8 Ratzinger, *Die erste Sitzungsperiode*, pp. 43–4.

9 It was Ratzinger himself, who together with Rahner drafted an alternative proposal, who had a major impact on the final version of the constitution. This made, for example, J.L. Allen conclude that *Dei verbum* is the conciliar document upon which the personal influence of Ratzinger was the most explicit. See J.L. Allen, *Cardinal Ratzinger* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 56.

It was not a surprise, therefore, that Ratzinger was asked to write the commentary to the first, second and last chapters of *Dei verbum* in the German edition and commentary

Today we can add to this the crucial insight that, inasmuch as the council itself constituted tradition and has become part of tradition, its proceedings precisely illustrate the very fact that the development of tradition occurs in *dialogue* with the sources, with developments in theology and exegesis, with other Christians and with the world of today. A second thought in this regard is that inasmuch as the council itself created tradition, it also showed that tradition development and tradition hermeneutics require the ability to cope with *both continuity and discontinuity* in order to safeguard the church's faithfulness to tradition. Mere continuity may run the risk of being a deadly self-enclosure without a future.¹⁰ As will become clear in the following, *Dei verbum's* concept of revelation appears to undergird this point.

A historical-dynamic, christological-pneumatological and soteriological concept of revelation – overcoming the controversies of old

In the history of the making of *Dei verbum*, it is striking that, within the writing process, important points of discussion were settled that had occupied the Roman Catholic theological agenda regarding revelation, Scripture and tradition since the controversies with Protestantism and the difficult engagement with modernity in the modernist crisis. In this sense, Vatican II indeed did not as such confirm Trent and Vatican I, but rather engaged in a critical hermeneutics of the teachings of these councils in relation to the theological and ecumenical developments which changed the 'battle grounds'. In his commentary on *Dei verbum*, Ratzinger points to these developments and adds that because of these, the constitution realizes a 'rereading' of former teachings 'in which the old is read in a contemporary way, and thereby also is interpreted anew with regard to what is essential to it, as well as what is insufficient in it'.¹¹

The key to this critical hermeneutic of earlier teachings is *Dei verbum's* personal, historical-dynamic, christological and soteriological concept of revelation. Revelation does not primarily concern content (*revelata*) but is *itself the salvific event*

on the Vatican II documents. See J. Ratzinger, 'Dogmatische Konstitution über die göttliche Offenbarung', in *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil. Dokumente und Kommentare (Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche)*, vol. 2, 2nd edn (Freiburg: Herder, 1967), pp. 498–503 and 571–81.

10 In his commentary, Ratzinger, *Dogmatische Konstitution*, p. 503, mentions that

the text combines faithfulness to the tradition of the church with an affirmation of the critical sciences, which as such allows faith to open itself to the contemporary. It does not abandon Trent and Vatican I, but it avoids mummifying past teachings, because it is aware that, with regards to the spiritual, faithfulness can only be realized through appropriating it anew, time and again.

11 Ratzinger, *Dogmatische Konstitution*, p. 505. See also p. 521.

of God's self-revelation as Love in Jesus Christ and the Spirit.¹² Revelation thus first of all concerns the encounter in person between God and humanity within concrete history; through this it becomes salvation history and culminates in the incarnation of the *Logos* in Jesus Christ. It is the transmission of this revelation by the apostles and their successors that will thus constitute the basis for considering the revelatory nature of Scripture and tradition.

What cannot be underestimated, then, is the importance of the insertion of a first chapter on revelation itself, immediately prior to a consideration of Scripture and tradition, that occurred during the drafting of the constitution.¹³ It indeed offered the key for overcoming many disputes stemming from controversies in the past.¹⁴ By this move, not only could the controversies over Scripture's inspiration and consequent inerrancy be looked at from a different perspective, not only could the discussions about the 'closure of revelation with the death of the last apostle' and the two sources of revelation (Scripture and 'oral' tradition), including the issue of the (in)sufficiency of Scripture, be put to rest, but the all too *instruktionstheoretische* reduction¹⁵ of revelation to objectifiable contents, with its ecclesiocentric restriction and its separation between the natural and supernatural aspects of the human knowledge of God, could be overcome as well. Faith, therefore, should not be considered merely as the obedient acceptance of revealed truths, but rather in the first instance as the trusting human response to God's salvific invitation. In *Dei verbum*, revelation is presented as one encompassing historical-dynamic and dialogical event, resulting in a conception which succeeds in going beyond the distinctions mentioned while at the same time keeping them together.

Indeed, a crucial distinction is made between (a) the occurrence of revelation in history and (b) the way in which Scripture and tradition bear witness to this revelatory occurrence (as their common divine source). Rather than two sources of revelation, both Scripture and tradition are linked to the original transmission of the Gospel by the apostles, who 'handed on, by their oral preaching and examples and by their dispositions, whatever they had received from Christ's lips, his way, his life or his works, or had learned by the prompting of the holy Spirit'. And as regards

12 The influence of Karl Rahner here is obvious; see in this regard K. Rahner, 'Bemerkungen zum Begriff der Offenbarung', in K. Rahner and J. Ratzinger, *Offenbarung und Überlieferung* (Freiburg: Herder, 1965), pp. 11–24.

13 See Florit, *Relatio*, p. 132.

14 Although, according to many commentators, not always in the most convincing way; see, e.g. the compromise character of ch. 2, as indicated in Hoping, *Dei verbum. C. Würdigung der Konstitution*, p. 809 (with further references).

15 Hoping, *Dei verbum. C. Würdigung der Konstitution*, p. 807. For an elaboration on the concept of an *instruktionstheoretisches Offenbarungsverständnis*, see M. Seckler, 'Der Begriff der Offenbarung', in W. Kern, H.J. Pottmeyer and M. Seckler, *Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie, Band 2: Traktat Offenbarung* (Tübingen: Francke, 1985), pp. 64–6. Revelation then is limited to the events and contents of divine teaching as regards salvation: 'By this, the concept of revelation is reduced to the informative and theoretical part of salvation history which can be translated in doctrine' (p. 64). Revelation is the teaching of *veritates revelatae*, the transmission of supernatural doctrines.

Scripture, *Dei verbum* adds: ‘some apostles, with others of the apostolic age, under the interior guidance of the same Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing’ (DV 7).

As a consequence, Scripture, so to speak, belongs to tradition – to the church’s handing-on of the gospel. At the same time, tradition should be understood as the proclamation, explanation and diffusion of the Word of God as it has been written down under the inspiration of the divine Spirit in Scripture, entrusted by Christ and the Holy Spirit to the apostles, and transmitted to their successors (DV 9). Scripture, and especially the New Testament, is the fruit of the life of the first church, active in proclaiming the gospel, celebrating it in liturgy and using it as the standard for community life. At the same time, the church is the first interpreter of Scripture, which is affirmed as the normative basis for Christian faith.¹⁶ Or, as Ratzinger put it in his 1965 publication on revelation and tradition:¹⁷ the Christian tradition exists because of a constitutive *incongruence between revelation and Scripture*. Revelation is the reality of God’s historical words and deeds with humanity, especially as it is concerned with the mystery of Christ, of which Scripture is the message. In two ways, then, Scripture is surpassed by revelation: *from above* by the words and deeds of God fulfilled in the mystery of Christ, and *from below* by what revelation makes present in the occurrence of faith in the church beyond the borders of Scripture. For one indeed can read Scripture without becoming acquainted with its revelatory dynamics and still be granted participation in the mystery of Christ.

The *distinction between* (a) the event of *revelation* in history and (b) Scripture and tradition which originate from and bear *witness* to this event remains an important hermeneutical principle for every encounter with the signs, deeds, words, texts and doctrines that signify this ‘economy of revelation [*revelationis oeconomia*]’ (DV 2). This distinction, therefore, instigates the development of a profoundly hermeneutical consciousness as the church deals with revelation and its mediations.

Tradition as the historical-dynamic learning process of the whole church

Such a historical-dynamic concept of revelation indeed bears important consequences for an understanding of tradition, since the transmission of revelation is mediated and fulfilled in Christ, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and by the whole church in her teaching, life and worship. From now on, tradition is also a historical-dynamic and pneumatologically anchored concept that can no longer be reduced to the transmission of static doctrinal contents or limited to the actions of the church’s magisterium.

16 See Hoping, *Dei verbum. C. Würdigung der Konstitution*, p. 814.

17 J. Ratzinger, ‘Ein Versuch zur Frage des Traditionsbegriffs’, in Rahner and Ratzinger, *Offenbarung und Überlieferung*, pp. 34–6.

In his commentary, Ratzinger confirms that the dynamics of this new view on tradition stem from (a) the acknowledgement of the tension between ‘what is expressed’ and ‘what remains unexpressed’ in revelation, (b) the all-encompassing character of tradition (referring to the teaching, life and worship of the ecclesial community), and (c) the recognition that tradition develops over time, not only through its proclamation by the magisterium but also ‘through contemplation and study by believers, who “ponder these things in their hearts” (see Lk. 2:19, 51); through the intimate understanding of spiritual things which they experience’ (DV 8). Time and again, according to Ratzinger, it is clear that tradition and its development are a matter of the whole church and not merely of the church’s hierarchy.¹⁸ With regard to DV 10, he emphasizes that tradition concerns the whole people of God and that the Council recognizes the ecclesial and spiritual contributions of the laity.¹⁹ He goes on to accentuate the explicit subordination of the magisterium under the Word of God, and explains that the servant-character of the magisterium first of all consists in listening, together with the whole church, to this Word: ‘In the end, [on the one hand,] there is the whole church listening, and, on the other, there is the whole church sharing in the perseverance of orthodox teaching.’²⁰

Tradition thus can be considered as *a living reality that encompasses both the learning process and the learning outcome of the whole church*, fuelled by its listening to, living by and worship of the Word of God. Tradition is not a static whole of doctrines, rules and cult, but develops over time, in relation to the historical conditions in which the church transmits the gospel. Moreover, tradition is not only a matter of the magisterium, but involves the entire church. As will become clear in what follows, it has become obvious, especially today, that these insights remain only pious words if they are not also *institutionally translated* into the way in which the church organizes its coming to truth.

Stepping stones towards a more hermeneutical view of Scripture and tradition, theology and magisterium

For several reasons, the chapters of *Dei verbum* that deal with Scripture and its interpretation (ch. 3), the Old and New Testament (ch. 4), and the place of Scripture in the life of the church (ch. 5) are particularly interesting for our present considerations. Because I am not able here to elaborate on these chapters at length, I will limit my remarks to the following five.

(a) First of all, these particular chapters confirm and articulate the new conciliar perspective on the historical-dynamic and christological-pneumatological nature of revelation, as well as its dialogical impetus. This implies, among other things, that the historical contextuality and even ambiguity (DV 15, as regards the Old

18 Ratzinger, *Dogmatische Konstitution*, p. 520.

19 See Ratzinger, *Dogmatische Konstitution*, p. 527.

20 Ratzinger, *Dogmatische Konstitution*, pp. 527 and 528.

Testament) of texts are recognized, as well as the development throughout time of both Scripture and tradition, within which Scripture plays a constitutive role.

(b) At the same time, the text of DV 11 and the following paragraphs show in practice what it means for tradition development to be a historical-dynamic reality. From the viewpoint of practice, *Dei verbum* indeed realizes what it claims: that the historical-critical and other sciences can assist us to come to a better understanding of both the process and contents of how revelation is 'inscribed' in concrete histories and texts.²¹ The constitution itself incorporates a number of insights which were gained from the exegetical research of its time: for example, in dealing with the evangelists as authors (see DV 19) and the importance of literary genres. It also theologically legitimates such a procedure: 'Indeed, God's words, expressed through human language, have taken on the likeness of human speech, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he assumed the flesh of human weakness, took on the likeness of human beings' (DV 13). As a consequence thereof, the constitution distinguishes between the historical-critical study of Scripture (which it deems a necessary step) and Scripture's ecclesial interpretation in relation to the whole of Scripture, the living tradition of the whole church, and 'the sense of perspective given by faith', in preparation for which the exegetes perform their historical-critical research (DV 12). The crucial contribution of exegesis and theology in coming to understand the Scriptures is reiterated in DV 23.

(c) Thirdly, the constitution explicitly recognizes the important role of Scripture in liturgy and the critical function it exercises vis-à-vis theology and the magisterium. 'Accordingly all the church's preaching, no less than the whole Christian religion, ought to be nourished and ruled by holy Scripture' (DV 21). Of course, these insights are correlated to the biblical, liturgical and theological movements which preceded the council. However, there is more to say: as privileged witness of the Word of God and in light of the broad concept of tradition as the integral whole of teaching, life and worship, Scripture and its scientific study introduce a significant and critical 'difference' within the development and hermeneutics of tradition. This 'difference' is an important hermeneutical principle as well.

(d) Next, this conciliar text exhibits a powerful call for a theological renewal, a renewal whose consequences at that time were not yet fully clear.²² This is also accentuated in Ratzinger's commentary on *Dei verbum*'s last chapter. Ratzinger remarks at least twice that in *Dei verbum*, the limits set by the encyclical *Humani*

21 In this regard, Ratzinger mentioned in his conciliar notes at the time of the third session (1964) that the council fathers progressively became more aware of the historical dimension of Christian faith and the development of tradition over time, and in this regard came to appreciate the importance of historical-critical methods for theology. The new texts, therefore, should make it possible to account for the faith in a world and thinking atmosphere which is marked by the modern sciences, and will offer theology again the necessary space to play its part in this modern context. See J. Ratzinger, *Ergebnisse und Probleme der dritten Konzilsperiode* (Cologne: Bachem, 1965), pp. 35–8.

22 Ratzinger, *Dogmatische Konstitution*, p. 577.

generis (1950)²³ on the roles of exegesis and theology – that they were merely to support what the magisterium proclaims – are overcome and corrected.²⁴ In his 1965 publication on revelation and tradition, Ratzinger even adds that exegesis, complementary to the custodial function of the magisterium, holds a similar custodial function, which in a way makes explicit the autonomy of Scripture vis-à-vis the magisterium: ‘What can be unambiguously known from Scripture through scientific research or through simple reading of Scripture, has the function of a real criterion, which is to be respected in magisterial utterances.’²⁵

(e) Finally, as we already noted, the text explicitly marks the irreducible and constitutive role of the magisterium in the church based on apostolic authority and succession.²⁶ But at the same time the text embeds this role in the encompassing learning process of the whole church as it listens to the Word of God and in the faithful perseverance of the entire people of God ‘to the apostles’ teaching and shared life, to the breaking of bread and prayer’ (DV 10, in reference to Acts 2:42). This relativizes the old distinction between *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens*, and makes room for the whole church’s discernment in this regard, and in particular that of the laity as well.

In short, time and again, the *historical and dialogical character of revelation, Scripture, tradition, theology and the magisterium* comes to the fore, including the intuition that this dialogue intrinsically exercises its impact on the originating and interpretative processes and on the contents that result from these processes. *Dei verbum* itself, in this regard, is the product of such a dialogical process in which both the life of the church (e.g. the movements of renewal) and the contemporary insights from historical-critical exegesis and theology were taken into account. In addition, when one reads *Dei verbum* from the perspective of contemporary hermeneutics (like Paul Ricoeur, for example), then not only its dialogical character but also its historical situatedness become immediately obvious: the hermeneutics displayed in *Dei verbum* tend to remain rather essentialist (see the claim that the intention of the ‘sacred authors’ of Scripture should be sought after, DV 12). One could proceed further in applying more fully the hermeneutical circle in which one not only cultivates an awareness of the historicity of the past, but also of today’s interpretations thereof. What also becomes immediately clear is that once one accepts this historical and dialogical nature of ecclesial teaching, such as *Dei verbum*, the dialogue will never end: history goes on, and historical contexts keep on changing. In all of this, the *principle of the dialogue* itself remains an important new insight of Vatican II and more particularly of *Dei verbum* itself as it deals with revelation, tradition, church and the like.

23 Encyclical ‘concerning some false opinions threatening to undermine the foundations of catholic doctrine’, promulgated by Pope Pius XII on 12 August 1950, see http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/ (accessed 1 July 2011).

24 See Ratzinger, *Dogmatische Konstitution*, p. 577 and also earlier on p. 527.

25 Ratzinger, *Ein Versuch zur Frage des Traditionsbegriff*, p. 48.

26 This is further developed in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*.

A lack of tradition criticism and too open to the world?

Before moving on to discuss briefly some developments in the Roman Catholic Church that illustrate the ongoing difficult reception of Vatican II, including some of the major insights of the dogmatic constitution on revelation, I want to draw attention to two critical remarks made in passing by the young Joseph Ratzinger in his commentary on *Dei verbum*. In one way or another these will appear important in reflecting further on this reception.

(a) First of all, in this early context, Ratzinger complains that the constitution hardly makes room in its views on the development of tradition for a *legitimate criticism of tradition*.²⁷ The compromise text of DV 8 does not suffice; it has missed the opportunity to integrate ‘the positive possibility and necessity of intra-ecclesial tradition criticism’.²⁸ In his evaluation, the eschatological framework in which tradition is placed (DV 7) is the only occasion in which a glimpse of tradition criticism can be observed. There a kind of negative theology is hinted at: during its pilgrimage on earth, the church sees God’s revelation through Scripture and tradition ‘as in a mirror [darkly]’ until the eschatological fulfilment when it will see God face to face.

The distinction between revelation and its historical mediations; the inner-ecclesial dialogues between the people of God, exegesis and theology, and the magisterium as they listen to the Word of God; Scripture as the rule of faith and norm for ecclesial life and proclamation; the dialogue with other Christians and with the world of today (including the sciences) – all of these indeed promote a self-critical consciousness. Making room for a legitimate criticism of tradition, with reference to potential ecclesial locations, would have strengthened this dialogical character as well as its institutional realization as the church listens to and interprets God’s revelation.

(b) Another criticism, one that resounds in Ratzinger’s evaluative considerations, is directed at the *too exclusively optimistic tone* in which the council addresses the issues of revelation, history and salvation. Commenting on DV 3, he asks whether such an exclusive optimism does not forget the fact ‘that divine salvation in essence concerns the justification of the *sinner*, that grace only is realized by undergoing the judgment of the cross, and by this itself bears a judgmental character’. He concludes with this criticism: ‘It would seem that the pastoral optimism exposed by a time looking for understanding and reconciliation has somewhat troubled the view on a not unessential part of the biblical witness.’²⁹ Most probably, one can find here a trace of the serious discussions from 1964–5 about the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, on

27 See Ratzinger, *Dogmatische Konstitution*, p. 514 (regarding DV 5) and more explicitly on p. 517 (DV 7) and pp. 519–20 (DV 8).

28 Ratzinger, *Dogmatische Konstitution*, p. 520.

29 Ratzinger, *Dogmatische Konstitution*, p. 509 (emphasis in the original).

the occasion of which Ratzinger expressed his critical reservations against there being too large of an opening of the church to the world.³⁰

This sentiment – that Vatican II, or at least its reception, in one way or another expounded a too open and optimistic attitude towards the world – has become more explicit and important in Ratzinger's ongoing observations of the post-conciliar church and his own reception of Vatican II.³¹ The following statement, dating from 1973, is telling in this regard:

The tragic one-sidedness of the final conciliar debates consisted in the fact that they were dominated by the trauma of backwardness and a pathos to catch up with modernity, a pathos which remained blind to the inherent ambiguity of today's world . . . Now, in the post-conciliar Church, we are forced to endure problems that are arising on account of that which did not find expression in the conciliar debates.³²

It made him conclude in 1982, almost twenty years after the council, that it is not certain whether Vatican II will prove itself to have been very significant, because from the perspective of church history not all valid councils have been fruitful councils.³³

A fruitful reception of *Dei verbum* and the council's teaching on revelation, Scripture and tradition?

Although *Dei verbum's* formal reception would appear to be limited, according to Helmut Hoping in the new Herder commentary,³⁴ several developments must be considered when reflecting on the impact (or the lack thereof) of the council's teaching on revelation. In most of these developments, our theological sparring partner has played an important role. Both as a theologian and (since 1981) as cardinal-prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) and president of both the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the International Theological Commission, Joseph Ratzinger has had a major influence in the reception of *Dei verbum*, and this within the context of the broader discussion of the reception of Vatican II. In the context of this essay, I am not able to develop this

30 See, e.g. J. Ratzinger, 'Angesichts der Welt von heute. Überlegungen zur Konfrontation mit der Kirche im Schema XIII', *Wort und Wahrheit* 20 (1965), pp. 493–504 (enlarged and revised in *Dogma und Verkündigung* (Münich:ewel, 1973), pp. 183–204).

31 For a more detailed description of his evaluation of Vatican II and its reception, see Boeve, 'Europe in Crisis', pp. 206–9.

32 Ratzinger, 'Angesichts der Welt von heute', in *Dogma und Verkündigung*, pp. 199–200.

33 See J. Ratzinger, 'Bilanz der Nachkonzilszeit – Misserfolge, Aufgaben, Hoffnungen', in J. Ratzinger, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre. Bausteine zur Fundamentaltheologie* (Münich:ewel, 1982), p. 395.

34 Hoping, *Dei verbum. C. Würdigung der Konstitution*, p. 815.

at any length.³⁵ To illustrate my point, however, I will mention only the following elements.

(a) Apart from the documents issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission,³⁶ one must mention in this regard the discussions on the interpretation of Scripture and the role of historical-critical exegetical methods in which Joseph Ratzinger has been involved. Although it would seem that he pays the obligatory lip service to their importance, Ratzinger has insistently accentuated the limits of the historical-critical methods in favour of an ecclesial ‘canonical’ exegesis.³⁷ It is evident that *Dei verbum* explicitly makes the connection between these two approaches, but it also stresses their mutual interdependency. It therefore allows for a much more critical-dynamic interaction between the two, one in which the so-called canonical exegesis not only further develops and complements the results of the historical-critical study of the Bible, but can be challenged by it as well. It is precisely in view of the church arriving at a more mature judgement that exegetes are asked to engage in their study (DV 12), and the insights of exegesis may legitimately challenge canonical interpretations that often have been informed by other exegetical, theological and contextual insights.³⁸ In this regard, we should not only engage in a critique of the historical-critical method,³⁹ but should foster an appropriate hermeneutical-critical openness in our theological and ‘canonical’ interpretations as well. No doubt, more contemporary hermeneutical insights⁴⁰ may assist us in coming to a more balanced and productive interaction of

35 I have had the opportunity to do so in the publications to which I have referred in n. 2 above.

36 See www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_doc_index.htm (accessed 1 July 2011), and especially *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (15 April 1993) and *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (24 May 2001).

37 See, e.g. J. Ratzinger, ‘Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit. Zur Frage nach Grundlagen und Weg der Exegese heute’, in J. Ratzinger, ed., *Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit* (Freiburg: Herder, 1989), pp. 15–44. See, in this regard, also his two most recent christological books: J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jesus von Nazareth* (Freiburg: Herder, vol. 1, 2007; vol. 2, 2011); with regard to our point here especially the preface of the first volume, pp. 10–23.

38 This point is well illustrated by a comparison of the way in which the results of exegetical research are received in the Christology of J. Ratzinger and of Edward Schillebeeckx. See E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus het verhaal van een levende* (Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1974), ET *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury Press / London: Collins, 1979); *Gerechtigheid en liefde. Genade en bevrijding* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1977), ET *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (London: SCM Press, 1980); see also his *Tussentijds verhaal over twee Jezusboeken* (Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1978), ET *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ* (London: SCM Press / New York: Crossroad, 1980). The Christology of Schillebeeckx became the subject of scrutiny by the CDF, without however being condemned.

39 See Ratzinger, *Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit*, pp. 22–34.

40 See, e.g. P. Ricœur, *L’herméneutique biblique. Traduction et présentation par F.-X. Amherdt* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2001); F.-X. Amherdt, *L’herméneutique philosophique de Paul Ricœur et son importance pour l’exégèse biblique: en débat avec le New Yale Theology School* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2004).

both approaches in relation to each other, and in becoming more aware of the broader hermeneutical horizons within which such interaction can be understood.

(b) Secondly, mention should be made of the discussion concerning the role of theology in the church, a discussion, for example, which went public with the *Kölner Erklärung* of 6 January 1989 ‘against curtailment – for an open catholicity’. This led to attempts by the magisterium to define more explicitly and specifically the place and task of theology in the church through an instruction by the CDF ‘on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian’,⁴¹ and brought about both structural and individual measures meant to ensure the orthodoxy and loyalty of theologians to the magisterium.⁴² Earlier, in 1985, Ratzinger claimed that, all too often, under the guise of doing academic theology, theologians present opinions which diverge from what the magisterium teaches – a magisterium which they then no longer consider as a spokesperson of the church’s faith, but as an exponent of an archaic, Roman theology.⁴³ A favourite argument in Ratzinger’s pronouncements on this subject at that time is that the magisterium therefore should protect ordinary believers from the confusion brought about by theologians.⁴⁴ In a way similar to that which I observed regarding exegesis, it would appear that in order to solve this problem, the interaction between theology and the magisterium again is conceived first and foremost as unidirectional: theology’s service to the church and its magisterium is again understood primarily as preparing and explaining what the magisterium teaches. There seems to be little room left for a dynamic (because mutually critical-constructive) relation between theologians and the church’s magisterium, one where each respects the other’s role in view of reaching a growing understanding, by the entire people of God, of God’s revelation and tradition, ‘both the words and the realities they signify’ (DV 8). The least one can say, it would seem,

41 See ‘Instruction on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian’: *Donum veritatis* of 24 May 1990, online at: www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html (accessed 1 July 2011).

42 See e.g. the ‘Formula to be used for the profession of faith and for the oath of fidelity to assume an office to be exercised in the name of the Church’, of 1 July 1988 and 29 June 1998 (*Ad tuendam fidem*), and the notifications concerning theologians and their work. See in this regard, B.E. Hinze, ‘A Decade of Disciplining Theologians’, *Horizons* 37 (2010), pp. 92–126, with further references in the footnotes. As I have remarked in ‘Theology at the Crossroads of Academy, Church and Society’, *ET Studies* 1 (2010), p. 81: ‘with each premature intervention, the mechanisms of self-correction within academic theology are disturbed or even blocked, and other mechanisms, like self-censorship or alienation, pop up. Such a situation is not only damaging to theology but also to the church’.

43 See J. Ratzinger and V. Messori, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), p. 26.

44 The topic of the role and task of theology has often been a concern in Ratzinger’s theological work: see, e.g. J. Ratzinger, ‘Kirche und wissenschaftliche Theologie’, in W. Sandfuchs, ed., *Die Kirche* (Würzburg: Echter, 1978), pp. 83–95; ‘Theologie und Kirchenpolitik’, *Communio* 9 (1980), pp. 425–34; ‘Theologie und Kirche’, *Communio* 16 (1986), pp. 515–33; *Wesen und Auftrag der Theologie* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1993).

is that the place for the legitimate criticism of tradition that Ratzinger called for has not been granted to theology.

(c) In relation to these developments, some commentators have asked whether today, more than forty years after the council, we are observing once again an *instruktionstheoretische* reduction of *Dei verbum's* historical-dynamic understanding of revelation and tradition to *revelata*, with again a more unilateral accentuation of the magisterium,⁴⁵ and as a consequence, a reductive characterization of faith in terms of obedience to revealed truths, rather than in terms of a trustful response to the self-revelation of God in history.⁴⁶ One example of this is the discussion of the role of the New Catechism of the Catholic Church⁴⁷ in education, instruction and initiation. In addition, when examining more closely various encyclicals, instructions and the like, one could also draw attention to the often apparent inability and/or unwillingness of the magisterium, in its consideration of *fides et mores*, to take into account the contribution of contemporary philosophical insights and the results of the human and natural sciences.⁴⁸ At the same time, the historical nature of tradition – its development through time and context – seems to be overlooked yet again.

(d) Particular mention should be made of the limited impact of the doctrine of collegiality in matters regarding the church's teaching office. This includes Ratzinger's consistent refusal to acknowledge any decisive authority to the synods of bishops⁴⁹ or any magisterial office for episcopal conferences.⁵⁰ It also pertains to the discussion with regard to the relation between the local and the universal church (the so-called Ratzinger–Kasper debate),⁵¹ wherein Ratzinger claims the clearly

45 Interesting in this regard is the discussion – seemingly with quite some incomprehension – between Ladislav Orsy and Joseph Ratzinger regarding 'definitive teaching', with reference to *Ad tuendam fidem*, originally in *Stimmen der Zeit*, reprinted in English in L. Orsy, *Receiving the Council: Theological and Canonical Insights and Debates* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), pp. 115–42.

46 See e.g., Hoping, *Dei verbum. C. Würdigung der Konstitution*, p. 809 (with further references).

47 The Catechism was drafted by a preparatory commission with Cardinal Ratzinger as its president, and promulgated in 1992 on the authority of John Paul II.

48 See, e.g. my remarks on the rather complex relationship between faith and reason as presented in *Fides et ratio*: L. Boeve, 'The Swan or the Dove? Two Keys for Reading *Fides et Ratio*', *Philosophy and Theology* 12 (2000), pp. 3–24.

49 See J. Ratzinger, 'Scopi e metodi del Sinodo dei vescovi', in J. Tomko, ed., *Il Sinodo dei vescovi. Natura – metodi – prospettiva* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Vatican City, 1985), pp. 45–58.

50 In the years after the council, episcopal conferences were quite active in this regard; reference could be made here, for example, to the Latin American episcopal conference (CELAM) with its ground-breaking meetings in Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979).

51 See, e.g. K. McDonnell, 'The Ratzinger/Kasper Debate: The Universal Church and the Local Churches', *Theological Studies* 63 (2002), pp. 227–50; M. Kehl, 'Zum jüngsten Disput um das Verhältnis von Universalkirche und Ortskirchen', in P. Walter, K. Krämer and G. Augustin, eds., *Kirche in ökumenischer Perspektive. FS Kardinal Kasper* (Freiburg: Herder, 2003), pp. 81–101.

asymmetrical precedence of the universal over the local church, and the consequences thereof for the process of finding truth by the whole church. Here I would like to refer back to my remark that *Dei verbum*'s insight regarding tradition – that is, the historical-dynamic process of the whole church as it listens to God's Word and learns how to bear witness to it – remains ineffective if it is not also institutionally translated into the way in which the church organizes its coming to truth.

Time and again, it would appear that the dialogical principle at the heart of the concept of revelation developed at Vatican II is truncated and conceived as unilateral and asymmetrical. The potentially renewing – or interrupting – impact of such dialogue is thus restrained because of the possible risk of a too far-reaching adaptation or renewal and a loss of continuity. In light of the tension which an open dialogue brings about, the church – and especially its magisterium – prematurely breaks off the dialogue and in so doing again threatens to close in on itself and its certainties. Of course, this development does not concern *Dei verbum* only, but pertains to the reception of Vatican II as a whole. The opening of the church to the contemporary context, through the combined efforts of *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*, has itself become questioned. Not only does the modern world no longer appear to serve as a dialogue partner, but the principle of dialogue itself seems no longer appropriate.

Before going into the broader reception process of Vatican II as well as some concluding remarks, I wish to refer to one more illustration of the curtailing of *Dei verbum*'s dialogical principle, as pointed out by Reimund Bieringer, as it appears in the recent post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum domini* by Pope Benedict XVI on the Word of God in the life and mission of the church.⁵² First of all, in part 1, the dialogical principle is firmly acknowledged (*Verbum domini* 6). At the same time, however, its reach is reduced due to a downplaying of the historical-dynamic nature of the revelation of God's Word in human words. Although the historical, human dimension is not denied, in *Verbum domini*'s relegation of *Dei verbum* it is precisely the divine dimension – revelation as God's Word – which is accentuated and further elaborated upon.⁵³ Through such a procedure – which threatens to see the two dimensions in opposition to each other – the historical-dynamic interaction between both risks disappearing, and, as a consequence, so too does the constitutive basis for a real hermeneutics of Scripture and tradition (see §§ 2–3).

Conclusion: safeguarding the dialogical principle

According to Ratzinger, the problem with the reception of Vatican II is precisely that the opening of the church to the modern world has resulted in a too far-reaching

52 *Verbum domini* was officially released on 30 September 2010, see www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/index_en.htm (accessed 1 July 2011).

53 See R. Bieringer, 'Openbaring, Schrift en interpretatie: Een bijbels-theologisch perspectief', paper presented at an internal symposium on the reception of Vatican II at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies in Leuven on 7 June 2011.

adaptation to a progressively radicalizing modernity that threatens the essence of the Christian faith itself. As I have shown elsewhere,⁵⁴ for Ratzinger this battle concerning the reception of the council already began during the last days of the council itself, and more particularly during the discussions of Schema XIII on the relation between the church and the modern world, which would eventually result in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*. And his evaluation of the modern world has become only more negative since then. In *The Ratzinger Report* of 1985, for example, he claims that the internal contradictions within modernity prevent the church *de facto* from continuing its dialogue with the world. It has become time, he adds, to end the period of ‘openness without discernment’, and to choose for the non-conformism of the minority which does not share in the spirit of the world.⁵⁵ And, in 2004, he even writes of a radical clash between two cultures, one in-line with the Christian faith, and the other in-line with a kind of radical Enlightenment thinking that results in individualism, intolerance and relativism.⁵⁶

In the above, we have seen that giving up on dialogue with the contemporary world has also been accompanied by the restraint on dialogue within the church: moreover, the principle of dialogue itself as the motor of revelation, Scripture and tradition again seems to be downplayed. In my book *God Interrupts History*, however, I have tried to show that a critical view of contemporary times should not lead to relinquishing a mutually critical and enriching dialogue but rather to an adjusted conception thereof in which both continuity and discontinuity, harmony and conflict, identity and otherness are held in a dynamic relationship. The argument for this is theological in nature, precisely because of the dialogical structure of revelation and tradition.

In this regard, we can re-evaluate Joseph Ratzinger’s statement regarding the reception of the council that we should not read Vatican II as a more progressive movement resulting in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* (and other documents, such as the ones about religious freedom, and the dialogue with the other religions) – a movement which had to be continued after the council – but that we rather should read these last documents of the council in the framework of the dogmatic constitutions on the church and on revelation.⁵⁷ However, if Ratzinger’s

54 See Boeve, ‘Europe in Crisis’ in reference to my ‘*Gaudium et Spes* and the Crisis of Modernity: The End of the Dialogue with the World?’, in M. Lamberigts and L. Kenis, eds., *Vatican II and its Legacy* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), pp. 83–94. For a similar analysis, see H.-J. Sander, ‘Theologischer Kommentar zur Pastoralconstitution über die Kirche in der Welt von heute *Gaudium et spes*’, in P. Hünermann and B.J. Hilberath, eds., *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, vol. 4 (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), pp. 838–44.

55 Ratzinger and Messori, *The Ratzinger Report*, ch. 2.

56 J. Ratzinger, *Werte in Zeiten des Umbruchs: die Herausforderungen der Zukunft bestehen* (Freiburg: Herder, 2005). He is even more explicit in ‘Europe in the Crisis of Cultures’, *Communio* 32 (2005), pp. 345–56.

57 See Ratzinger, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre*, p. 396: ‘Is one obliged to read the dogmatic as criterion for the pastoral, or does the turn to the pastoral imply that the dogmatic is to go in a new direction?’

claim is correct, even so we read about the dialogical and historical-dynamic concept of revelation, Scripture and tradition which is presented in *Dei verbum*, and we are able to perceive how in the making of *Dei verbum* this – explicitly! – is done in dialogue with the state-of-the art historical-critical and theological research of the day, so much so that *Dei verbum* itself legitimately can be said to be the result of such a dialogue. This would surely not motivate a relinquishing of the dialogue, as if Christian faith in essence were not affected by it. On the contrary, one needs to accentuate its theological necessity.

Of course such an evaluation is made from within the framework of contemporary theological-hermeneutical insights, nurtured by the dialogue with the current (scientific) world. These insights have led me to propose the concept of ‘recontextualisation’ in order to consider both the development and hermeneutics of tradition, and in so doing, to place the dialogical principle at the heart of how revelation and tradition work.⁵⁸ In such a conceptualization, continuity and discontinuity are not to be considered as oppositional but may be constitutive for a historical-dynamic conception of tradition as witness to the revelation of God in the concrete history of world and humanity. Or, in other words: the discussion concerning the reception of Vatican II does not revolve around the simple opposition between the spirit and letter of the council (as the confrontation between a progressive and conservative reading of Vatican II is often portrayed).⁵⁹ However, the dynamics of spirit and letter remain – because of *Dei verbum* – constitutive for every legitimate understanding of the council. This is because Vatican II, for the Roman Catholic Church, is also a constitutive part of the tradition as the witness of the revelation of God in history – the history of listening and learning by God’s people on its way to eschatological fulfilment. And thus our reading and rereading requires the same hermeneutical principles which *Dei verbum* itself presents and requires.

58 See, e.g. L. Boeve, ‘Systematic Theology, Truth and History: Recontextualisation’, in M. Lamberigts and T. Merrigan, eds., *Orthodoxy: Process and Product* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), pp. 27–44.

59 See Ratzinger and Messori, *The Ratzinger Report*, ch. 2.