

Inspired Scripture, free from all error

In our survey of unchangeable dogmas of faith listed by the Holy See's 1998 *Doctrinal Commentary*, we next look at Scripture's freedom from error ('inerrancy'). The *Commentary* names 'the absence of error in the inspired sacred texts' as a first-level teaching, the denial of which is heresy.

It references two magisterial documents, firstly Pope Leo XIII's 1893 encyclical on Scripture, *Providentissimus Deus*. Leo, having first stated that all biblical books with all their parts are written wholly at the dictation of the Holy Spirit, then declares that this inspiration by the Holy Spirit '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.' (20) And he then affirms (in the text directly referenced by the *Doctrinal Commentary*): 'This is the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church.' (DS 3293)

The Council of Trent had infallibly defined in 1546 the correct list ('canon') of biblical books, anathematising anyone not accepting all of them as 'sacred and canonical, entire with all their parts' (DS 1504). In 1870, Vatican I added the definition that these texts were inspired by God (DS 3029). The freedom from error of the inspired texts was not itself explicitly defined by those Councils, but Leo XIII declared this to be the 'unchanging faith of the Church'. (Possibly he discerned it to be infallibly taught by the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium.)

Supporting the same doctrine, the 1998 *Commentary* then references Vatican II's (1965) Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (DV), 11, which affirmed: 'Holy Mother Church...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 for the sake of salvation.'

Here *Dei Verbum* footnoted a passage (EB 539) from Pius XII's encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943). In that passage, Pius quotes the words of Leo XIII already cited above, as well as his caution that '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'. Leo and Pius rejected the theory that biblical inerrancy was limited to matters of faith and morals. Likewise, the official explanation of *Dei Verbum* 11 given to the bishops at Vatican II (*Acta Synodalia* IV, V 708) emphasised that the intended meaning of what they would be voting on, did not imply any limitation of biblical inerrancy to this or that subject matter. (cf. B. Harrison *The Truth and Salvific Purpose of Sacred Scripture according to 'Dei Verbum' Article 11*)

The Church's logic is clear. 'Everything asserted by the inspired authors' is 'asserted by the Holy Spirit'. (DV 11) But obviously, everything asserted by the Holy Spirit is without error. So, it necessarily follows that everything asserted by the inspired authors is also without error.

So does that mean Catholics should be *fundamentalists* in interpreting Scripture? The word ‘fundamentalism’ is employed in such a variety of ways as to make it quite ambiguous, and of limited usefulness. But one possible definition is, ‘taking everything literally, even when it was not the human author’s intention to assert a literal meaning’. And in that sense of excessive literalism, Catholics certainly reject fundamentalism, as unfaithful to Scripture’s *true* meaning.

Vatican II explained: ‘The interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words. To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to “literary forms” [or “genres”]. For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse.’ (DV 12)

A simple example of misinterpreting genre would be to imagine that Jesus’ parables must be describing actual events. But more broadly, not every biblical passage appearing to an untrained 21st-century reader to be asserting literal history was necessarily understood as such by the author and his audience in the very different contexts of biblical times. As a parallel, we could imagine someone from future times misinterpreting as literal history a historical novel of our own times. (cf. W. Most *Free From All Error* 49-50) Pius XII had already emphasised the importance of literary genre in *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (33-46); and the earlier Magisterium, while cautioning against too easy an appeal to non-historical interpretations of texts that were seemingly historical, in the end allowed for this, given sufficient evidence. (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 23/06/1905)

Also, as Vatican II stated (echoing Leo and Pius), God inspired the Scriptures ‘for the sake of salvation’. (DV 11) This helps us interpret the intended meaning of a biblical text (cf. *Acta Synodalia* IV, V 708), cautioning us from imagining that the inspired writers are intending to assert things such as precisely expressed scientific statements, not relevant to salvation.

In these matters, we often need the help of exegetes (Scripture scholars) and ultimately the Magisterium’s guidance. But considerations of genre can help scholars resolve certain scriptural difficulties, while firmly holding the Church’s faith that there is no error in whatever the sacred authors intend to affirm as the truth.

As for the genre of *the Gospels* – Vatican II, aware of ‘liberal’ interpretations by some scholars, resoundingly proclaimed: ‘Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy maintained and continues to maintain, that the four Gospels...whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while he lived among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day when he was taken up.’ (DV 19) So the claims one sometimes hears that some Gospel story did not really happen, or that some Gospel teaching was not really taught by Jesus himself, go against Church teaching.

St John Paul II explained: ‘the Apostles...had a first-hand experience of Christ, the Word of life: they saw him with their eyes, heard him with their ears, touched him with their hands. (cf. *1 Jn* 1:1) What we receive from them is a vision of faith based on precise historical testimony: a true testimony which the Gospels, despite their complex redaction [editing process] and primarily catechetical purpose, pass on to us in an entirely trustworthy way.’ (*Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001) 17)

So we rejoice that in Scripture we have the Word of God, free from error; and that in the Gospels we find ‘the honest truth about Jesus’ (DV 19) as he walked this earth for our salvation.