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PAUL VI ON MODERN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

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With this issue of *Living Tradition* we resume our survey of Pope Paul VI's teachings on biblical studies. In *LT* 159 ("Paul VI's Advocacy of the 'Perennial Philosophy'", July 2012) we saw that Pope Paul VI's repeated insistence on various points of epistemology was presented mainly in the context of warning against those trends in modern thought which conflicted with the 'perennial philosophy' in such a way as to strike at the very roots of all true knowledge and so undermine the integral conservation and transmission of Christ's message. However, when it came to modern philosophical hermeneutics, the Pope found that although certain erroneous tendencies were undoubtedly present in that field also, other aspects of these investigations could be judged in a more positive light, and indeed, that they could furnish fruitful insights for the interpretation of Scripture. These observations on hermeneutical issues were presented mainly in two important allocutions to the Italian Biblical Association: one on 25 September 1970 at a convention dedicated to the theme "Exegesis and Hermeneutics"¹ and the other on 29 September 1972, when the Scripture scholars had chosen as the topic for their "Biblical Week" the "Epiphany," or manifestation, of God's Word in the human language of Scripture, especially in its moral implications.²

In this essay we shall examine the Pope's teaching in these discourses, but before doing so, it will be useful to place them in context by giving some brief background information on the recent debates in this area. No attempt will be made here to synthesize the whole complex and extensive modern discourse regarding hermeneutics,³ but rather, to single out those aspects of that discourse which seem most directly relevant to the Pope's observations. What emerges from his teaching, as we shall see, is an approach to these questions which is characteristic of the Montinian outlook toward the whole relationship between Catholic faith and modern culture: a desire to listen in a spirit of dialogue to the major currents of contemporary thought, to discern and affirm whatever elements of truth and authentic insight are to be found in these currents, and to set them within a framework of solid Catholic tradition.

1. Contemporary Debates over Objectivity in Interpretation

(a) Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics: Schleiermacher and Dilthey

¹ Cf. AAS 62 [1970] 615-619.

² Cf. AAS 64 [1972] 634-637.

³ For a useful summary of this sort cf. P. Grech, "Ermeneutica" (P. Rossano, G. Ravasi, & A. Girlanda [eds.], *Nuovo dizionario di teologia biblica*, [Milan: Edizioni Paoline, 1988] 464-489).

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As we have seen in LT 159, Paul VI insisted that the meaning⁴ of Scriptural and definitive magisterial texts, while capable of deeper penetration in successive ages in the light of new circumstances, is essentially unchanging. In every age there have of course been distortions of the meaning of biblical or credal statements by those who claim to be discovering (or recovering) their authentic message, for not every ‘re-reading’ of an old text is a genuine appropriation of its true meaning. One prominent source of such erroneous ‘re-readings’ of the Christian message in the twentieth century has been the application of the existentialist thought of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) to biblical hermeneutics in a ‘this-worldly’ key which does not recognize the eternal and supernatural element in Scripture.

Heidegger’s thought in turn needs to be seen in the light of the nineteenth century’s two most seminal thinkers in the field of hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). A central common element in the thought of these philosophers is, as the Pontifical Biblical Commission has recently pointed out, their stress on “the involvement of the knowing subject in understanding, especially as regards historical knowledge.”⁵ Schleiermacher, reacting with the romantic movement against an arid rationalism which tended to see ancient texts as mere ‘objects’ which could be adequately understood in a more or less mechanical way by the application of grammatical and philological rules, claimed that the imagination and intuition of the reader must also enter into play, so that by penetrating the linguistic phenomena of the text he is able to enter into the very mind and individuality of the ancient author — to re-think the author’s thoughts and aspirations, as it were, by a kind of connaturality.⁶

Dilthey took up elements of Schleiermacher’s thought, but applied them in a less individualistic way: in historical understanding, imaginative insight was required not just into the mind and personality of this or that ancient author in isolation, but into the whole complex of social, linguistic, political, aesthetic, and religious factors that together made up the author’s particular cultural ‘world’. For Dilthey, historical hermeneutics of this kind is the key to understanding not just in the field of literature, but in all the ‘humanities’, namely, those branches of investigation which have to do with the free and creative activity of man (what Dilthey called *Geisteswissenschaften*). Such fruits of the mind or spirit, he insisted, cannot be understood adequately by the impersonal methods employed in the positive sciences which study physical, sub-human reality.⁷

A fundamental part of the heritage bequeathed to modern hermeneutical thought by Schleiermacher and Dilthey is that of the ‘hermeneutical circle’: the idea of a kind of dialogue between the text and its reader, in which each in a certain way influences the other. The meeting of minds involved in the interpretative process means that not only will the author’s own consciously expressed ideas in any great literary work from the past interrogate and perhaps challenge my own ideas and preconceptions as I strive to ‘re-live’ and ‘re-think’ the author’s experiences and thoughts respectively; I for my part can also ‘interrogate’ the text, by posing questions to it from the standpoint of my own culture and presuppositions, thereby ‘influencing’ that work in the sense of enabling it to speak to me differently from the way it spoke to those of an earlier generation, who probably considered it from quite a different angle. Hence it is that we never have a ‘final’ or ‘definitive’ commentary, valid for all future ages, on Plato, Cervantes, Dante, Augustine, Shakespeare, and so on, — and much less on the Bible, which is God’s word as well as man’s. In short, great works of the spirit can have depths and implications that go beyond the immediate and conscious intentions of the author in his own limited historical situation. They bear the potential to speak anew in different ages, in response to new questions, so that the ‘circle’ (or even ‘spiral’) of communication between the text and its successive readers — that is, their continuing exchange of interrogation and response — can extend indefinitely as one age gives way to another.

⁴ By “meaning,” here and throughout this essay, is to be understood “sense” (*sensu* and *sentido* in Italian and Spanish respectively). Along with the tradition of the *philosophia perennis*, I take the true meaning (or sense) of a single-author text to be that which the author himself consciously intended to express by it. This is to be distinguished from “meaning” in the sense of “significance” or “meaningfulness,” i.e., its relevance or personal impact on the interpreter (as in “What does this mean **for me**?”). “Meaning” in this second sense can of course change considerably since it involves the subjectivity of differing interpreters in different ages and cultures. But it is central to the argument of this essay that in Pope Paul VI’s teaching, “meaning” in the first sense is immutable.

⁵ J.A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Biblical Commission’s Document “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church”: Text and Commentary* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1995), 109 (Section IIA of the document; EB 1391).

⁶ Schleiermacher’s classic work on this subject was *Hermeneutik*, (ed. Heinz Kimmerle, Heidelberg, 1959). H.-G. Gadamer describes his approach thus: “According to Schleiermacher, historical knowledge opens the way to replacing what is lost and re-establishing tradition, inasmuch as it brings back the circumstances of the situation and restores it ‘as it was.’ The work of hermeneutics seeks to rediscover the point of contact in the mind of the artist which will open up fully the significance of a work of art, just as in the case of texts it seeks to reproduce the writer’s original words” (*Truth and Method* [London: Sheed & Ward, 1975] 148).

⁷ Cf. H.A. Hodges, *Wilhelm Dilthey: An Introduction* (New York: H. Fertig, 1944, reprinted 1989); I.N. Bulhof, *Wilhelm Dilthey: A Hermeneutic Approach to the Study of History and Culture* (The Hague/Boston: Nijhoff Publishers, 1980).

(b) Recent Hermeneutics: Classical and Existentialist Schools of Thought

In twentieth-century Western philosophy Heidegger's development of these ideas, among others, has had a far-reaching impact, as well as producing a marked influence on theology and biblical studies through the existentialist hermeneutics of Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976). This increasing insistence on the 'historicity' (i.e., the state of being profoundly conditioned by the transient circumstances of time, place and culture) of all human language, understanding and knowing, and indeed, of man's very essence, has sometimes led to that historicist relativism which, as we have seen, Paul VI repeatedly denounced: he saw it as a corrosive agent, obscuring and even dissolving the certainty and immutability in meaning of revealed and moral truth.⁸ The central question has been how, and to what extent, the **subjectivity** of the interpreter can be accepted as entering into the true understanding of a text without this resulting in a mere **subjectivism**, wherein exegesis ('drawing out of' a text a meaning which is truly there) gives way to 'eisegesis' ('reading into' the text what is not objectively there at all, but simply in the mind of the interpreter).

In recent philosophical debates over this issue Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) has been the most prominent exponent of the Heideggerian approach, while his main critics from the standpoint of a more classical, 'Aristotelian' epistemology have been Emilio Betti and E.D. Hirsch. In between these two poles has been the contribution of Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) whose phenomenological point of view, deriving from Husserl more than Heidegger,⁹ has led him to agree with Gadamer on some points, while disagreeing on others.¹⁰

Central to the debate is the question of whether there can be any such thing as an "objective" understanding of a literary text, and indeed, whether the text itself possesses any stable and objective meaning. Whereas the classical assumption¹¹ has been that the task of interpretation is to recover and explain the permanently valid meaning of a given written text, the existentialist hermeneutical theorists do not accept that this is possible. As one of them puts it:

Objective knowledge, objectively "valid" knowledge, suggests a standpoint above history from which history itself can be looked upon — such a standpoint is not available to man. Finite, historical man always sees and understands from his standpoint in time and place; he cannot, says Gadamer, stand above the relativity of history and procure "objectively valid knowledge." Such a standpoint presupposes an absolute philosophical knowledge — an invalid assumption.¹²

Thus, where the classical tradition takes it for granted that a correct interpretation of a text requires an effort to put aside or prescind from one's own preconceptions in order to be receptive to the meaning intended by the author, the existentialist approach insists that the text and its interpreters in successive ages are 'interwoven' inseparably in one historical process, so that the preconceptions of successive readers are an inevitable and indeed valuable part of the interpretative process. As Gadamer puts it:

To interpret means precisely to use one's own preconceptions so that the meaning of the text can really be made to speak for us. . . . The historical life of a tradition depends on constantly new assimilation and interpretation. An

⁸ Cf. *Living Tradition*, no. 159, July 2012, pp. 9-10. The undermining of revealed truth necessarily empties Christianity of its distinctive theological and supernatural content. As the Pontifical Biblical Commission observes in pointing out the inadequacy of Bultmann's approach: "Moreover, by virtue of the presuppositions insisted upon in this hermeneutic, the religious message of the Bible is for the most part emptied of its objective reality (by means of an excessive 'demythologization') and tends to be reduced to an anthropological message only" (Fitzmyer, *op. cit.*, 115 [Section IIA.2.]; *EB* 1399).

⁹ Cf. W.A. Wallace, "Philosophers, Contemporary: France, Germany" (*New Catholic Encyclopedia* [Washington D.C.: Publishers Guild & McGraw Hill, vol. XVI, 1974] 346).

¹⁰ Basic reading on modern hermeneutical studies could include H.-G. Gadamer, (*op. cit.*, [cf. n. 6 above] London: Sheed & Ward, 1975); E. Betti, *Teoria generale della interpretazione*, 2 vols., (Milan: Giuffrè, 1955); E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1967); J.M. Robinson and J.B. Cobb (eds.) *The New Hermeneutic* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1969); G. Ebeling, *The Nature of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961) and *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963). P. Ricoeur's main work on hermeneutics is available in English as *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

¹¹ This is the premise taken for granted by ancient and mediæval interpreters, and spelt out from the time of early hermeneutical theorists such as J.J. Rambach (cf. below, section 2(a) of this essay).

¹² Palmer, *op. cit.*, 178. Palmer appears to contradict himself here: while affirming that "objectively valid knowledge" is impossible, he asserts 'absolutely' that a certain assumption is false ("invalid"), thereby giving the impression that he himself has an "objectively valid knowledge" of its falsity or invalidity.

interpretation that was correct ‘in itself’ would be a foolish ideal that failed to take account of the nature of tradition.¹³

Hence, the author’s original intention in writing a given text is not of central importance for Gadamer:

The reconstruction of the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a pointless undertaking in view of the historicity of our being. What is reconstructed, a life brought back from the lost past, is not the original. Even the painting taken from the museum and replaced in the church, or the building restored to its original condition, are not what they once were — they become simply tourist attractions. Similarly, a hermeneutics that regarded understanding as the reconstruction of the original would be no more than the recovery of a dead meaning.¹⁴

Such a theory of interpretation, which seems to imply that ideas can be no more timeless, trans-historical, and repeatable than material artefacts such as paintings or buildings, has not met with universal agreement. Emilio Betti has sharply criticized Gadamer’s theory as calling in question the very possibility of an objective understanding of a given text, and thus opening the way to arbitrary distortions in the name of “interpretation.”¹⁵ Similar criticisms of Gadamer have been made by the American E.D. Hirsch, whose book *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) also approaches these problems from the standpoint of the *philosophia perennis*. Hirsch develops in detail the classical thesis that the author’s intention must always be the norm by which the validity of any interpretation of a text must be assessed.¹⁶

Paul Ricoeur, while agreeing with Gadamer that the hermeneutical circle involving the reader’s preconceptions or pre-understanding is both inevitable and fruitful in the interpretative process, also criticizes Gadamer’s desire to overcome the ‘distance’ between ourselves and the ancient author of a text by the ‘fusion’ of our respective ‘horizons’ (*Horizontverschmelzung*). For Ricoeur, this distance between our own world-view and that of the author we are studying must be maintained and respected. While it is true that his text, once written, gains a certain autonomy by which it can speak differently to different generations,¹⁷ the author’s original intention cannot simply be forgotten or merged into our own subjectivity.¹⁸

Such criticisms of Gadamer could perhaps be summarized as the insistence that while the significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*) of a text for successive readers in different ages cannot simply be reduced to the meaning (*Bedeutung*) originally intended by the author, it always depends on the latter, which remains ever valid as a limiting or controlling norm. No true interpretation of a text can ever repudiate or contradict what its author(s) originally intended. This normative status of the author’s intention, indeed, has been repeatedly stressed by magisterial statements on biblical hermeneutics. In the article of *Dei Verbum* dealing with principles of scriptural interpretation, the Fathers of Vatican Council II begin with the affirmation that “in order to discern what [God] wanted to communicate to us, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture must carefully seek to discover what it is that the inspired writers really intended to signify, and that God wished to make known by their words.”¹⁹

¹³ Gadamer, *op. cit.*, 358.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

¹⁵ Palmer summarizes as follows the central point of a pamphlet by Betti which was published in German in 1962, shortly after the appearance in German of Gadamer’s *Wahrheit und Methode*: “Betti by no means wishes to omit the subjective moment from interpretation, or even to deny that it is necessary in every humane interpretation. But he does wish to affirm that, whatever the subjective role in interpretation may be, the object remains object and an objectively valid interpretation of it can reasonably be striven for and accomplished. An object speaks, and it can be heard rightly or wrongly precisely because there is an objectively verifiable meaning in the object. If the object is not other than its observer, and if it does not, of itself, speak, why listen?” (*op. cit.*, 56).

¹⁶ Hirsch’s position is summarized as follows by Palmer: “Of course the ‘verbal meaning’ of a passage as determined by intensive philological analysis (both of the work and all external evidence that bears on the author’s intentions) and the ‘significance’ that same work may have today are two very different matters. But this is precisely Hirsch’s point: endless confusion is created by lumping together ‘verbal meaning’ and ‘significance’ (meaningfulness for us), and this sin he ascribes to Gadamer, Bultmann, and the theologians of the New Hermeneutic. In the language of Betti’s attack on the same point, the *Bedeutung* (meaning) must be held separate from *Bedeutsamkeit* (significance), or philology will fall apart and the possibility of obtaining objective and valid results will vanish” (*op. cit.*, 60-61). By using words such as “sin,” “fall apart,” and “separate” to characterize Hirsch’s position, Palmer seems to manifest an unduly polemical attitude. The ‘perennial philosophy’ represented by Hirsch would hold rather that “significance” is distinct from “meaning” yet dependent on it, rather than as something “separate.”

¹⁷ Cf. our discussion above, in section 1(a).

¹⁸ Cf. Fitzmyer, *op. cit.*, 113 (*EB* 1395).

¹⁹ “. . . *interpres Sacrae Scripturae, ut perspiciat, quid [Deus] nobiscum communicare voluerit, attente investigare debet, quid hagiographi reapse significare intenderint et eorum verbis manifestare Deo placuerit.*” *Dei verbum* 12. In some translations this sentence is rendered as though it had another “quid” between “et” and “eorum.” For instance, in the best-selling version of the conciliar documents edited by Walter M. Abbott (*The Documents of Vatican II*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), the Council is presented as saying that interpreters should carefully investigate “what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and **what** God wanted to manifest by means of their words” (120, emphasis added). Likewise, the Italian

2. The Allocution of 25 September 1970

After this brief excursus into some key points of recent hermeneutical debates, we are in a position to appreciate better the contributions of Pope Paul VI in this field. We shall consider first his allocution during the 1970 “Biblical Week” (*Settimana Biblica*) organized by the Italian Biblical Association and dedicated that year to the theme “Exegesis and Hermeneutics” (*esegesi ed ermeneutica*). The Pope here showed his awareness of the more specialized sense given to the second of those two words in recent studies, and began by recalling to the assembled Scripture scholars the way the two terms were understood by contemporary scholars:

Distinguished specialists have presented you with the problem of exegesis and hermeneutics. The first is understood as the traditional activity of the biblical interpreter, along the lines delineated by Pius XII’s Encyclical *Divino afflante* and by chapters III and VI of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, without forgetting what St. Augustine had already recalled: “The initial task which should exercise the vigilant skill of those desirous of knowing the Scriptures is that of acquiring a correct text.” The second activity, hermeneutics, is seen as the study of the means of interpretation, and of the interpretative process itself, in the broadest sense: that is, of the roots, the conditions, and the various moments of interpretative activity. The interpreter himself is included in this study.”²⁰

The inclusion of the interpreter himself in the definition of hermeneutics shows Pope Paul’s awareness of the existential and subjective elements in the interpretative process. However, this does not imply any lapse into subjectivism or historical relativism. For the Pope, while noting the “urgent and exciting relevance” of modern studies in this field, also pointed out that genuine hermeneutics is concerned with “[the] mode of interpreting and explaining the **permanent message** of Scripture.”²¹ He prefaced his observations on the hermeneutical project with words that showed the grave importance he attached to this inquiry:

We cannot, it is true, enter into specific details regarding the problems treated [by contemporary hermeneutical theorists]; but We wish to take the opportunity of setting before you some considerations and principles which seem to Us of capital importance for guiding your delicate scholarly activity, which has such decisive repercussions on the life and formation of men, both as humans and as Christians.²²

Pope Paul went on to highlight three of these principles. He did not say that he considered them to be necessarily the most important hermeneutical principles in an absolute sense; but rather, that they struck him as the most valuable insights to emerge from the recent flowering of interest in the hermeneutical process as such. In the Pope’s own words, “We cannot fail to note with satisfaction some of the emphases that are emerging from the renewed interest in the hermeneutical process.”²³

(a) Contemporary Actualization of the Text as Part of Interpretation

The first of these modern emphases which the Pope believes are of “capital” importance is “the insight that interpretation has not completed its task until it has shown how the *meaning of Scripture can be related to the present salvific moment*, that is, until it has brought to light the Scripture’s application to the present circumstances of the Church and the world.”²⁴ This explicit recognition that biblical interpretation involves not only the discovery of the author’s

translation given in *EB* 688 says that the interpreter “*deve ricercare con attenzione che cosa realmente gli agiografi hanno inteso dire e che cosa a Dio è piaciuto manifestare con le loro parole*” (723, emphasis added). Since the one Latin word *quid* refers simultaneously to both the following clauses, such translations are misleading, because they make a distinction between what God says in a given passage and what the human author says in it. That, plainly, could be used to undermine what the previous article (*DV* 11) has taught so clearly, namely, that God affirms *everything* which is affirmed by the human author. God may indeed at times say more than the human author intended (the so-called ‘fuller sense’ — *sensus plenior* — of Scripture, as well as its various spiritual senses), but certainly not less.

²⁰ *AAS* 62 [1970] 615-616. The words of St. Augustine are cited in a footnote to this page as being found in *Doct. chr.* II, 14 (*PL* 34, 46). This and other translations in this essay are those of the present writer.

²¹ *AAS loc. cit.*, 616, emphasis added.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, emphasis in original. For a useful study on the question of actualization as a distinctively ecclesial and pastoral aspect of exegesis see the series of articles in *Revue Biblique* by F. Dreyfus entitled “L’actualisation de l’Écriture”: Part I: “Du texte à la vie” (*RB* 86 [1979] 5-58); Part II:

intended meaning but also the actualization of that “permanent message” is a new development within the *corpus* of Catholic magisterial teaching on Scripture, and anticipates what the Pontifical Biblical Commission would say a quarter-century later in reviewing the evolution of Catholic biblical studies over the hundred years since *Providentissimus Deus*.²⁵

Nevertheless, while the idea of the present-day “application” of Scripture as part of the interpretative process is a point which has received much recent emphasis, it is also found in traditional works on the hermeneutical project. As Gadamer points out, the early classical treatise of J.J. Rambach, *Institutiones hermeneuticae sacrae* (1723) distinguished three “skills” (*subtilitates*) necessary for the biblical scholar: a *subtilitas intelligendi* (understanding the text); a *subtilitas explicandi* (explaining it); and a *subtilitas applicandi* (applying the text to present circumstances).²⁶

In the discourse we are considering, Paul VI immediately went on to show that he was following this traditionally-accepted distinction between the understanding of a text and its application to the present as two successive moments of the interpretative task: immediately following the sentence we have already cited, he pointed out that the latter (i.e., application) does not derogate from the former (the “philological, archæological, and historical interpretation”), and also recalled that Vatican II had specifically insisted on the need for biblical scholars to equip the greatest possible number of clergy with the formation necessary for making the Word relevant and fruitful in the present lives of ordinary Catholics:

Without underestimating in any way the value of a philological, archæological and historical interpretation of the text — for that is always necessary — one must underline the continuity between exegesis and preaching. The Constitution on Divine Revelation has expressed this in the following words: “Let Catholic exegetes and other specialists in Sacred Theology commit themselves to collaborate zealously in studying and explaining the divine Scriptures, under the vigilance of the Sacred Magisterium and making use of the appropriate resources, in such a way that the greatest possible number of ministers of the divine word will be equipped to offer fruitfully to the People of God the nourishment of the Scriptures, which illumine the mind, strengthen the will, and inflame men’s hearts with the love of God” (*Dei Verbum*, 23). And this applies especially to you, who are engaged in forming future priests.²⁷

The Pope’s insistence on a close continuity between exegesis and its pastoral application in preaching highlights one of the valid elements in existentialist hermeneutics. There are probably good grounds for Gadamer’s complaint that such continuity has not always been maintained.²⁸ By acknowledging the interpreter’s task of applying the biblical message to the needs of today’s Christians, but yet recognizing that such application must be rooted in a the correct philological and historical understanding of the text’s original meaning, Pope Paul implies the same kind of relationship as that which Hirsch discerns between “meaning” and “significance” — two concepts which he finds are often confused by some of the existentialist theorists.²⁹

(b) Interpretation as Personal ‘Dialogue’ With the Text

The second consideration which Pope Paul placed before the Italian Scripture scholars in this 1970 allocution

“L’action de l’Esprit” (*ibid.*, 161-193); and Part III: “La place de la Tradition” (*ibid.*, 321-384).

²⁵ The Commission’s 1993 document, in the section “Hermeneutical Questions” (II A.2), makes the following remarks about the “usefulness” for exegesis of recent investigations in this area: “The Bible is the Word of God for all succeeding ages. Hence the absolute necessity of a hermeneutical theory which allows for the incorporation of the methods of literary and historical criticism within a broader model of interpretation. It is a question of overcoming the distance in time of the authors and first addressees of the biblical texts and our own contemporary age, and of doing so in a way that permits a correct actualization of the scriptural message so that the Christian life of faith may find nourishment. All exegesis of texts is thus summoned to make itself fully complete through a ‘hermeneutics’ understood in this modern sense” (Fitzmyer, *op. cit.*, 114 [EB 1396]).

²⁶ Cf. Gadamer, *op. cit.*, 274. For an interesting study of how even a millennium before Rambach’s time the idea was being developed that the sacred text can ‘grow’ in significance for successive readers, cf. P.C. Bori, “Circolarità e sviluppo nell’interpretazione spirituale: ‘Divina eloquia cum legente crescunt’” (*Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi*, 2 [1985] 263-274). The Latin quotation in the title is from St. Gregory the Great, *In Ezech.*, I, VII, 8.

²⁷ AAS 62 (1970) 616-617.

²⁸ Referring to that classical threefold division of the hermeneutical process which we noted above, he claims that often, in the past, “. . . the third element in the hermeneutical problem, application, [became] wholly cut off from any connection with hermeneutics. The edifying application of scripture, for example, in Christian proclamation and preaching, now seemed quite a different thing from the historical and theological understanding of it. . . . A law is not there to be understood historically, but to be made concretely valid through being interpreted. Similarly, a religious proclamation is not there to be understood as a merely historical document, but to be taken in a way in which it exercises its saving effect” (Gadamer, *op. cit.*, 274-275).

²⁹ Cf. above, n. 16.

shows a similar appreciation for another closely-related theme which recurs frequently in recent hermeneutical studies, namely, the existential and dialectical nature of a truly Christian reading of the Scriptures. The living and powerful Word challenges us to enter into dialogue with it, and not to adopt the Olympian posture of trying to inspect it from a ‘neutral’ and purely academic viewpoint, as if it were a passive object totally under our control:

Once again: in every interpretative process, and especially when we are dealing with God’s Word, **the person of the interpreter is not extraneous to that process itself**, but is involved in it: his whole being is challenged. If the word of God is “living and effectual” (*Heb.* 4:12) and “is able to build up and to give an inheritance among all the sanctified” (*Acts* 20:32), then in order to enter into serious contact with it, taking it as it really is — the Word of God which works “in those who believe” (Cfr. *I Thess.* 2:13), — it is necessary to enter into that dialogue which the Word seeks to conduct authoritatively with every person.³⁰

This personal “dialogue” is one in which **salvific** truth is involved — the most important truth there is — so that the interpreter must open himself with humility to being “scrutinized **by**” Scripture before he can adequately explain it:

The divine purpose of the Bible is precisely that of imparting the wisdom “which leads to salvation by faith in Christ Jesus, so that the man of God may be fully formed, ready for every good work” (*2 Tim.* 3:15-17). Whoever, therefore, scrutinizes Scripture is in the first place scrutinized by it, and must approach it in this spirit of humble openness which alone will prepare him for the full comprehension of its message.³¹

There are indeed clear resonances here with certain ideas stressed by the existentialist currents in modern hermeneutics: one thinks of Bultmann’s emphasis on the New Testament as *kerygma*, a proclamation which seeks to change our lives by challenging us to a personal decision. One thinks also of Gadamer’s strictures against the kind of interpretative method which seeks to “dominate” the text as an “object,” instead of opening oneself to its message and seeing it as a “Thou” which “stands in a relationship with us.”³²

Apart from their intrinsic value, moreover, emphases of this sort can be seen as a perennially necessary corrective against the temptation toward “scientism” in biblical exegesis: that is, against the tendency to assume the stance which is appropriate for the physical sciences which study sub-human realities. This can result in the kind of dry, merely technical, exegesis that brings forth mountains of minutiae concerning historical and linguistic data, but with little or no indication as to how any of this is relevant to the message of life and salvation in our own time. It can also result in the fallacy, common among biblical form-critics, of thinking and writing as if literary forms were like the objects of physical or biological investigation; that is, as if they were subject to certain invariable and predictable “laws” of development instead of being the free, and therefore largely unpredictable, creations of human beings.

Once again, therefore, Paul VI is discerning elements of truth to be found in contemporary hermeneutical studies. Indeed, as the Pope’s scriptural citations demonstrate, these elements of truth are found to be endorsed or foreshadowed in the Bible itself. After all, it is not for stressing that the Bible calls us to personal decision and conversion that the Bultmannian school has been severely criticized by traditional believers (both Catholic and Protestant). Rather, their concern has been that Bultmann and his followers radically reinterpret the **essential meaning** of the apostolic *kerygma* in such a way as to evacuate that proclamation of its supernatural content and even of its clear reference to a transcendent God.

c) The Quest for ‘Connaturality’ with the Authors’ World-View

The third and final feature of recent hermeneutical discourse which Pope Paul singled out for commendation in his 1970 address is closely linked to the second theme, that of the interpreter’s personal relationship to the divine Word. Perhaps, indeed, it could be seen as a development of that theme. Here the Pope draws attention to the appropriate inner disposition of the interpreter, which can be attained only by a profound openness to the Holy Spirit speaking within the Church, since she is the matrix within which we are given the Scriptures:

Thirdly, We would note the emphasis placed on the **need to seek a certain connaturality** of interests and problems with the theme of the text, so that we can open ourselves to hear its message. The same God who

³⁰ AAS 62 (1970) 617, emphasis in original.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Cf. Gadamer, *op. cit.*, 321-323.

reveals Himself in the Scriptures, the same Spirit who speaks through the mouth of the sacred writers, is the God who moves our hearts to seek Him, and who infuses in us the grace which disposes us to listen to Him. The Church, having given birth to the Scriptures, is the one who transmits to us with her Tradition the fundamental attitudes which find in the Scriptures their first written motivation.³³

Here we find the Pope taking up a theme which was dear to the hearts of thinkers participating in the nineteenth-century romantic movement. In reacting against the Enlightenment's rationalism and 'scientism', which sought to judge all past history, literature and art in accordance with the severe canons of a "pure reason" which was finally asserting its claims against the "darkness" and "superstition" of former ages, the romantic philosophers sought to develop an intuitive sympathy for the original insights of the creative spirits of former ages, and to judge their achievements not by modern standards, but only in terms of their origin and genesis within their own cultural framework, their own 'world'. It is true that an exaggerated and one-sided emphasis of this sort has led to the relativism and historicism which we considered in the preceding article in this series (*LT* 159): to the outlook, that is, which recognizes no stable, trans-cultural, trans-historical standards of truth and value by which human beliefs and behaviour of any epoch or society can be objectively evaluated. Nevertheless it remains true that in order to evaluate something one must first understand it; and in order to understand it adequately, one must first attempt to appreciate the historical circumstances, the world-view, the cultural environment, and so on, in which it arose. This is surely what Paul VI has in mind in the passage just cited — a passage which echoes his own well-known commitment to dialogue as a fundamental path forward for the Church in our time.³⁴ Dialogue, after all, depends largely on this search for a certain sympathy or "connaturality" of outlook with one's interlocutor; for without it, dialogue can rapidly turn into confrontation.

As we have noted, Schleiermacher was a leading proponent of this romantic quest for connaturality with an old text, but understood this psychological affinity in a rather exaggerated and individualistic form, speaking as if the interpreter, by a sort of inspired guesswork or 'divination' can actually enter the mind of the ancient author and see everything through his eyes.³⁵ Gadamer — while in some respects one of Schleiermacher's heirs — rightly regards this claimed 'unity' of spirit with a long-dead author as mistaken, but seems to go rather too far in the opposite direction when he writes:

It is quite mistaken to base the possibility of understanding a text on the postulate of 'connaturality' that supposedly unites the creator and the interpreter of a work. If this were really the case, then the human sciences would be in a bad way. The miracle of understanding, rather, consists in the fact that no connaturality is necessary to recognise what is really significant and fundamentally meaningful in tradition.³⁶

Such an affirmation has to be seen in the context of Gadamer's rejection of the *mens auctoris* as the fundamental criterion for interpretation, and his exaggeration of the extent to which great works of the human spirit can evolve unceasingly in meaning by virtue of gaining 'autonomy' and a 'life of their own'. Their 'being' is held to consist precisely in their 'becoming'. This opens the way for historical relativism just as surely as the romantic approach that Gadamer regards as misguided. That approach, while holding to the objectivity and stability of the text's meaning (and its accessibility to the interpreter through a combination of scholarship and connaturality of direct intuition and sentiment) leads to historicism because it holds that no trans-cultural standards are available by which to assess the **validity or truth** of that meaning. But the existentialist hermeneutic of Heidegger, Gadamer, and their followers leads to the same relativism by the still more radical path of practically discarding the *mens auctoris* as a limiting norm for all future interpreters. For them, the only completely constant factor is the linguistic one — the text itself — so that in their writings we seem to find ourselves faced with yet another form of that nominalism which has troubled Western philosophy in successive stages of history. It is this nominalist substratum which enables Bultmann to claim that he is being faithful to the New Testament even while he knows he is attributing to its unchanged first-century language a 'modern' meaning which would have been quite foreign — and even opposed — to the conscious intentions of its authors. **They** believed

³³AAS *loc. cit.*, emphasis in original.

³⁴Cf. Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam suam* (6 August 1964), Section III (AAS 56 [1964] 637-659).

³⁵Cf. above, section 1(a). Schleiermacher's classic work on this subject was *Hermeneutik*, (ed. Heinz Kimmerle, Heidelberg, 1959). Grech criticizes his position as a "subjectivistic psychologism," quoting him as saying on p.109 of this work that "the divinatory method is that in which a man transforms himself into another person in order to grasp his individuality directly" (*op. cit.*, 479). Gadamer describes his approach thus: "According to Schleiermacher, historical knowledge opens the way to replacing what is lost and re-establishing tradition, inasmuch as it brings back the circumstances of the situation and restores it 'as it was'. The work of hermeneutics seeks to rediscover the point of contact in the mind of the artist which will open up fully the significance of a work of art, just as in the case of texts it seeks to reproduce the writer's original words" (*op. cit.*, 148).

³⁶*Ibid.*, 277.

that the factual truth of the supernatural and miraculous events they recorded was all-important; but for Bultmann the reinterpretation of those records as “myths” (i.e., as **not** being factual accounts) does not distort their “true” meaning or intention. On the contrary, such “demythologization” is supposed to help rescue or preserve the authors’ meaning by divesting their account of its pre-scientific trappings and presenting their message in a form which will be more intelligible to modern “scientific” man.

In contrast to both the romantic approach (the “divinatory” connaturality supposedly giving direct insight into the author’s individuality) and the radical existentialist approach (which postulates an almost unbridgeable cultural abyss between ancient authors and their modern interpreters), Paul VI recommends, as we have seen, the quest for another kind of connaturality which would lie in between these two extremes. Instead of pretending that the interpreter can enter into the individual author’s own mind and, as it were, re-think his thoughts, the Pope speaks less ambitiously, but more realistically, of a connaturality “of interests and problems with the theme of the text.”

While our access to an ancient author’s individual personality will no doubt always remain very limited, comparative historical, philological, archaeological and literary investigations can give us a good deal more access to the **common** (or at least, widely-shared) cultural and spiritual elements of the world in which such an author lived, and it is precisely elements of this sort which will be reflected in the “interests and problems” which form the theme and substance of his text. As regards “connaturality,” then, Pope Paul is noting that the value for biblical studies of modern hermeneutical studies is their insistence that investigations in these various literary and historical sciences should be carried out not in the detached and ‘impersonal’ spirit proper to the study of sub-human, merely physical reality, but with the effort to enter mentally and imaginatively into this cultural world of the author in order to understand him better. In this way, Paul VI develops a point which had already been mentioned in passing by Pius XII in *Divino afflante Spiritu*,³⁷ and anticipates another point made much later by the 1993 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission: “Access to a proper understanding of biblical texts is only granted to the person who has an affinity with what the text is saying on the basis of life experience.”³⁸

Indeed, in Pope Paul’s teaching, the need for connaturality takes on an added dimension for the Christian Scripture scholar, precisely because its primary Author is the same Holy Spirit who now moves us to seek out and understand the message which He inspired two or three millennia ago, acting in and through the sacred writers.

3. The Allocution of 29 September 1972

(a) The Text in its Original Meaning and Modern Significance

The way in which Pope Paul tried to do justice to the valid contributions of recent hermeneutical investigation, while at the same time anchoring them in the *philosophia perennis* so as to avoid the pitfalls of nominalism and relativism, comes through once again in his discourse to the next *Settimana Biblica*, that of 1972. On this occasion, as the Pontiff observed, the community of Italian biblical scholars chose to discuss how the divine Word (particularly on moral questions) shines through the concrete but culturally-conditioned limitations of human forms. Their chosen theme, he noted, was

one which is much discussed today: the epiphany of the Word of God, — especially its moral implications — in the concreteness, but also the weakness, of human forms. Here we see recurring that mysterious but provident law which Vatican II, adopting an expression of St. John Chrysostom, has described by the term “condescension,” as if to say, an ineffable indulgence in virtue of which “the words of God, expressed in human language, are made similar to human discourse, in the same way that the Word of the eternal Father, taking on weak human flesh, has been made similar to men.” It is perhaps this aspect which strikes contemporary man as most paradoxical and moving, when faced with the Word of God and with the Church herself, who proposes and interprets it.³⁹

This theme of the “condescension” embodied in God’s written Word — analogous to the Incarnation itself — is certainly a central focus of interest for modern biblical hermeneutics. Indeed, Paul VI’s recognition of its importance anticipates the emphasis placed on this same theme in John Paul II’s allocution two decades later, reviewing the entire course of the Catholic biblical movement in the hundred years since *Providentissimus Deus* and the half-century since

³⁷ In speaking of the way in which the inspired author’s true meaning is to be discerned, Pius XII said: “It is altogether necessary for the interpreter to go back in his mind, as it were (*mente quasi redeat interpretis*), to those remote ages of the Orient, so that, aided by the auxiliary disciplines of history, archaeology, ethnology and other sciences he will be able to discern and perceive what literary genres the writers of that ancient era wanted to use, and did in fact use” (*EB* 558).

³⁸ Fitzmyer, *op. cit.*, 115 (Section IIA.2; *EB* 1398).

³⁹ *AAS* 64 (1972) 635. The Pope’s quotation from Vatican II is taken from *Dei Verbum* 13.

Divino afflante Spiritu.⁴⁰ Pope Paul also recognizes here the validity of one of the points brought to light by historical-critical studies and emphasized also by such hermeneutical theorists as Gadamer and Ricoeur: that the message drawn from a Scriptural text will be conditioned in some way by the varying questions which are asked of it, first at the time of its original composition and then in successive ages and in different cultural contexts. Acknowledging the “irrepressible dynamism of our age and the global coming together of peoples,” Pope Paul remarks that there is an upsurge of “new and unheard-of questions, which cannot always be solved adequately by the material repetition of past formulæ, however substantial and valid these may be.”⁴¹

Since this meeting of the Biblical Association was dedicated to the scriptural aspects of moral theology in particular, it is not hard to imagine some of the “new questions” which the Pope had in mind: new medical technology, for instance, and the development of hitherto unknown weapons of mass destruction, have presented new challenges to theologians and exegetes of our own century, as they seek light from the sources of divine truth in order to evaluate the production and use of these new discoveries and inventions. Yet the Pope is confident that **there are** firm answers to these questions — answers that are both certainly valid in themselves and discernible by Jesus’ followers today. Discovering them is in large part the task of the dialectic in biblical studies between philological and literary research into the inspired Word, and the hermeneutic task of showing its relevance for today:

People on all sides are asking us: “Where are the eternal words of the Lord? Where are the words of eternal life, those words that are spirit and life? Where is the universal and immutable sign of the Word of God? . . .” In the field of biblical studies today this appeal has made its presence felt in the contemporary oscillation between exegetical research of a philological and literary character (which, to be sure, is always necessary) and hermeneutics, that is, investigation into the genuine significance of the Word of God for modern man — bringing its message alive existentially so as to give light and strength to our contemporaries.⁴²

It will be noted that in this passage the Pope implies that there is an inseparable link, in the form of a dialectical relationship — an “oscillation” as between two poles — between the original meaning of Scripture on the one hand (that is, the sense consciously intended by the human author, which necessarily remains the same and is sought out by sound historical and critical exegesis) and on the other hand its “genuine significance” or import “for modern man.” This contemporary significance can be seen as latent or implicit in the original meaning, for what it does, according to Paul VI, is “bring [that original] message alive existentially”; but it cannot be simply reduced to and equated with that original meaning, as though the inspired text has absolutely nothing more to say to us today than it did to the ancient addressees who heard or read that word in its original *Sitz-im-Leben*. A one-sided stress on historical-critical analysis of the text, carried out in an arid and impersonal manner, has at times seemed to imply this kind of reductionism: in practice such interpretation can become closed to the second of the two poles in this dialectical “oscillation,” thereby ignoring what Pope Paul called the modern “appeal” for biblical specialists to make Scripture’s message come alive for our contemporaries.⁴³

The opposite danger, as we have noted already, is to neglect the first pole: too much ‘autonomy’ is sometimes ascribed to the text in existentialist hermeneutics, so that the author’s originally intended meaning is no longer considered normative for all successive interpretations and his message is thus left open to subjectivist interpretations which could even conflict with his own intention.⁴⁴ It will already be clear from everything we have recorded so far about Paul VI’s adherence to the ‘perennial philosophy’ that he would by no means have endorsed this tendency.

⁴⁰ In the central section of this address, entitled “The Harmony between Catholic Exegesis and the Mystery of the Incarnation,” Pope John Paul II affirmed: “The strict relationship uniting the inspired biblical texts with the mystery of the Incarnation was expressed by the Encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* in the following terms: ‘Just as the substantial Word of God became like men in every respect except sin, so too the words of God, expressed in human languages, became like human language in every respect except error’ (EB 559). Repeated almost literally by the conciliar Constitution *Dei Verbum* (13), this statement sheds light on a parallelism rich in meaning.” Fitzmyer, *op. cit.*, 4 (EB 1245). Cf., For a recent survey of 20th-century studies on this theme, cf. M. A. Tabet, “Ispirazione, Condiscendenza ed Incarnazione nella Teologia di questo secolo” (*Annale Theologici*, 8 [1994] 235-283).

⁴¹ AAS 64 [1972] 635).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 635-636.

⁴³ This “appeal” highlighted by Paul VI — the appeal, that is, for biblical scholars to complement academic analysis of the text with its existential actualization — is again reminiscent of a point subsequently mentioned by the P.B.C. in evaluating the contribution of recent hermeneutical studies: “Contemporary hermeneutics is a healthy reaction to historical positivism and to the temptation to apply to the study of the Bible the purely objective criteria used in the natural sciences” (Fitzmyer, *loc. cit.* [cf. above, n. 38]).

⁴⁴ When Hirsch insists on this point, stressing the immutable meaning inherent in any text, Palmer (a follower of Gadamer) dismisses Hirsch’s objection with the remark that it bears an “Aristotelian flavour” (*op. cit.*, 61). This is no doubt true, but Palmer seems to regard it as self-evident that anything “Aristotelian” is inadequate for the twentieth century; or at least, that merely identifying a position by this label dispenses one from the need

Indeed, in the next section of the allocution we are considering he emphasises that there is an essential core of immutable, trans-historical and trans-cultural meaning in the biblical Word, despite its culturally contingent elements. Here the Pope sets out two clear moments in the work of the biblical scholar wishing to expound the moral teachings of Scripture. First, he must use all the resources of modern erudition to discern and explain in its original context the essential, transcendent content of the revealed message:

The exegete's task is to provide a sure guide to the cutting edge of the Word of God, as it is found in the verbal signs that expressed it within cultural situations which were sometimes splendid, but sometimes "imperfect and contingent," as the Council notes in reference to the Old Testament (*Dei Verbum*, 15). He must then point out the ethical content and the transcendent dynamic of the revealed message, **which transcends the historical forms and even the cultural sensibilities of the environment which has received and expressed it**, and patiently clarify, using all the methods of scientific research, the literary, psychological and sociological connections which relate that message to the culture of the age in which it was announced.⁴⁵

However, the Pope continues, this distillation of the permanently valid content of the Word from the historically contingent aspects in which it comes clothed does not exhaust the exegete's role; for he must go on to show the timeless value and importance of that core teaching:

But when this preliminary task has been completed, the exegete will strive to bring out the novelty, excellence, superior energy and universal import of God's Word and its implications for morality, and in this he will hold fast "to the content and unity of the whole of Sacred Scripture, taking account of the living Tradition of the entire Church and the analogy of faith" (*Dei Verbum*, 12).⁴⁶

(b) The Relationship of Language to Concepts

This understanding of hermeneutics embodies very clearly the traditional conception of a truth which in its essence transcends cultural distances and historical evolution — an essence which can clearly be understood as self-identical, beneath the changing linguistic forms which give expression to it in different ages. In other words, Paul VI's hermeneutic is based on the common, classical notion of language as a set of instruments or signs for expressing stable natures or essences which are grasped by the mind as concepts. This enables him to present the interpreter's task as that of distinguishing the permanent, underlying truth in Scripture from the culturally-conditioned ways in which the biblical authors express it.

But for the hermeneutical theorists of the Heideggerian school this basic conception of language is inadmissible. Palmer, for instance, implies that thought is determined by language rather than vice versa. He writes, "To see language and words as the tools of human reflection and subjectivity is to allow the tail to wag the dog."⁴⁷ Thus it is that language, from being a servant of man, in effect becomes elevated to the status of his master: for the Heideggerians it almost becomes that in which we 'live and move and have our being.'

Perhaps this can be seen as yet another ramification of the philosophical revolution which began with Descartes' methodical doubt and led to the Kantian limitation of knowledge to that of appearances. A word, after all, is an "appearance," an epiphany, of the concept it seeks to communicate. In any case, it is not difficult to see how the exaggerated autonomy or dominance over thought which such theorists ascribe to language, and the tendency of this

of presenting any further argument against it. Without adding any such argument, he goes on to assert brusquely that "it is not possible to relegate to limbo with Aristotelian definitions the bulk of understanding theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer" (*ibid.*, 63-64).

⁴⁵ AAS 64 (1972) 636, emphasis added.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 636-637.

⁴⁷ Palmer, *op. cit.*, 204; cf. Gadamer, *op. cit.*, 366ff. Arguing that man, precisely as a thinking being, is formed **by** language as much as **he** forms **it** seems to be as fallacious as denying that man is the inventor of the computer on the grounds that in modern technological societies it is the computers which "form man" as much as vice versa. There appears to be a certain confusion of thought here arising from an equivocal use of terms. "Man," understood as **each individual** person, whose cognitive faculties gradually develop from birth onward, is of course very much dependent on language and does not personally invent it. The case histories of 'feral' children having spent their earliest years in the company of animals, and thus cut off from language, show that their mental and linguistic development is severely and permanently stunted by such deprivation. But this does not mean that "man," understood as a **collectivity** with thousands of years of continuous rational existence, has not unilaterally invented language — or rather, a multiplicity of languages whose very diversity and arbitrariness bear witness to their origin in free and conscious decision — as a tool for expressing and communicating his thought. The fact that language, like Rome, was not built in a day by no means implies that it was not built by "man."

school to caricature any **distinction** between language and concepts as a “separation” or “divorce” between them,⁴⁸ opens the way for that radical demythologization of Christian revelation which destroys its authentic meaning while retaining the traditional terminology. As we saw in *LT 159*, Paul VI repeatedly warned against this tendency during his pontificate. For when one depicts the word as being so closely identified with the corresponding concept as in effect to absorb it (like those “black holes” in space which we are told suck matter and even light irretrievably into their dark, mysterious void), one can claim to be preserving the essential concepts merely **by virtue of** continuing to affirm the traditional language. But, as we have already remarked, that plainly opens the door to another form of that recurring ‘disease’ of nominalism which threatens the coherence and objectivity of both thought and language.⁴⁹

(c) Application of a Text as an Aspect of Its Interpretation

We have seen in his 1970 allocution to the Italian Biblical Association,⁵⁰ that Pope Paul understands the interpretation of Scripture in the full sense to include its application to present-day needs and circumstances. In the 1972 allocution now under consideration he develops this idea, adding that such “application,” in the wider sense of that word, should be seen as the particular competence of the theologian rather than that of the exegete. Thus, a hermeneutical ‘division of labour’ is projected in which the theologian as well as the exegete plays a role in interpreting the written Word.

As we saw in the above excerpts from this 1972 address,⁵¹ Paul VI sees the task of the professional exegete as that of using his technical linguistic skills, his understanding of ancient history, and his knowledge of Church Tradition and the unity of all Scripture, in order to distinguish between the historically-conditioned aspects of the inspired writer’s message and the central, immutable truth which he (and thus, the divine Author speaking through him) wishes to affirm. He must then present this essential, trans-historical meaning clearly in all its excellency, energy and universality.

But the Pope went on to conclude that this universal message of the biblical text must then be applied to the lives and existential situations of today’s believers by integrating it with other relevant data pertaining to (or derived from) faith or morals. This, said the Pope, is the task which must be carried out by the theologian (who in the case of moral theology will need to take into account also that **unwritten** Word of God which is the natural law):

Once this point has been reached, the exegete can entrust the distilled succulence of the Word of God to the specialist in moral theology. The latter, on the basis of his specific competence as a student of man, and of man’s conscience and freedom (and here there opens up the vast and fertile field of the moralist, where another Word of God resounds — one not written in books but in creation and in the right reason of man, image of God) will then strive, in a spirit of complete docility to Christ and the Church, the “pillar and foundation of truth” (*I Tim.* 3:15), to **apply** the authentic stamp of God’s Word, written and unwritten, to the existential situations of Christian life, so that the believer knows how to “walk and be pleasing to God” (Cfr. *I Thess.* 4:1).⁵²

Thus, the “distilled succulence” (*succo autentico*) of the scriptural message — its essential, universal and unchanging meaning — is seen by Paul VI as necessarily present in every authentic application of the Word to changing historical circumstances; but the way in which that perennial meaning is explained, made manifest, related to other truths and concretized for particular situations will be the task of the theologian rather than that of the exegete.

It is clear from our analysis of the principles laid down by Paul VI in these two major allocutions on biblical hermeneutics that he recognizes and does justice to the legitimate recent emphases on the subjective and existential pole

⁴⁸ In his critique of “Aristotelian” (i.e., classical) hermeneutics, for instance, Palmer (*loc. cit.*) insists that “Form cannot be separated from content. . . . Language cannot be divorced from thought.” But **distinguishing** between two things is not necessarily the same as “separating” or “divorcing” them.

⁴⁹ It seems to this writer that the artificial intellectual climate engendered by these currents in existentialist hermeneutics is largely what enables the disciples of Bultmann to gain credence, for instance, in protesting their faithfulness to the true or essential New Testament meaning of Jesus’ “resurrection” or “rising from the dead,” even while denying the factual, historical reality of what (as they themselves acknowledge) the evangelists themselves intended to affirm when they wrote those words, namely, Jesus’ conscious attainment of a new and glorified life precisely through the miraculous raising of his mortal remains. In effect, the retention of traditional language is treated here as a sufficient (not merely a necessary) condition for fidelity to the original Gospel proclamation. But in fact, language which is not solidly anchored in essentially unchanging concepts ultimately becomes as worthless as a paper currency which seeks its value within itself, instead of in some form of real wealth which is firmly ‘tied’ to, yet distinct from, the paper as such.

⁵⁰ Cf. above, section 2(a).

⁵¹ Cf. above, section 3(a), nn. 45-46.

⁵² AAS 64 (1972) 637, emphasis added in translation. This passage immediately follows that cited over note 46 above.

of interpretation, while safeguarding the essential objectivity and immutability of the Bible's meaning over against nominalistic, 'demythologizing' tendencies.

4 The Subjectivity of the Catholic Interpreter of Scripture

While our accent so far has been on the philosophical aspects of such hermeneutical considerations, the Pope's words have also made it clear that here we find ourselves, as it were, at the frontier between reason and faith, philosophy and theology, because specifically **biblical** interpretation, when carried out by the exegete or theologian precisely in his capacity as a Catholic believer, can never lose sight of the fact that what is being studied is God's word as well as man's. We shall conclude this essay, therefore, by considering several distinctively Christian and Catholic aspects of that personal 'involvement' of the interpreter with the biblical text which Paul VI underlined in various discourses during his pontificate.

(a) The Quest for a Spiritual Connaturality

We have already cited Pope Paul's expressed approval of the emphasis in modern hermeneutical theory on the need for "**a certain connaturality** of interests and problems with the theme of the text,"⁵³ in order to be truly open to its message. This, indeed, is in the first place a natural or philosophical consideration, which has its relevance in the interpretation of literary and historical documents in general. But the Pope saw a special significance for this quest for connaturality, in its application to biblical studies. This is precisely because of the role of the Holy Spirit as both Author of the Scriptures and the Principle of supernatural life in the believer: "The same God who reveals Himself in the Scriptures, the same Spirit who speaks through the mouth of the sacred writers, is the God who moves our hearts to seek Him, and who infuses in us the grace which disposes us to listen to Him."⁵⁴

How, then, is this connaturality — this spiritual sympathy and openness to the authentic message of the Spirit speaking in Scripture — to be sought and cultivated by the exegete? Earlier in the same address, Pope Paul set this question in its true context by an analogy which could hardly fail to inspire the highest ideals in any believing scholar who ponders their significance. The one who explains Scripture, he affirmed, actually shares in the office of Christ Himself:

Yours is a responsibility which increases to the extent that — with the help of the divine Paraclete — it is measured by, and assimilated to, the responsibility of the Son of God Himself; for in a certain way you are continuing and prolonging among those young minds you are forming His own action: "Then he opened their eyes, so that they understood the Scriptures" (Luke 24:25).⁵⁵

(b) The Moral Virtues, Especially Humility

In his address of 27 September 1968 to the *Associazione Biblica Italiana*, Pope Paul laid great stress on the spiritual disposition of the interpreter of God's Word. As we have seen,⁵⁶ the Pope emphasised in this major allocution that the exegete's task is "above all" (*innanzi tutto*) that of interpreting Scripture in accordance with the Church's teaching. However, he went on to assert that the main point of his discourse that day was to underline the moral qualities which must be cultivated by the Scripture scholar. The clear implication is that the exegete will not in practice be able to accomplish his principal task unless he cultivates these virtues:

And here we arrive at the central theme which We had in mind to develop at this gathering: that of the moral virtues — over and above the scientific and professional skills needed for your activity — which should characterize and undergird the arduous, dangerous, but wonderful labours of the Catholic exegete. A great deal has been written about this subjective prerequisite for biblical studies by masters both ancient and modern; and We suppose that you are already very familiar with this point too. Indeed, we trust and believe that you all attend to your studies and teaching in the field of Scripture with an ascetical attitude, with an intimate and devout veneration, an avidity to discover through the most exact philological and textual analysis that spiritual meaning, that truth, that revelatory presence, which are the hallmarks of

⁵³ "... *una certa connaturalità di interesse, di problemi, con l'argomento del testo*" (cf. above, section 2(c), n. 33).

⁵⁴ AAS 62 (1970) 617.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 615.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Living Tradition*, no. 158, May 2012, p. 8, citation over n. 35.

God's Word. Let it suffice to recall the recommendation made by Our venerated Predecessor Pius XII in his *Instructio* of 13 May 1950: “. . . It can be easily seen how necessary it is for the teacher of Sacred Scripture to give himself totally to his work, so that, having begun his task well, he renews his strength day by day and perseveres with the greatest zeal and care” (A.A.S. 1950, p.318). How much wisdom, how much prudence, what exquisite charity are necessary in order to fulfil truthfully and fruitfully this most worthy ministry, so that a truly nourishing repast may be served at the table of the Word of God!⁵⁷

Pope Paul went on to stress in a particular way the virtue of humility as being of fundamental importance to the exegete:

Let your service to the Word of God, therefore, be animated and undergirded, like any service worthy of the name, by devotion and humility: that humility which, indeed, is the distinctive virtue of the truly wise man. We have in mind that humility which leads the biblical scholar to accept the guidance of the sacred Magisterium, which prevents him from relying on purely human efforts in an undertaking which has to do with the Mystery of God and His Revelation, and which suggests respect for others not only in the academic sphere but also in the pastoral ministry of higher education. All Catholics have a need to be enriched by further knowledge; but they also have a right not to have it presented in a disturbing, inopportune way, but rather, in such a way that this sound doctrine “enlightens the mind, strengthens the will, and inflames men’s hearts with the love of God” (*Dei verbum*, 23).⁵⁸

It is no doubt significant that this exhortation to humility on the part of exegetes, and the reference to the *inopportuni turbamenti* which can arise when that virtue is not sufficiently developed, came shortly after the “Year of Faith,” at a time when dissent and contestation — often supported by appeals to recent scriptural scholarship — were quickly gathering force. The controversies over the “Dutch Catechism” and *Humanae Vitae* were at their height at this time. And while at first sight it might seem like a fairly normal and unexceptional thing for a Pope to remind biblical scholars of the need for humility, closer examination shows that Paul VI was sounding a note which had been very much muted in the principal magisterial documents on Scripture studies. Even though this idea is certainly implicit in the Church’s constantly repeated exhortations to the effect that exegetes must be submissive to the Magisterium, the need for humility as a prerequisite for this due submission is not expressly mentioned in the conciliar constitution *Dei Verbum*; nor is it given explicit mention in the two key encyclical letters which gave impetus to the modern biblical movement, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943). In the other Encyclical on Scripture, Benedict XV’s *Spiritus Paraclitus* (15 September 1920), we do indeed find this virtue briefly mentioned: “To return, however, to the question [of the formation of biblical students]. We must lay the foundations in piety and humility of mind; only when we have done that does St. Jerome invite us to study the Bible.”⁵⁹

For another forceful statement on this matter in the previous teaching of the Popes, we must look as far back as St. Pius X’s Encyclical *Pascendi* of 1907, against the purveyors of modernism. In this document the Pontiff denounced the “pride which puffs them up . . . and makes them say, elated and inflated with presumption, ‘We are not as the rest of men,’” with the result that a “spirit of disobedience” to Church authority comes to dominate.⁶⁰ Paul VI’s references to humility as a capital virtue for biblical scholars, therefore, may well have seemed to his audience rather pointed and unexpected, even though they were not cast in a polemical tone. Indeed, given the sharp differences of opinion regarding modern biblical scholarship which were voiced before, during and after the Council, some exegetes may well have been very sensitive to any suggestion that they might be **lacking** in humility.⁶¹

⁵⁷ *Ins.* 1968, 495.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 495-496.

⁵⁹ AAS 12 [1920] 404.

⁶⁰ ASS 40 [1907] 635.

⁶¹ An incident from just before the Council, at a time when tension between the Holy Office and the Pontifical Biblical Institute was particularly acute because of the controversy over two of the latter’s professors (cf. *Living Tradition*, no. 157, March 2012, pp. 1-8) shows just how extremely delicate this question of “humility” on the part of exegetes could be. After the 1961 Holy Office *Monitum* warned against current opinions calling in question the historicity of the Scriptures (cf. AAS 53 [1961] 507), Gerald T. Kennedy, O.M.I., had an article published in the *American Ecclesiastical Review* (“The Holy Office *Monitum* and the Teaching of Scripture,” CXLV, 1961, 145-151), in which, amongst other things, he emphasised the need for a spirit of humility and prayer on the part of exegetes (cf. *ibid.*, 150-151). This quickly elicited an indignant response in the same journal from an American representative of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, W.L. Moran, S.J. (“Father Kennedy’s Exegesis of the Holy Office *Monitum*,” CXLVI, 1962, 174-180). Kennedy’s very general remarks about the need for humility (no exegetes were singled out and mentioned by name) were described by Moran as “a grave offense against many Catholic exegetes” (*ibid.*, 174). On the basis of one word — “docile” — in a 1958 message of Pope Pius XII to a Brussels congress of Scripture scholars, Moran asserts that “Pius XII declares Catholic exegetes docile to the Church, and does so without

(c) The Spirit of Prayer

In his major allocution to the Rome symposium on Christ's Resurrection two years later (4 April 1970), Pope Paul drew attention to the spirit of prayer which must accompany the exegete's task:

And the Church exhorts us to see that study and prayer go hand in hand as we search for solutions. Here we are still following the lead of Saint Augustine: "Those who devote themselves to studying the sacred Writings are to be admonished not only to be well versed in the particularities of biblical language, . . . but also **to pray in order that they may understand**. And that is what is most basic and most necessary (*De doctrina christiana*, III, 56; *PL* 34, 89)."⁶²

Finally, this attitude of prayerfulness and humility was strongly recommended once again by the Pope in the longest — and arguably the most weighty — of all his pronouncements devoted specifically to the study of Scripture, his address of 14 March 1974 to the plenary session of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. On this occasion Paul VI drew the exegetes' attention to Christ's words regarding those divine secrets which are revealed to the simple and hidden from the "wise and learned," and repeated the passage from St. Augustine which we have just cited from his 1970 allocution:

Great tasks are awaiting the exegete in the path he treads and in the future of the Church. For that reason, he will persevere in guarding and nurturing in himself every day a living relation with the mystery of the God of love, who sent His Son amongst us to make us His children by adoption. This mystery, with the divine works which accompany it, can only with difficulty be recognized by a person who is attached mainly to earthly values, be they ever so noble in themselves — cultural and scientific progress, for instance. Has not Jesus Christ spoken of the wise and prudent from whom Revelation remains hidden, while it is accessible to the little and humble? (Cfr. *Mat.* 11:25, *Lk.* 10:21.) A true existential opening to the mystery of the God of love, without which even our most learned exegesis remains in the shadows, cannot be sustained in us without the light of divine grace which we must always humbly beg. Saint Augustine warns us: "Those who devote themselves to studying the sacred Writings are to be admonished not only to be well versed in the particularities of biblical language, . . . but also **to pray that they may understand**. And that is what is most basic and most necessary."⁶³

Such, then, are the basic spiritual attitudes which the Pope singles out as pre-requisites for the exegete's task at a time when biblical studies are fraught with new and often perplexing challenges to the integrity of the faith. Perhaps they could conveniently be summed up by the word **reverence**. Only if the Scripture scholar approaches his task with a prayerful and humble reverence for the Word which speaks to him not through "Scripture alone," but also through the Church's constant and traditional interpretation of Scripture as expressed in her magisterial decisions, will he be able to develop that connaturality with the authors — both divine and human — which will in turn enable him to discern those fine lines marking out both the limit of what faith permits, and of what reason requires, in the way of revised or novel interpretations of the inspired Writings.

reservation" (*ibid.*, 175, n.2). Quite apart from the fact that it was precisely **after** the Pope of *Humani Generis* had died that Catholic biblical scholars were beginning to express more daring opinions, this seems an exaggerated conclusion to draw, especially since the Pope used the key word in connection with a subjunctive verb, not an indicative, as if to indicate that his "esteem" for the exegetes was **contingent** on their "docility": "Docile to the Church, . . . and high in our esteem, let them pursue with confidence their research" (*ibid.*). Certainly this one footnote reference scarcely justifies the sweeping inference which Moran draws from it earlier on the same page (175): "To insinuate therefore that every exegete has not carried on his work with humility, prayer, and the utmost dedication to the teaching authority of the Church, as Father Kennedy does without the slightest support of the *Monitum*, can only be a grave offense against these men." One can only wonder whether Paul VI's admonitions on humility several years later also gave "offense" to some of the Scripture professors in his audience.

⁶² AAS 62 (1970) 223, emphasis in original.

⁶³ AAS 66 (1974) 240.