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PAUL VI ON SCRIPTURE, TRADITION, AND MAGISTERIUM

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Part B: Pope Paul's Personal Magisterial Statements

(a) The Continuity of Magisterial Statements on Scripture

If we turn now to the addresses of Pope Paul, during and after the Council, which touched on the relationship between Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium, one of the first points which strikes one's attention is his insistence on continuity between the living Magisterium of the present and the authoritative 'monuments of tradition' from the past — both pontifical and patristic.

1. Major Interventions

During the Council, at the very time when the second schema on revelation, with its reduced emphasis on Tradition, was being presented to the conciliar Fathers, the Pope made a point of asserting in his first major biblical allocution (25 September 1964) that both Leo XIII's foundational encyclical of 1893 on biblical studies, and that of Pius XII half a century later, were still both valid and relevant. After commenting that the Church's criteria for the interpretation of Scripture were well-known to those present, Pope Paul continued: "We shall be content to remind you of how the papal teachings — contained especially in the two great documents '*Providentissimus Deus*' of Leo XIII and '*Divino afflante Spiritu*' of Pius XII — are still valid and worthy of the study and adherence of everyone involved in biblical studies."¹ This remark must be seen in the context of influential trends which were giving the impression that *Divino afflante Spiritu* had virtually superseded all previous magisterial pronouncements on the subject of Sacred Scripture.

At the next of these biennial meetings organized by the Italian Biblical Association (23 September 1966), Pope Paul made a point of quoting from *Providentissimus Deus*, in the context of reminding the assembled exegetes that without adherence to the Magisterium, the biblical Word is reduced to a subjective human opinion:

Hence, your own office is a participation in the Church's magisterium; and it must adhere to that magisterium if it is not to turn the Word of God into a subjective, private word, stripped of its inherent power. However, We would add at the same

¹ AAS 56 (1964) 937. The English translations given throughout this essay are those of the present writer.

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time with Leo XIII: “By this most wise law the Church in no way retards or imprisons biblical science, but rather guarantees its freedom from error, and so greatly assists its true advancement” (“*Providentissimus*”).²

2. Other Intervention

The importance which Pope Paul attached to a sense of continuity with previous magisterial documents concerning Scripture was also brought out with particular clarity on Wednesday, 1 July 1970, in a general audience dedicated to the Council’s teaching on the Bible, especially in *Dei Verbum*. The Pope emphasised that the conciliar document forms part of a larger series of magisterial teachings on Scripture:

Many questions relative to doctrine and studies concerning the Bible are treated in the first five chapters of the Constitution which, therefore, becomes part of the series of great pontifical documents which in the last century have been issued on this theme of such capital importance (such as the Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, 1893, of Pope Leo XIII; *Spiritus Paraclitus* of Pope Benedict XV; *Divino afflante Spiritu* of Pius XII, etc.).³

(b) The Perennial Relevance of Patristic Exegesis

In very much the same vein, Pope Paul insisted in several of his less formal interventions that just as previous papal teachings on biblical interpretation retained an perennial value, so did the teachings of the Fathers. The recent Council, he pointed out, far from lessening the importance of patristic commentaries on the Scriptures, recalled the Church to a renewed study of the Fathers, whose agreement on questions of biblical interpretation remains as “decisive” as ever for the Church. The Pontiff made these telling and important observations when blessing a new Institute of Patrology at the *Augustinianum* in Rome on 4 May 1970:

A return to the Fathers of the Church, in fact, constitutes part of that return to Christian origins without which it would not be possible to realize the biblical renewal, the liturgical reform and the new theological research which have been called for by the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council. . . .

We can understand, then, how important the study of the Fathers is for a deeper understanding of Holy Scripture, and how decisive for the Church is their agreement on how it is to be interpreted. As the Encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* recalls, the Fathers, while they may have been “sometimes less endowed with profane erudition and linguistic science than the interpreters of our own time, nevertheless, through the role which God entrusted to them in the Church, excel in their serene penetration of celestial things and in a marvellous perspicacity by which they penetrate intimately into the depths of the divine words.” . . .

Not for nothing is the study of the Fathers recommended insistently by the Council for its relevance to Scripture studies . . . (*Dei Verbum*, 23).⁴

Several years later, in a letter of 10 May 1975 to Cardinal Michele Pellegrino, Archbishop of Turin, commemorating the centenary of the death of Jacques-Paul Migne, editor of the monumental edition of the entire *corpus* of the Latin and Greek Fathers, the Pope was even more explicit in reaffirming the consensus of the Fathers as an interpretative criterion:

² *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI (Ins.)* 1966, 417-418. On two occasions not long after this the Pope, speaking in more general terms, emphasised the need to conserve even the traditional **formulas** with which the Church’s faith has been long expressed. His words on one of these occasions (3 April 1968) have been cited in an earlier article (cf. *Living Tradition*, no. 159, July 2012, section 2[b], text over n. 29). Several months after that, at another Wednesday audience (4 December 1968), he stressed: “The very formulas in which doctrine has been authoritatively defined after long reflection cannot be abandoned” (*Ins.* 1968, 1045). Shortly afterwards, in an allocution of 8 December 1969 commemorating the centenary of Vatican Council I, Pope Paul spoke of its “extraordinary and perennially valid importance” and emphasized its complementarity with Vatican II (cf. AAS 61 [1969] 789). A particularly pointed statement of this truth was made soon after the Council, near the beginning of the 1967-1968 ‘Year of Faith’: at the Wednesday audience of 8 March 1967 Pope Paul warned against the idea that dogmatic definitions are “outdated forms of Catholic teaching, and that the Council could be considered as a liberation from ancient dogmas with their corresponding anathemas” (cf. *Ins.* 1967, 704).

³ *Ins.* 1970, 690.

⁴ AAS 62 (1970) 424-426. In recent decades major studies of patristic exegesis— especially its interest in the spiritual senses of Scripture — have been carried out by H. de Lubac, e.g., *Histoire et Esprit: L’intelligence de l’Écriture d’après Origène* (Paris, 1950); *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l’Écriture* (Paris, Part I, 1959; Part II, 1964); *L’Écriture dans la Tradition* (Paris, 1966). Another response to the Council’s call for greater attention to patristic studies is the journal *Annali di storia dell’esegesi*, which commenced in 1984, published by Edizioni Dehoniane (Bologna). Regarding De Lubac’s work in this field this journal has published two useful essays: F. Bolgiani, “Henri de Lubac e l’esegesi spirituale” (*Annali di storia dell’esegesi* 10/2 [1993] 283-300) and M. Pesce, “Un ‘bruit absurde’? Henri de Lubac di fronte alla distinzione tra esegesi storica e esegesi spirituale” (*ibid.*, 301-353).

In fact the Church, in her function as “pillar and foundation of the truth,” has always referred herself back to the teaching of the Fathers, considering their consensus as a rule of interpretation for Holy Scripture. Saint Augustine had already formulated and applied this rule in his own time. Vincent of Lérins, in turn, had expounded it at length in his *Commonitorium Primum*. It was taken up again and solemnly proclaimed by the Council of Trent and by the First Vatican Council. The recent Second Vatican Council has shown itself if anything even more insistent on this point. For after having affirmed that “the teaching of the Fathers attests the living presence of Tradition, whose riches are infused into the practice and life of the believing and praying Church” (*Dei Verbum*, 8), the Council has recommended the study of the Fathers “for an ever-deeper understanding of the Holy Scriptures” (*Ibid.* 23), for the teaching of theology, which should show to the students “the contribution of the Eastern and Western Fathers to the transmission and faithful development of each of the revealed truths” (*Optatam Totius*, 16), for a solid priestly knowledge (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 19), for the enrichment of the official prayer of the Church (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 92) and for theological research in mission lands (*Ad Gentes*, 22).⁵

Paul VI, in short, was careful to remind Catholics that new developments in biblical studies should never be understood to obviate the need for studying the patristic norms and insights into Scripture, which still remain normative for interpreting the inspired books in cases of unanimous consent about matters of faith on the part of the Fathers.

(c) An Incarnational Reading of Scripture: the Heart of Tradition

At the same time, when treating of Tradition as a norm for interpreting Scripture, Pope Paul made it clear in several of his major pronouncements on biblical studies that it was not simply a question of repeating what commentators of past ages had said. The Church’s tradition has always been a living tradition, and that implies explaining the Word of God anew to each generation and culture so that the unchanging Word — the centre of which is Christ — becomes actualized for all men. This idea of a ‘Christocentric’ reading of Scripture in all ages was explained in the Pope’s allocution of 25 September 1970 to the Italian Biblical Association:

The Christ is the first “exegesis” of the Father, his “Word” who makes the Father known to us; and every subsequent word about God and Christ is based on this first revelation of the Father.

Since he then becomes the Word of God historically manifested in the flesh, and therefore in acquiring a human language as well, his words and those of the first witnesses and servants of the Word — those moved by the Spirit to express authentically the mystery of his appearance among men — will always remain the fundamental norm for everything to be said about the Christ until the end of the world.⁶

Next, the Pope spoke of the incarnational aspects of the Word of God. Just as Christ participated in the language and culture of a particular era, his Word must also be made “contemporary” in every subsequent era, by the development of the original Tradition:

The incarnation of the Word, his humiliation in assuming a temporal form in a determined historical era and in the surroundings of a determined culture, is a fact that has its repercussions on all subsequent cultures. It obliges them to return continually and with fidelity to this privileged moment, in order to let it work in their midst as an irreplaceable formative principle. But faithfulness to the incarnate Word also demands, in virtue of the dynamic of the Incarnation, that the message be made present in all its integrity, not to man in general but to men of today — those to whom the word is announced here and now. Christ made himself the contemporary of certain men and spoke in their language. Now faithfulness to him requires that this contemporaneity continue. Here we have the whole work of the Church, with its Tradition, the Magisterium, and preaching.⁷

What, then, is the exegete’s role in this perennial task of making the Gospel incarnate in successive cultures? He must be a part of this living tradition, with a ‘dual fidelity’ to both modern culture and the immutable Gospel, being able to discern how best to distinguish the timeless and absolute element in the Word, so that it can then be explained and translated into contemporary terms without its radical demands being compromised:

Exegetes must contribute to this task. Faithfulness to modern man is demanding and difficult, but it is necessary if we wish to be completely faithful to the message. It is not servility or mimicking, but a courageous preaching of the Cross and

⁵ AAS 67 (1975) 470-471.

⁶ AAS 62 (1970), 918.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 923.

Resurrection, with the confident certitude that this message will still resonate in the hearts of modern men. The history of the Church affords luminous examples of those who have courageously given new relevance to the Word. Saint Catherine of Siena, whom We shall soon have the satisfaction of naming a Doctor of the Church, spoke to those of her own time in ardent and incisive language, in absolute faithfulness to the Gospel message. Between these two ‘fidelities’, one to the incarnate Word and the other to modern man, there neither can nor should be any conflict. The first contains the absolute and irreplaceable norm, while the second suggests the modality of translating and explaining the message.⁸

At the Association’s next *Settimana Biblica* two years later (29 September 1972), Pope Paul returned to this theme, making the important point that the more conscious we become today of the changing and relative nature of all merely cultural experiences, the more pressing becomes the demand for an eternal, unchangeable, universal Word of salvation:

On the one hand, the flourishing development of biblical studies has reached the point of indicating clearly the historical and geographical point, and the sequence of cultures, in which the Word of God has been inserted in its historical revelation. On the other hand, the irrepressible dynamism of our age, and the global encounter of peoples in which we are both actors and spectators, is exposing ever more persuasively the limitations of successively changing cultural experiences, posing new and unheard-of questions to our contemporaries, above all in the sector of ethics and religion. In order to resolve these questions it is not always sufficient to repeat materially the formulas of the past, even though they may be substantially valid. In consequence, we are being asked on all sides: Where are the eternal words of the Lord? Where are the words of eternal life — those words which are spirit and life? Where is the universal and immutable sign of the Word of God?⁹

In his allocution to the Pontifical Biblical Commission (14 March 1974), Pope Paul cited the Council’s injunction (*Dei Verbum* 12) to exegetes, which spoke of “the living tradition of the whole Church,” together with the need to attend to “the content and unity of the entire Bible” as well as “the analogy of faith.” This passage of the conciliar Constitution, he said, provided a “golden rule” (*la règle d’or de l’herméneutique théologique*) which needs to be observed if the exegete is to avoid one-sided or rationalistic deviations. The Pope then went on to expound this injunction of Vatican II, which, in itself, is a somewhat abstract generalization. Once again he stressed the fact that this underlying unity in the Scriptures — the centre of our faith and of all Tradition in the Church — is the God-man himself and the mystery of grace and salvation. Pope Paul cited the words of the renowned Dominican exegete Joseph-Marie Lagrange:

“The interpreter will not be able to rediscover the meaning of Christianity” — this is still Père Lagrange speaking — “by grouping texts together, if he cannot penetrate them right as far as the very *raison d’être* of the whole. [Scripture] is an organism whose vital principle is unique — a principle which was discovered long ago: the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and the salvation assured to men through the grace of the redemption. If we seek elsewhere we will be in danger of deviating from the true path.” To express the message thus means above all to gather together all the meanings of a text and bring them to converge toward the unity of the Mystery, which is unique, transcendent, impenetrable, inexhaustible, and which, therefore, we can approach from a number of viewpoints. To this end, the collaboration of many people will be necessary to analyze the process of the insertion of God’s Word in history — what St. John Chrysostom has designated under the term *sunkatabasis* or *condescensio* — according to the variety of languages and human cultures.¹⁰

Thus it is the great Paschal Mystery itself, in this papal reading of the conciliar text, which forms that “content and unity of the entire Bible” spoken of in *Dei Verbum*. It could thus be seen as the heart of that living Tradition of the Church according to which the exegete must interpret Scripture, as did the early Fathers who found Christ “latent” throughout the Old Testament as well as “patent,” as it were, in the New. Then, in a passage which suggests that this approach still retains its validity today, the Pope went on to stress that this Mystery of Christ, of universal import despite the determined biblical culture in which it was first revealed, is reflected in one way or another “in each page” of Scripture, and needs to be brought out by the exegete and offered to the Church in her task of actualizing that message under today’s conditions:

This will enable the exegete to grasp in each page the universal and unchangeable meaning of the message, and to propose it to the Church for an authentic understanding of the faith in the modern context as well as a salutary application to the grave

⁸ *Ibid.*, 923-924.

⁹ AAS 64 (1972) 635-636.

¹⁰ AAS 66 (1974) 238. For a brief but valuable recent study of the different ways in which patristic exegesis saw Christ present in the OT, cf. M. Simonetti, “‘Scripturarum clavis notitia Christi’: proposta per una discussione sulla specificità dell’esegesi patristica” (*Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi*, 4 [1987] 7-19).

problems which torment thoughtful souls at the present time. You, as exegetes, are called to show the contemporary relevance of Holy Scripture, according to the sense of the living Church, so that the Bible does not remain just a monument from the past, but is transformed into a source of light, life and action. Only thus will the fruits of exegesis be able to serve the kerygmatic function of the Church and her dialogue, to be available for the reflection of systematic theology and moral teaching, and to become useful for pastoral action in the modern world.¹¹

(d) Tradition as Constitutive of Revelation

As we saw in examining Paul VI's contribution to the final text of *Dei Verbum* 9, on the relation between Scripture and Tradition, the question of whether some aspects of revealed truths are known exclusively from Sacred Tradition was a vigorously debated one, which the Council decided to leave open for further discussion among theologians, except insofar as it strongly suggested in article 8 that knowledge of the integral canon of Scripture itself comes to us only through Tradition. We also saw that Pope Paul personally favoured the common post-Tridentine view which recognized a constitutive, not merely interpretative, role for Tradition, but that he decided not to insist on the inclusion of that teaching in the conciliar document, after having initially requested such an inclusion quite firmly. However, it is certainly worth while looking to see whether the Pope had anything further to say on this point in his personal teaching after the Council.

For the most part Paul VI did not go beyond the conciliar teaching, but in one intervention — although not a major one — he did reiterate implicitly the constitutive role of Tradition. In his allocution of 8 December 1969 commemorating the centenary of Vatican Council I the Pope stressed the perduring contemporary relevance of the dogmatic definitions made by that Council. Like all the Church's dogmas, he said, they are "authoritative definitions of a divine teaching contained in Scripture, or which we derive from the apostolic preaching by way of Tradition (cfr. *Dei Verbum*, 8,9)."¹² By the use of a disjunctive "or" the Pope seemed to imply that there are some Christian truths not quantitatively contained in Scripture, and which are derived only from Tradition.

As a matter of fact, the Fathers of Vatican Council I did solemnly define the one truth which their successors a century later agreed came from Tradition alone — the canon of Scripture.¹³

(e) An Explicit Critique of the Protestant 'Private Interpretation' Principle

The relationship between both Scripture and Tradition on the one hand, and the Magisterium on the other, was not a question on which Paul VI intervened personally during the drafting of *Dei Verbum*. We have seen already¹⁴ that during and after the Council he repeatedly stressed the importance of obedience to the Magisterium in order to avoid false and deviant interpretations of Scripture. At this point it will be useful to consider the Pope's personal teaching on the Scripture-Tradition-Magisterium *nexus* in relation to the corresponding conciliar statement, in order to see what further light may be shed on this question. First, however, it will be useful to review what the Council itself has to say about the matter.

1. The Teaching of *Dei Verbum* 10

This point is treated at the end of article 10 of *Dei Verbum* in brief and quite general terms. The three components of this relationship are said to be "so linked and joined together that one does not stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls."¹⁵ This summary remained substantially unchanged from the second schema onwards, but certain other nuances in the history of the text of article 10 are worth noting. The first two schemas, for instance, affirmed that Scripture and Tradition,

¹¹ AAS *loc. cit.*, 238-239.

¹² "... definizioni autorevoli di un insegnamento divino contenuto nella Sacra Scrittura, o derivato a noi dalla predicazione apostolica, per via di Tradizione (cfr. *Dei verbum*, 8,9)" (*Ins.* 1969, 778).

¹³ Cf. *DS* 3029. It is also arguable that at least one other truth defined by Vatican I falls into that category: the Council's *anathema* against anyone who says that all the miracles recorded in Scripture are fables and legends (cf. *DS* 3034). Since the Bible does not explicitly state what literary genre it is using when recording miracles, it would seem that Tradition adds something 'quantitative' here. That the miracles of Jesus recorded in the Gospels are intended as factual reports, for instance, not as "creative theological symbolism," is fundamentally something which has been handed down in Tradition from the time of the original apostolic preaching. In any case, Pope Paul's statement quoted above was not referring only to dogmas defined by Vatican Council I.

¹⁴ Cf. *Living Tradition*, no. 158, May, 2012, section 2.

¹⁵ This is the Abbott edition translation (*op. cit.*, 118), except that we have replaced the inaccurate "cannot stand" by "does not stand." The original reads: "... ita inter se connecti et consociari, ut unum sine aliis non consistat, omnique simul, singula suo modo sub actione unius Spiritus Sancti, ad animarum salutem efficaciter conferant."

forming the deposit of revealed truth, are not entrusted to individuals, but to the Church's Magisterium.¹⁶ This was replaced in the third and subsequent drafts by the assertion that the deposit of faith is entrusted to the whole Church. As the definitive text says, the sacred deposit is "committed to the Church, and in adhering to it the entire holy people, united to their Pastors, perseveres in the Apostolic doctrine . . ." ¹⁷ This change was not intended as a denial of what the original text said, as if the specific role of the Magisterium were now being handed over to all Catholics. Rather, the idea was simply to broaden or extend the frame of reference at this point in the text. The *relator's* explanation made this clear:

In this sentence, which is completely new, the relationship is laid down between the one revealed deposit, consisting of Tradition and Scripture, . . . and the whole Church, which embraces the ordinary faithful together with the hierarchy. This deposit of faith is to be understood as entrusted to the [whole] Church, not as regards its interpretation (which pertains to the Magisterium alone), but so that she may live from it; and so that by living in this way the Church in every age may faithfully imitate the Apostolic Church.¹⁸

While this revised draft undoubtedly brings out more clearly that the deposit of faith (that is, Scripture and Tradition together) is given to the Church as a whole, it has meant that the exclusion of the Protestant "private interpretation" principle is now implicit rather than explicit in the text of *Dei Verbum*. (It is implied further on in article 10, where the Council states that the authentic interpretation of the Word of God is entrusted "only to the living Magisterium of the Church."¹⁹) It is worth observing, therefore, that Pope Paul, in the personal exercise of his teaching office, repeatedly brought out clearly what the final conciliar text left implicit. That is, he reaffirmed emphatically the substance of the original schema's affirmation that this authentic interpretation is not entrusted to individual members of the faithful, no matter how erudite. We shall now consider his interventions to that effect.

2. Major Personal Interventions

In his first address to the *Associazione Biblica Italiana* on 25 September 1964 — during the Council and before the promulgation of *Dei Verbum* — the Pope warned of the temptation "to circumscribe the immense and mysterious field of biblical truth within merely human and personal perimeters," and observed that the resulting confusion is in effect "unwittingly bearing witness to the providential necessity of a living magisterium which can safeguard and clarify the authentic meaning of the divine Book."²⁰ In his next allocution to the Biblical Association (23 September 1966) the Pope was if anything even more direct: "'Let there be no private interpretation.' (2 *Peter*, 1: 20). You all know this. Hence, your own office is a participation in the Church's magisterium; and it must adhere to that magisterium if it is not to turn the Word of God into a subjective, private word, stripped of its inherent power."²¹

3. Other Personal Interventions

In a Wednesday audience several years after the Council (15 April 1970), when the storms of dissent related to the 'Dutch Catechism' and *Humanæ Vitæ* were at their peak,²² Pope Paul expounded at some length the Church's rejection of the Protestant principle of 'private interpretation'. And he did so in terms that would probably have been judged lacking in a 'pastoral' and 'ecumenical' spirit by certain Fathers and *periti* had they been pronounced on the Council floor, for this was a very blunt and undiluted assertion of that principle of hierarchical power and its rights over individual conscience that Protestants — more or less by definition — find unacceptable and even scandalous. In reality, however, the Pope here presents us with a brief model of how true ecumenical discourse ought to proceed. First he gives a clear statement of the Catholic doctrine under discussion, thereby avoiding that "false irenicism" which the Council says is foreign to true ecumenism.²³ But this is immediately followed by stating sympathetically the objection to this doctrine, in terms which separated Christians could readily appreciate (even though the Pope is actually using the words of a Catholic scholar, his philosopher friend Jean Guitton):

¹⁶ The first schema stated that the Lord entrusted the care of the deposit of faith "not to individual believers, no matter how learned, but only to the living Magisterium of the Church (*non singulis fidelibus, utcumque eruditis, sed soli vivo Ecclesiae Magisterio*)" (AS I, III, 16). The second draft was similar: "Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, as the sacred deposit of God's Word, have been entrusted not to individual men, but to the living and infallible Magisterium of the Church. (*S. Scriptura et S. Traditio, uti sacrum verbum Dei depositum, non singulis hominibus, sed vivo et infallibili Ecclesiae Magisterio concreditum est*)" (AS III, III, 80-81).

¹⁷ ". . . Ecclesiae commissum, cui inhaerens tota plebs sancta Pastoribus suis adunata in doctrina Apostolorum . . . perseverat."

¹⁸ AS III, III, 87, emphasis in original.

¹⁹ "*Munus autem authentice interpretandi verbum Dei scriptum vel traditum soli vivo Ecclesiae Magisterio concreditum est*" (AAS 58 [1966] 822).

²⁰ AAS 56 (1964), 937.

²¹ *Ins.* 1966, 417.

²² Cf. *Living Tradition*, no. 158, May, 2012, section 1.

²³ Cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio* 11.

Between Christ and Christians there is interposed a teaching power: it is the hierarchical magisterium.

Now, this insertion, this power, has been and still is the object of grave and revolutionary contestations in the Church. At first sight one might say these objections are legitimate. “In the field of religion the very notion of a ‘power’ seems to be excluded, since religion is what binds conscience to its origin and goal . . . and with still greater reason if we are dealing with the religion of Jesus, who has reformed the Law and its observances, calling every person, even the Samaritan woman, to that worship — in Spirit and Truth — which is true adoration” (GUITTON).²⁴

The Pope then goes on, however, to answer the objection, pointing out that a principle which inevitably fractures that unity which Christ, by common consent, willed for his Church cannot be a true principle governing the transmission of revelation:

This is what the Protestant Reformation has brought about — excluding the magisterium of the Church, putting every follower of Christ in direct contact with “Scripture alone,” and leaving the latter to the “private judgment” of each individual. But is this the way that Christ willed his revelation to be communicated to believers? Was there not a danger here that the truth of Sacred Scripture might lose its univocal meaning, ending up shattered into a thousand different and conflicting interpretations? What has happened to the unity of the faith, which was supposed to be the very thing that made Christians into brothers, according to this summary formula: “One God, one faith, one baptism”? (*Eph.* 4:5). The painful history of the division of Christians into so many fragments — still separated — speaks for itself.²⁵

During the Holy Year dedicated to reconciliation in the Church, the Pope found it necessary to speak in similar tones. In the Wednesday audience of 28 August 1974 he warned that

Catholics find constantly before their eyes the formula of the Reformers, ancient and modern: *sola Scriptura*, as if they were the true champions of religious unity, . . . and as if [the Bible], separated from the apostolic teaching, were not exposed to the danger, now as real as ever, of being given over to individual interpretation, indefinitely centrifugal and pluralistic, that is, to the “private judgment” (“*libero esame*”) which has pulverized the unity of the faith into an innumerable multiplicity of personal opinions . . .²⁶

The Pontiff’s affirmation in the 1970 Wednesday allocution cited above, namely, that “between Christ and Christians there is interposed” the teaching power of the Magisterium, is really a reassertion in non-technical language of the traditional scholastic description of the Magisterium as the “proximate norm of belief,” or the “proximate rule of faith” for each believer, in contrast to the deposit of faith itself as the “remote” norm or rule. These expressions, too, had been used in the first two drafts of the conciliar text explaining the relationship between Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium.²⁷ In the third draft of the schema, however, the reference to the Magisterium as a “proximate” norm was omitted, on the very general grounds that it was “out of context” and that such terminology did not “at first sight” seem a completely suitable mode of expression.²⁸

Whether or not this terminology would have been suitable for the pastoral scope of the Council itself, Paul VI made it clear very soon after the Council itself (on 11 July 1966) that the expression “proximate norm” — and *a fortiori* the idea conveyed by that expression — should not in itself be seen as outdated or abandoned by the Church. This was during one of the major doctrinal allocutions of his pontificate, the discourse on Original Sin to a symposium of scholars who would all have been familiar with this expression. He cited the last sentence of *Dei Verbum* 10, which speaks in

²⁴ *Ins.* 1970, 316.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ins.* 1974, 766. The expression *libero esame* (like the corresponding *libre examen* in Spanish) would of course translate literally as “free examination.” However this is never heard in English. Rather, the standard phrase used to signify this distinctively or classically Protestant attitude to Scripture is always “private interpretation” or “private judgment.”

²⁷ The original schema drafted by the Council’s preparatory Commission described the Magisterium as the “proximate and universal norm of belief (*proxima et universalis credendi norma*),” AS I, III, 16, while the second schema, presented in 1964, affirmed: “Therefore the proximate rule of faith is indeed the Magisterium of the Church, while the remote rule is the Sacred Deposit (*Exinde regula fidei proxima quidem est Ecclesiae Magisterium, remota vero Sacrum Depositum*)” (AS III, III, 81).

²⁸ Referring to the sentence from *Schema II* cited in n. 27 above, the *relatio* stated: “What is affirmed in that sentence seems out of context; the terminology used does not at first sight seem altogether apt for expressing this matter. (*Quod enim per eandem affirmatur videtur esse extra contextum; terminologia autem adhibita primo ictu non videtur rei exprimendae omni ex parte consentanea*)” (*ibid.*, 88).

general terms of the unbreakable link between Tradition, Scripture and Magisterium,²⁹ but also warned that all exegetes and theologians must not imprudently go beyond the due limits of their respective disciplines: “These limits are set down by the living Magisterium of the Church, which is the proximate norm of truth for all the faithful, as We ourselves have recalled in the Encyclical *Mysterium Fidei*.”³⁰ Pope Paul made the same point still more formally several months later in another important allocution, that of 1 October 1966 to an international Congress on the theology of Vatican II. Having recalled the Apostle Paul’s teaching that the Church is “the pillar and foundation of the truth” (I *Tim.* 3: 15), the Pope went on to make it clear that the recent Council must be understood in harmony with the perennial teaching laid down a century earlier by the First Vatican Council: “By the divine will of Christ,” he affirmed, “it will not be possible to find the proximate and universal norm of this indefectible truth anywhere but in the authentic Magisterium of the Church, whose role it is to guard the deposit of faith faithfully and declare it infallibly (cf. *Vatican Council I, Session III, ch.4; Denz-B. 1798*).”³¹

(f) Magisterium as a Charism Dating Back to the Apostles

1. The Teaching of *Dei Verbum* 7 and 10

Another aspect of the Council’s doctrine which Pope Paul elucidated and developed in his personal teaching concerns the link between the Magisterium and the Apostolic origins of the revealed deposit. In article 7 of *Dei Verbum*, one of the very earliest instances of the word “magisterium” is cited: St. Irenæus records that the Apostles, in appointing Bishops as their successors, “handed on to them their own teaching office.”³² The Apostles themselves, that is, exercised the “magisterium” of the primitive Church.

This might seem a rather obvious point to make; but it serves to remind us that, when thinking of the relation between Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium, we should not think of the third as being chronologically posterior to the first two; rather, all three have been inseparably linked from the beginning of the Church. This fact can sometimes become obscured, insofar as now, in post-apostolic times, the ecclesiastical Magisterium has a posterior and subordinate role with respect to Scripture and Tradition. As the Council stresses, both of these transmit to us the very Word of God,³³ whereas the “living Magisterium of the Church” does not do this. Rather, its strictly interpretative role means that it is “not above the Word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on.”³⁴ Nevertheless, in the primitive Church, the preaching of the Apostles themselves — their Magisterium — played a constitutive, not just an interpretative, role, with respect to the Deposit of Faith itself. Indeed, at this time the most important Scriptures from a Christian standpoint were still in the process of gradual formation and were not complete until around the end of the apostolic age.

This point was actually made in a subtle but significant change in the wording of *Dei Verbum* 10. The sentence affirming the unbreakable link between Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium was introduced in the second schema, where it was stated that these three are so closely connected “that one cannot stand without the others (*ut unum sine aliis consistere non possit*).” In the third and subsequent schemas, however, “cannot stand” in this clause was changed to “does not stand (*non consistat*).”³⁵ The relatio made clear the reason for this amendment: the former wording, explained Archbishop Florit, was too absolute, because, while true today, it would not have been true in the time of the primitive Church: “In place of ‘cannot stand’ it is now said ‘does not stand’, so that this relation is considered a question of fact, not a question of law. For speaking in absolute terms, one of the three (Tradition, Scripture and Magisterium) would be able to stand without the others; in reality, Tradition and the Magisterium did exist before Scripture in its complete form existed.”³⁶

²⁹ Cf. AAS 58 (1966) 653.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Actually, the Pope did not use the term “proximate norm” in that Encyclical; however in this 1966 allocution he immediately proceeds to quote the passage of *Mysterium Fidei* (cf. AAS 57 [1965], 755) where he rebukes those exegetes and theologians who explain the dogma of Christ’s Eucharistic presence in a way that empties the magisterial definitions of their true meaning. Quite clearly, the Pope understands the term “proximate norm” to signify nothing other than that status or function which all faithful Catholics have always recognized as pertaining to their Church’s teaching office, regardless of what terminology is used.

³¹ AAS 58 [1966], 891.

³² “. . . *ipsis ‘suum ipsorum locum magisterii tradentes’.*”

³³ DV 9.

³⁴ DV 10.

³⁵ AS III, III, 81. The standard English translations, unfortunately, ignore this change. Both the Abbott edition (*op. cit.*, 118) and the Flannery edition (*op. cit.*, 756) use the discarded term “cannot stand,” as does the standard Italian Dehoniane edition, which says that the three are “*talmente connessi e congiunti da non potere indipendentemente sussistere*” (*op. cit.*, 505, emphasis added).

³⁶ AS III, III, 88, emphasis in original.

2. Personal Interventions of Paul VI

The reality and importance of the Apostolic Magisterium was brought out much more clearly and explicitly by Pope Paul in two of his Wednesday allocutions after the Council. Shortly after declaring the ‘Year of Faith’ in honour of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the Pope dedicated his general audience of 5 July 1967 to “The Wonderful Heritage of the Apostles,”³⁷ stressing that these first leaders of the Church are “intermediaries between us and Christ,” and that this role continues in the teaching authority which is an essential aspect of the Church’s constitution in all subsequent ages. Speaking of Saints Peter and Paul, the Pope said:

The fact that they, together with the other apostles and with those authorized to proclaim the Gospel, are the intermediaries between us and Christ, characterizes Christianity in an essential way. It generates a system of indispensable relations within the community of believers, who cannot prescind from the teaching function exercised for them by these authorities.

We remember, for example, a significant saying of St. Peter, conscious of being a living instrument, destined to generate the faith of the first Christians. That is how he speaks at the first Council of the infant Church: “Brothers, you already know that from the very first days, by a disposition of God among us, the Gentiles should hear the word of the Gospel from my mouth, and believe it.” (*Acts* 15:7).³⁸

Pope Paul went on to bring out clearly the distinctive feature of this apostolic teaching, namely, its authority: it consists of a magisterial role which “generates faith” in those who heard the Apostles. It is not simply an authoritative or juridical expression of a pre-existing faith which arises in the Christian community:

You see: the Apostle is a real teacher. He is not simply the echo of the religious consciousness of the community; he is not just acting as a spokesman giving precise expression and legitimacy to the opinion of the faithful, as the modernists used to claim (cf. *Denz.-Schoen.* 3406 [200]), and as some theologians still dare to affirm today. The voice of the Apostle generates faith; and just as it brings the first proclamation of the Gospel, so also it defends the Gospel’s true meaning, defines its interpretation, guides its reception by the faithful, and denounces the errors of those who deform it.³⁹

Finally, in this address, the Pope went on to describe the Magisterium — which in the post-apostolic era is simply a continuation of the Apostolic Magisterium — as a “canal” or “channel” by which the truth deriving from Christ reaches us, and related it to Scripture by means of a striking claim: the divine Word, the Word of God itself, while not being strictly identical with the Magisterium, nevertheless speaks in and through that Magisterium:

The religious truth deriving from Christ is not diffused among men in an uncontrolled and irresponsible manner. It needs an exterior and social channel, it requires an authorised magisterium; and only with the help of this service (the charity of truth) does it conserve its univocal divine meaning and its salvific value. Yes, this system is binding, . . . it has no room for what appeals to many people, today and yesterday — the subjection of Scripture to their private judgement: that is, the separation of the written Word, Sacred Scripture, from the spoken Word — living, faithful, and contemporary — of the Church’s magisterium, and hence, a more agreeable interpretation. Saint Augustine warns: “You who believe only what pleases you in the Gospels, disbelieving what does not, are believing yourselves rather than the Gospels.” (*Contra Faustum*, 17,3: PL 42, 342).⁴⁰

The Apostles themselves were “channels” of revealed truth, said the Pontiff several years later, in the Wednesday audience of 15 April 1970 which we cited a little earlier.⁴¹ And the dignity of their magisterial office is such that the Church herself is “continually born” from their preaching. Once again, the key theme is that the Magisterium does not simply arise from the Church community and depend on it for its authority; on the contrary, the community depends on the Magisterium, which in turn comes directly from Christ:

But now We ask you: how do we come to have faith? That is, how do we arrive not just at some religious sentiment, or at a vague knowledge of God and the Gospel, but at an assent of the mind and heart to God’s Word — to the truth revealed by Christ and taught by the Church? . . . “Faith comes by hearing.” Faith depends on preaching, and preaching on the Word of Christ. This preaching in turn requires a mandate, an investiture, a mission. We understand the concept and the importance of

³⁷ “*La Stupenda Eredità degli Apostoli*.” This is the title given to the allocution in *Ins.* 1967, 820. For a recent study on this theme, cf. P. Grelot, *La tradition apostolique: règle de foi et de vie pour l’Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1995).

³⁸ *Ins.* 1967, 820-821.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 821.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 821-822.

⁴¹ Cf. above, citations over nn. 24-25 and related commentary.

evangelization, of pastoral and missionary activity: these are still familiar concepts in our own time, concepts which acquire their greatness and their specific role when considered as ordered toward the continual birth of the Church's members: the Church as such does not give birth to itself; it is born from the teaching Church. Or rather, it is born from Christ who sends out his Apostles in order to save mankind through his word and his grace. Note well: the channel of the truths of the faith is the Apostle — authoritative through his personal experience and authorized by his investiture as a missionary. After him there will follow the "chain" of those who spread the same testimony — now mediated rather than immediate — throughout the world and pass it on throughout history. (St. Augustine is worth reading on this.) Thus it is that this plan for the proclamation of the saving Gospel — a plan deriving from Christ — displays two essential characteristics: the jealous and literal faithfulness of the message proclaimed; and the distinctive, empowering office, conferred on the apostolic succession, of guarding, propagating, defending, and explaining that message — in a word, of teaching it.⁴²

Pope Paul then draws the conclusion that follows from these premises: the Apostolic magisterium of the primitive Church is nothing other than the initial exercise of a teaching power which is perennial, and which exists today in the ecclesiastical Magisterium. Here the point is spelt out which was only subtly indicated in *Dei Verbum* 10 (and ignored in some standard translations) by the change from "cannot stand" to "does not stand,"⁴³ namely, that the Church's Magisterium has not always depended on Scripture in an absolute way (i.e., at all times and in all places), because it preceded the New Testament writings and even "produced" them, in the sense of recognizing them as inspired and giving them canonicity. Particularly striking is the image of the Magisterium as being like the eye: within the body, and yet acting for the whole body as regards the function of sight:

This indicates that the Church possesses within herself an organ which instructs her, and which guarantees for her the genuine expression of the Word of God: a hierarchical magisterium, generator of the Christian people (of which it also forms a part, but with an authoritative, providential function, like the eye for the whole body). . . . And we could also recall this point to those who suppose that Sacred Scripture was enough to generate Christianity: Where did Sacred Scripture come from, if not from an oral Apostolic magisterium which preceded it, produced it, recognized it and guarded it?⁴⁴

At the same time, the Pope was careful to recall the teaching of *Dei Verbum* 10 that "the Magisterium is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed down."⁴⁵ A balanced summary of his position — the perennial position of the Church, in fact — was provided in another Wednesday allocution soon after the Council (11 January 1967), and shortly before the Pope's announcement of the 'Year of Faith.' He described the Magisterium as "an authorized voice, not one which in reality reveals new truths, not superior to Sacred Scripture (although Scripture flowed forth from the prophetic and apostolic magisterium), but a subordinate and faithful echo of the divine Word and its sure interpreter."⁴⁶

Summary: We have seen in this two-part essay, first, how Pope Paul intervened in the drafting phase of *Dei Verbum* in regard to a basic principle which must be upheld by everyone seeking a correct and Catholic understanding of the Bible, namely, that the Church's knowledge of revealed truth is drawn not from "Scripture alone" but also from Sacred Tradition. Faced with a tendency among certain groups of Fathers and *periti* at the Council which seemed to place too much emphasis on Scripture at the expense of Tradition, Paul VI asked the doctrinal Commission to insert in the text of *Dei Verbum* 9 an explicit statement to the effect that "Scripture alone" is not sufficient to provide the Church with a certain knowledge of all aspects of the revealed deposit. This request was subsequently fulfilled, in a way which insisted only on the necessity of both Scripture and Tradition from the 'epistemological' standpoint (the Church's attainment of "certainty" about the truths of her faith). That is, it left open the disputed 'ontological' question as to whether (leaving aside the canon of Scripture itself) all of the saving truths of revelation are, *per se* and objectively, contained in the Bible itself, or whether some are contained *only* in Tradition and not at all in Scripture.

⁴² *Ins.* 1970, 314-315.

⁴³ Cf. above, section 2(f).1, n. 35 and related discussion.

⁴⁴ *Ins.* 1970, 316. In another Wednesday audience allocution toward the end of his pontificate (10 August 1977), the Pope made the same point: "Jesus did not say, 'the text of Scripture is enough', because Scripture itself comes from a magisterium that gave rise to it." (*Ins.* 1977, 758). In the 1974 Wednesday audience already cited (cf. above, n. 26), Pope Paul stressed the same point yet again, but used the expression "apostolic Tradition" instead of "apostolic magisterium." Criticizing the "Reformers, ancient and modern," he pointed out the inadequacy of the *sola Scriptura* principle, "as if Sacred Scripture itself did not derive from the apostolic Tradition" (*Ins.* 1974, 766). For Paul VI, then, the "Magisterium" of the Apostles and the "Tradition" of the Apostles are virtually interchangeable terms; and this conclusion is also suggested by the close parallel which he drew between the "written Word" of Scripture and the "speaking, living, faithful and contemporary Word of the Church's magisterium (. . . *la Parola parlante, viva, fedele e attuale del magistero ecclesiastico*)" (*Ins.* 1967, 821-822).

⁴⁵ "Magisterium non supra verbum Dei est, sed eidem ministrat, docens non nisi quod traditum est" (AAS 58 [1966] 822).

⁴⁶ *Ins.* 1967, 673.

In his personal teaching, both during and after the Council, Pope Paul returned frequently to the conciliar treatment of Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium, commenting, elaborating and shedding further light on aspects of this *nexus* which was touched upon only in brief and general terms by the Council itself. He made it clear that the Council's teaching on Scripture must not be seen in isolation from earlier statements of the Magisterium, but rather, as forming a harmonious unity with earlier documents in a series which began with *Providentissimus Deus* in 1893. Indeed, the Pope made it clear that an authentic understanding of Scripture did not begin with the modern biblical movement of the last hundred years: rather more forcefully than the Council itself, the Pope reiterated the importance of the Fathers as interpreters of Scripture, urging the assiduous study of these ancient masters of the faith, and recalling and confirming the traditional Catholic belief that the consensus of the Fathers in matters of biblical interpretation remains normative for the Church. The heart of that Sacred Tradition in the light of which Scripture must be read, Pope Paul recalled in some of his major biblical allocutions, is the knowledge of the Paschal Mystery of the incarnate Redeemer. Any reading of the Bible which does not keep Christ — as known by Catholic Tradition — at the centre of its message will inevitably distort that message.

Finally, Paul VI's personal teaching about the third component of the *nexus* dealt with in *Dei Verbum* 10 — the Church's Magisterium — gave more explicit emphasis to certain points which were not highlighted in the conciliar document itself. Evidently responding to the challenges which became increasingly obvious in the years after the Council, partly as a result of one-sided or inadequate notions of ecumenism, Pope Paul repeatedly criticized the Protestant *sola Scriptura* principle, especially insofar as it entrusted the interpretation of the Bible to the judgment of each individual believer. The Pope did not hesitate to draw attention to the fragmentation and disunity which this approach has produced. Indeed, he emphasised that the Magisterium predates the New Testament itself, and in its earliest manifestations was identical with that Apostolic Tradition which itself brought forth and made known to us the inspired New Testament writings. For Paul VI, the Magisterium is essentially an aspect of Sacred Tradition — the aspect which continues to safeguard and announce that same divine Word which the Apostles first announced to the nations, and which the Holy Spirit brought forth in written form in the Sacred Scriptures.
