

ENCOUNTERING CHRIST THROUGH THE SAME SPIRIT IN WHOM SCRIPTURE IS WRITTEN

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Church teaching helps us to see how to personally appropriate the Scriptures as living sources for our lives and for our catechesis

John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (*CT*) begins by underscoring the christocentricity of catechesis. Since a Person, the Person of the Lord, is at the heart of catechesis, then the "primary and essential object of catechesis is... 'the mystery of Christ.'" Moreover, this means that "the aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity" (*CT* §5).

Christ, the Word of God and the Scriptures

A deeper understanding of the mystery of Christ is tied significantly to the Word of God, as it is articulated in Scripture and Tradition. The catechumen and catechesis itself are to be "impregnated" with the word of Scripture (*CT* §§20, 27).ⁱ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (*CCC*) reinforces and deepens these points by teaching that "Christ ... is the Father's one, perfect, and unsurpassable Word...[in whom] he has said everything" (*CCC* §65) and that "through all the words of Sacred Scripture, God speaks only one single Word, his one Utterance in whom he expresses himself completely" (*CCC* §102).ⁱⁱ

Given the correlation between the living Word of God, Christ, and the Scriptures, it is not uncommon for catechumens and catechists to tell of reading or hearing Scripture in a way that speaks directly to their hearts and the circumstances of their lives. Those who have received this grace testify to the intense sense of meaning that is found in the personal appropriation of Scripture that now fills, spiritually feeds, and directs their lives. The Scriptures are for them no "dead letter" (*CCC* §111; cf. 2 Cor 3:6) but the living word of God (Hebrews 4:12).

As wonderful as this experience is, it raises two questions. First, how may we explain theologically the experience of personal appropriation of Scripture for one's life? Second, how is such an interpretation of Scripture deeply personal and yet not private so as not to succumb to the literalism of biblical fundamentalism?

In this article, only the first of these two questions may be considered. The second will have to await a forthcoming treatment. We shall begin by taking stock briefly of the theological parameters articulated by the *CCC* for biblical interpretation. This will provide a spring-board for considering the role of the Holy Spirit as one key

hermeneutical principle for the personal appropriation of the living voice of Christ in the Scriptures.

Principles of Interpretation

At the end of Article Three of Chapter Two of the *CCC*, which treats the topic of Sacred Scripture within the context of God’s revelation to humanity, §137 indicates the bifurcated nature of the meaning of Scripture into literal and spiritual senses. It states: “Interpretation of the inspired Scripture must be attentive above all to what God wants to reveal through the sacred authors for our salvation. What comes from the Spirit is not fully ‘understood except by the Spirit’s action.’” This statement summarizes the *CCC*’s treatment of the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture found earlier in this section. First, it summarizes §§109-110, which make the point that interpretation must take into account the dual authorship of Scripture, the divine and the human. Hence, the interpreter of Scripture “must be attentive to what the human author truly wanted to affirm and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words” (§109). To discover what the human author wanted to affirm, due attention must be given to the “conditions of their times and culture, the speaking, and narrating then current” (§110).

In these remarks, the *CCC* underscores the foundational role of the literal sense of Scripture. What God wanted to reveal is coterminous with what the human author wanted to affirm to his own audience within their own socio-historical situation. Second, *CCC* §137 summarizes the remarks made earlier in §111, which cites Vatican II’s *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum, henceforth DV)* §12 when it states “But since Sacred Scripture is inspired, there is another and no less important principle of correct interpretation, without which Scripture would remain a dead letter. ‘Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written.’”ⁱⁱⁱ Finally, the last sentence of *CCC* §137 contains a partial quotation from Origen, claiming that Scripture cannot be “...understood except by the Spirit’s action,” thus evoking the patristic tradition to formulate this hermeneutic stance. This citation forms an inclusion with the subheading at the beginning of the third part of Article 3 of the *CCC*, which states: “The Holy Spirit, Interpreter of Scripture” (cf. *CCC* §1101).

Our review indicates that, although the Church has maintained a healthy respect for the necessity of the historico-literary study of Scripture, based as it is on the principle of the Incarnation, the role of the Holy Spirit is likewise affirmed as a key source and motivator for the spiritual communication that Scripture contains. An examination of the early Patristic tradition will help flesh out this perspective.

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Spirit-Guided Interpretation of Scripture

Our brief introductory remarks provide the parameters of our discussion on this topic. First, the *CCC* supplies the classic Patristic stance represented by Origen that the biblical

word inspired by the Spirit must necessarily involve the Spirit to understand it. Second, representing our own end of the historical spectrum, bringing this view up to date in modern times, the *CCC* cites *DV* §1: “Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written.”

Let us begin with the Patristic view.^{iv} The early Fathers, well represented by Origen, argue for the essential connection between the Spirit and the letter of the sacred page. Origen was the first to make the dramatic shift from the emphasis on the divine influence upon the sacred writers — that the human authors were inspired or borne by God and/or his Spirit (*pneumatophorētos*, “spirit borne”; 2 Pet 1:21) — to the view that the document itself, which was produced by this divine influence on the sacred writers, was also initially and residually inspired by God.^v The notion that scripture is inspired by God also emerged implicitly in the Old Testament (henceforth OT) prophetic tradition, which preserved the work of the Spirit of Yahweh in the men and women called to proclaim the divine word to Israel. Origen and those who followed him developed their views quite naturally from their reflection on the OT and New Testament (henceforth NT) traditions, but especially on the well-known passage from 2 Tim 3:16: “All scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness....” (NRSV).

Inspired authors, inspired texts

The key phrase is, “All scripture is inspired by God.” In the days in which the New Testament was being composed and to a great extent in the days of many of the early Fathers themselves, “all scripture” referred to the OT, and especially the Septuagint version of it, although an exception in the latter case may be made for Jerome.^{vi} The all-important phrase “inspired by God,” a key scriptural datum in the Church’s dogma of biblical inspiration, is a translation of the Greek *theopneustos*. The sacred writings themselves are “God-breathed” (the predicative, passive sense) and/or “inspired by God” (the attributive sense). In any case, the NT Church and the Fathers took this passage as a point of departure for further reflection on the role of the Spirit still residing in and speaking through the word that He inspired. This view was an extension of the OT belief that the spirit of Yahweh remained in those things He inspired with the divine breath, particularly the human person, who bore the divine image and performed the divine oversight of the creation (Gen 1:26-28; 2:7,19-20). This view gave rise to the ancient Israelite belief in the sacredness of the bones of the deceased and the need to treat them with reverence and respect (Tobit 1:17).^{vii}

The shift in focus from inspired “human authors” (2 Pet 1:21) to inspired “texts” inaugurated by Origen did not, however, move the basic understanding of the divine inspiration beyond the position held by those emphasizing the inspired “human authors.” Whatever the emphasis or angle, the heart of the dogmatic interest was the assertion of divine authorship of the sacred text. This meant also that the foci of interpretation remained the same. That is, “the proper interpretation of the Scriptures comes not from the vagaries of one’s own imagination, but from the Spirit of God himself.”^{viii} The literal

and spiritual exegesis, although dependent to some degree on basic methods or techniques, such as grammatical or historical analysis, nevertheless depended essentially on cooperation with the Holy Spirit, poured out by Christ and indwelling both believer and the letter of the sacred page.

Some of the early Christian fathers understood the Spirit's action in bringing about knowledge of the sacred text to be a specific charism working in an individual. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, for example, states: "The Spirit makes one man a teacher of divine truth, inspires another to prophesy, gives another the power of casting out devils, enables another to interpret holy Scripture."^x Much later, Thomas Aquinas spoke about it in terms of a specific grace.

'After the level of those who receive revelation directly from God, another level of grace is necessary. Because men receive revelation from God not only for their own time but also for the instruction of all who come after them, it was necessary that the things revealed to them be not only passed on in speech to their contemporaries but also written down for the instruction of those to follow them. And thus it was also necessary that there be those who could interpret what was written down. This also must be done by divine grace, just as the original revelation took place by the grace of God. Thus we read in Gen 40:8: "Does not interpretation come from God?"'^x

Although the quotations provided above may be used to defend the unique role that the magisterium plays in the interpretation of the sacred text (DV §10) in the Roman Catholic tradition, the magisterial tradition itself extends this role of the Spirit and the responsibility to interpret the sacred text to all who believe. According to DV §8, "the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church, and through her, in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them (see Col 3:16)." Later in DV §10, the council fathers, writing about the transmission of the word of God, state: "[I]t becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a single common effort."^{xi}

Therefore, the magisterial tradition receives the early Christian fathers' views with the widest possible application while allowing for the unique role of interpretation that results from the dispensation of a specific charism. The Spirit indwelling the letter of the sacred text provides a grace to the whole Church, not just the select few.

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The spiritual sense of Scripture

The early Christian fathers' attention to the Spirit, who abides in and speaks through the sacred letter, led them to be concerned with the exterior dimension of the text, the literal

sense conditioned as it is by the historical circumstances and communicative aspects of the text. This was because the text itself was seen as the incarnational reality that communicated the Spirit. It also led the early Christian interpreters of Scripture to pay attention to the interior dimension of the text as well. This interior dimension was addressed as “mystery” (Greek, *mystērion*; Latin, *mysterium*). St. Gregory, for example, in addressing the story about Jacob and Esau in Genesis 27:1-40, claims that one “must rise at once from history to the mystery.”^{xii} This interior dimension or mystery, what the CCC §236 refers to as *theologia* (theology), is the inner life of the Trinity, and especially the Christ-event, that is communicated by the movement of the Spirit of God who brings spiritual understanding of the sacred text insofar as the spiritual realities mediated there are illuminated.

This frame of mind provided by the early Christian interpreters of Scripture is one of two components of the classic definition of the *sensus spiritualis* (spiritual sense) of scripture. The first component, a somewhat technical one, understands the spiritual sense in terms of the understanding of the OT in the light of the NT and vice versa. In the words of DV §16, which cites the view of St. Augustine: “God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New.” Yet it is the second component of the *sensus spiritualis* that is expressed by the Patristic attention to the “mystery” contained within the letter that concerns us here. In general, the *sensus spiritualis* refers to knowledge and understanding of the realities of faith experienced by the believer as those realities are mediated by the divine saving events communicated by the sacred text.^{xiii}

From the Greek and Latin fathers through the Medieval period, various ways, not methods really, of handling the text were devised and perfected to articulate the *sensus spiritualis* on both of these levels. We know them today as the “four-fold sense” or “quadriga” and they are briefly addressed in the CCC (§§115-118; the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses). It should be pointed out, however, that even in the CCC’s treatment of these ways of handling the text, the emphasis is not on the various meanings of the words of the text as it is treated historically/literally, allegorically, morally, and anagogically. Rather, the “four-fold sense” provided different ways of speaking about various aspects of the saving event. The emphasis is on the realities mediated by the events of which the text speaks. And these are all realities of divine self-communication, realities of faith. To understand these realities, immersion in the mysteries of faith and especially anointing by the Holy Spirit are presupposed.

Recently, the Pontifical Biblical Commission formulated this view so as to underscore the essential task of exegesis as that of recovering the reality of faith that the text intends to communicate. This reality of faith is mediated by the text when it is “read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it.”^{xiv} Bonaventure says it well when he writes:

‘The source of sacred Scripture was not human research but divine revelation. This revelation comes from the Father of light from whom the

whole concept of fatherhood in heaven and on earth derives. From him, through Jesus Christ his Son, the Holy Spirit enters into us. Then, through the Holy Spirit who allots and apportions his gifts to each person as he wishes, we receive the gift of faith, and through faith Christ lives in our hearts. So we come to know Christ and this knowledge becomes the main source of a firm understanding of the truth of all sacred Scripture.^{xv}

This seems to bring us full circle to consider the mandate of *DV*. The citation of *DV* §12 as it is restated in the *CCC* §111 reads: “Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written.”^{xvi} The mandate places biblical interpretation squarely in the realm of the believer’s exercise of the prophetic office of Christ, received from the Holy Spirit through the gift of faith. It is not so much a mandate to produce “spiritual sense” meanings of Scripture. Rather, it is a mandate to recognize, cooperate with, and appropriate the grace of the Holy Spirit working mutually in the sacred text, the community of faith, and the anointed believer, a grace that is tied essentially to the paschal mystery and to the believer’s experience of that mystery.

The collaboration between the Holy Spirit and believer-interpreter results in a living faith-knowledge of the very spiritual, paschal realities of which the text speaks. As such, this collaboration makes the act of divine revelation a completed act of communication. What God communicates through Christ in the Holy Spirit is now obtained as knowledge on the part of the believer. Or to say it another way, the believer’s knowledge of the mystery of the Trinity is a share in God’s knowledge of himself and his plan.

Conclusion

Encountering the living voice of Christ in the Scriptures is an action of the Holy Spirit who indwells the sacred text, the Church, and the reader-interpreter. When through faith one’s heart is stirred and is enflamed with the presence of Christ upon hearing his words through Scripture, the significance of the experience and the authentic meaning of the Scriptures that are received on a personal level are welcomed by the Church. It is the heritage of every baptized believer. The occasion of hearing this voice is an action of grace that is deeply personal, yet never private, since the Spirit works likewise in and through the entire community of faith, mediating the Paschal mystery throughout the whole life of the Church.

Yet experience has taught us that hearing Christ speak through the inspired text of Scripture may be vulnerable to a literalistic reading most closely associated with biblical fundamentalism. In our next article we shall take up this problem.

The question of reading scripture and fundamentalism is the subject of the second of Dr Minto’s articles, which will appear in the October issue of The Sower.

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NOTES

ⁱ For additional elaboration, see the *General Directory for Catechesis* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997) §§71, 80-81, 94-97, 108, 117, 127-128.

ⁱⁱ Another perspective on this is offered by Sacrosanctum Concilium §7: '[Christ] is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church.'

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*),' in Austin P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1975) 758.

^{iv} For the following discussion see, Christopher Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998); Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*. Trans. by L.C. Sheppard and E. Englund, OCD (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988); idem., *Scripture in the Tradition*. Trans. L. O'Neill (New York: Herder & Herder, 2000); idem., *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*. Vol. 1. Trans. by M. Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998); idem., *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*. Vol. 2. Trans. by E.M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000). Ignace de la Potterie, 'Reading Holy Scripture 'in the Spirit': Is the Patristic Way of Reading the Bible Still Possible Today?' *Communio* 4 (1986) 308-25; Joseph T. Lienhard, *The Bible, The Church, and Authority* (Collegeville: Glazier/Liturgical, 1995); John Rogerson, Christopher Rowland, and Barnabas Lindars, *The History of Christian Theology. Volume 2: The Study and Use of the Bible* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering/ Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988) 14-53; and Luke Timothy Johnson and William S. Kurz, S. J., *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U. K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002) 64-90.

^v On what follows, see Raymond F. Collins, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1983) 317-28.

^{vi} See Martin Hengel with the assistance of Roland Deines, *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture. Its Prehistory and the Problem of Its Canon*. Introduction by Robert Hanhart; trans. Mark E. Biddle (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

^{vii} On this point, see A. R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel*. (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1964).

^{viii} Collins, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 323.

^{ix} *Cat. 16, De Spiritu Sancto* 1, 11-12. 16; PG 33, 931-935.

^x *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3, 154.

^{xi} See also Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, §25 (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1943).

^{xii} *In Ezech.*, 1.6.3. Cited in De La Potterie, 'Reading Holy Scripture,' 310. For a thorough treatment of the wealth of patristic sources, see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses*; 2 vols., (n. 4 above).

^{xiii} This view of the spiritual sense is explained well by Thomas Aquinas (*Sum. Theol.* I.a.I,10), who states that this sense referred to the "things" or 'realities' (*res*) recounted in Scripture which God uses to signify other realities' For the citation and a discussion of it, see Peter S. Williamson, *Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (pref. Albert Vanhoye; Subsidia Biblica 22; Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2001) 200; and the companion paper to mine in this conference by William S. Kurz, 'Charismatic Renewal and the Development in Catholic Biblical Studies beyond Primarily Academic (Historical) Approaches to Interpreting Scripture,' p. 7.

^{xiv} *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston: Pauline Media and Books, 1993) 85. See the entire discussion from pp 78-86.

^{xv} *Prologus: Opera Omnia* 5, 201-202.

^{xvi} After the Council, the interpretation of this sentence was in some dispute. The original Latin leaves open the possibility of an ambiguity, which is reflected in most of the English translations. The CCC clarifies the intent of the Council, providing a translation that specifies that the reference is to the Holy Spirit. Thus, it is a reference to the Spirit's role in inspiration in *DV* §11 and not a reference to the human spirit or condition under which the sacred text was written (*DV* §12, 1-2). For a discussion of this and an early anticipation of the CCC's resolution of the issue, see Ignace de la Potterie, 'Interpretation of Holy Scripture in The Spirit in Which It was Written (*Dei Verbum* 12c),' in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives Twenty-Five Years After 1962-1987* (3 vols.; ed. R. Latourelle; New York:Paulist, 1988) 1:220-66.