

INTRODUCTION

In this volume of *Letter & Spirit*, we examine one of the most fundamental mysteries of the Christian faith, the mystery of the truth and inspiration of the sacred Scriptures as the Word of God. Christianity has never been a religion of the book, although from the beginning Scripture has played a vital role in the lives of believers and the mission of the Church.

The New Testament testifies that the first Christians understood both the Jewish Scriptures and the apostolic writings to be of divine origin, authority, and power. We know from the oldest surviving extra-biblical records that every celebration of the Eucharist on the Lord's Day began with readings from "the memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets."¹

Early on, Christians began the custom of venerating the Scriptures. They kissed the book of the Gospels before opening and reading it. They began their liturgies with a solemn procession in which they bore the Gospel book to the altar and "enthroned" it in a place of honor. "The entrance of the Gospel makes visible [Greek: *emphainei*] the coming of the Son of God and his entrance into this world," St. Germanus I, the seventh-century Patriarch of Constantinople, wrote in his famous explanation of the divine liturgy.²

There was more than symbolism at work in these rituals of respect. During the imperial persecutions, bishops, priests, and lay people endured torture and death rather than hand over or reveal the hiding places of "the Lord's Scriptures."³ Church Fathers such as Origen taught that the book of the Gospels was to be revered as the Eucharist was—as "the Body of the Lord."⁴

Indeed, a profound unity was felt between the Word and the Eucharist. As St. Jerome put it: "When we approach the [eucharistic] mystery, if a crumb falls to the ground we are troubled. Yet when we are listening to the Word of God, and God's Word and Christ's flesh and blood are being poured into our ears yet we pay no heed, what peril should we not feel?"⁵ The first Christians believed that

1 St. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, Chaps. 65–67, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004 [reprint]), 1:185.

2 St. Germanus of Constantinople, *Ecclesiastical History and Mystical Contemplation*, 24, in *On the Divine Liturgy*, trans. and introd. Paul Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1984), 73.

3 See Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, new ed. introd. Simon Jones (New York: Continuum, 2005 [1945]), 24–27; compare Rev. 6:9.

4 Origen, *Homilies on Exodus*, Hom. 13, 3, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca*, ed. J. P. Migne, 161 vols. (Paris: Garnier and J. P. Migne, 1857–1866), 12:391. Hereafter abbreviated: PG. Eng. trans. in Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, The Fathers of the Church 71 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1982).

5 St. Jerome, *Commentary on the Psalms*, Ps. 147, in *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–), 78:337–378.

God's Word was living and active, at work in those who believe.⁶ Pronounced in the Church's sacred liturgy, this Word was performative and efficacious, accomplishing what it proposed—bringing the believer into contact with the living God. Each of the Church's sacraments, St. Augustine taught, was "a kind of visible word [Latin: *verbum visibile*]."⁷

The first Christians cherished the Scriptures as the very Word of God written in human words, inspired by the Spirit of God.⁸ But their faith was not a faith in written texts. It was faith in the living Word, in the event preserved and in some way mysteriously prolonged in these texts—the encounter with the divine person, Jesus Christ. The Scriptures themselves testified that Jesus is the Word of God, long spoken by the Father through the mouths of his prophets but in these last days come in human flesh in the person of his only Son.⁹

Verbum caro factum est. These words from the prologue of the Gospel of John, rendered in the Latin of the Vulgate, the first common translation of the Bible, encapsulate the mystery: "And the Word was made flesh." Christianity is not a religion of the book. It is the religion of the incarnate Word of God. The Christian believes that this Word is the eternal Word, the *Logos*, the divine Wisdom and creative Reason through whom God created the heavens and the earth in the beginning.¹⁰ The Christian believes that this divine Word, in the fullness of time, humbled and emptied himself, accommodating himself to our weakness, descending to share in our humanity by dwelling among us in the form of a man, a servant to others.¹¹

At the heart of the mystery and mission of the Word incarnate lies the mystery of the sacred Scriptures. The Scriptures are central to the divine pedagogy and economy of salvation that they attest to. The history that unfolds in the pages of the Old Testament documents a dialogue, a kind of courtship, in which God, through his patriarchs and prophets, addresses to Israel and the nations an invitation to share in the blessings of his divine life, to live as children of God in his covenant family and kingdom. The history of salvation is depicted as beginning in pure gift, with a series of divine speech acts: *Dixitque Deus fiat.* "And God said: 'Let there be ...'" God is depicted speaking the world into being, writing what the Church Fathers and saints would later call the *liber naturae*, the book of nature. The human person is the culmination of God's creation, made a *creatura Verbi*, a

6 See Heb. 4:12; 1 Thess. 2:13.

7 St. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, Tract. 80, 3, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 [reprint]), 7:344; compare 1 Pet. 1:23; Eph. 5: 26.

8 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Thess. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21.

9 Heb. 1:1.

10 2 Pet. 3:5; John 1:3; Col. 1:15–16; Heb. 11:3; compare Ps. 33:6, 9.

11 Gal. 4:4; Phil. 2:5–11.

creature of the Word, as later Church writers would term it. Born of the creative Word of God, the human person is shown throughout the pages of the Scriptures as having been created for a relationship with the Creator, summoned to live in filial dialogue with the Father.

The history that unfolds in the New Testament records how God's Word was made flesh in order to fulfill all that God had promised beforehand in the Scriptures.¹² Jesus' resurrection from the dead is depicted as the vindication of his interpretation of the Scriptures. On the night of his resurrection, he is shown teaching his disciples the meaning of his new covenant in light of the Scriptures and how the written text is to become living Word in the celebration of the divine liturgy. "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself... and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread."¹³

The theology and apologetics of the early Church, not to mention her pastoral practice, consisted almost entirely of interpretation and commentary on the Scriptures in light of the words and deeds of Christ.¹⁴ The apostles considered themselves to be servants of the Word of God. St. Paul described himself as "a minister according to the divine office which was given to me ... to make the Word of God fully known."¹⁵ The apostolic Church charted her growth in terms of the growth of God's Word.¹⁶ And the New Testament writings, which preserve the apostolic preaching and witness to Christ, profess the same motive and purpose as that preaching—to bring men and women into saving contact with the "words of eternal life," through which they would meet the living Word of God.¹⁷

That ... which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes,
which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, con-
cerning the Word of life ... we are writing.¹⁸

These were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ,
the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his
name.¹⁹

12 Compare Matt. 26:56; Mark 14:49; Luke 24:27, 32, 45; John 5:39.

13 See Luke 24:27, 35.

14 See for example, Rom. 1:2; John 2:22; Acts. 15:6; 17:2, 11; 18:28; Rom. 1:2; 15:4; 1 Cor. 15:3, 4; compare John 14:25–26.

15 1 Cor. 14:36; 2 Cor. 2:17; Act. 6:4; Col. 1:25.

16 Compare Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20.

17 John 6:63, 68.

18 1 John 1:1–4.

19 John 20:31.

The Christian faith, then, is rooted in this mystery of a God who communicates, a God who has chosen to enter into a dialogue of love with his creatures through the gift of his Word—incarnate in Christ and inspired in the pages of the Scripture. The mystery of the written Word, the *Verbum Dei Scriptum*, participates in this greater mystery—the mission of the incarnate Word, the *Verbum Dei Incarnatum*.



These mysteries give shape to the theme and subject matter of this volume of *Letter & Spirit*. Theologians traditionally have considered these mysteries under the heading of the *inspiration and truth* of sacred Scripture or, to use a slightly older nomenclature, the *inspiration and inerrancy* of Scripture. In the modern period, the orthodox Catholic understanding of these categories was set forth in the great Scripture encyclicals of the popes—Leo XII's *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), Benedict XV's *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920), and Pius XII's *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943)—and codified in Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965).²⁰

In essence, the Church has always taught that Scripture partakes of the mystery it imparts—that there is a profound interrelation between the Word incarnate and the Word inspired. Pius XII expressed it this way:

For as the substantial Word of God became like human beings in all things ‘except sin,’ so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect except error. In this consists that “condescension” of the God of providence, which St. John Chrysostom extolled with the highest praise and repeatedly declared to be found in the sacred books.²¹

It is important to remember that this analogy of the Word inspired and the Word incarnate—and the Church's teaching on the truth and inerrancy of Scripture—grows out of the lived experience of the early Church. Following the christological hymn in St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians,²² the Church Fathers took note of the

²⁰ See Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* [The God of All Providence], Encyclical Letter on the Study of Scripture (November 18, 1893); Pope Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus* [The Holy Spirit, the Comforter], Encyclical Letter Commemorating the Fifteenth Centenary of the Death of St. Jerome (September 15, 1920); Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* [Inspired by the Divine Spirit], Encyclical Letter Promoting Biblical Studies (September 30, 1943); Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (November 18, 1965). Texts in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchard (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002).

²¹ Pius XI, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* 20, quoting Heb. 4:15.

²² See Phil. 2:5–11.

deep humility of the divine expressed in the incarnation—the humility of the Son of God's *kenosis*, his self-emptying to be born of a woman in the form of an infant. Many saw an analogy between the humility and condescension of the incarnation and the humility and condescension of the Word of God expressed in the poverty of human language.

In the Scriptures, God adapts his Word to our weakness in order to communicate with us, Origen said:

He condescends and accommodates himself to our weakness,
like a schoolmaster talking a “little language” to his children, like
a father caring for his own children and adopting their ways.²³

The Word inspired follows the same pattern of lowness and humble service as the Word incarnate. As the Word was made incarnate for our salvation, so also the Scriptures are inspired for the sake of our salvation. This image is a commonplace in the writings of the Fathers and Churchmen of the Middle Ages; so is the notion that the Scriptures contain no error, as God cannot lie.²⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas held that “Sacred Scripture was divinely appointed to manifest the truth necessary for salvation.”²⁵ The enduring sense of the Church was well expressed in the Middle Ages by St. Anselm of Canterbury:

There is nothing that we preach profitably for spiritual salvation
that sacred Scripture, made fruitful by the miracle of the Holy
Spirit, has not expressed or does not contain within itself.²⁶



One of the ironies of history is that it was the Reformation's insistence upon *sola Scriptura* that first forced the issue of the truth and inspiration of Scripture.

²³ Origen, *Fragments on Deuteronomy*, 1, 21 (PG 17:24), quoted in Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993), 12.

²⁴ Tit. 1:2.

²⁵ Latin: “Sacra Scriptura ad hoc divinitus est ordinata ut per eam nobis veritas manifestetur necessaria ad salutem.” St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* [Miscellaneous Questions], quod. 1, q. 6, art. 1; compare Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [Summary of Theology], pt. 1a-2ae, q. 106, art. 4, reply obj. 2; pt. 1a-2ae, q. 108, art. 2, contra.

²⁶ Latin: “Nihil utiliter ad salutem praedicamus, quod sacra Scriptura, Spiritus Sancti miraculo fecundata, non protulerit aut intra se non contineat.” St. Anselm, *De Concordia Praescientiae Dei cum Libero Arbitrio* [The Compatibility of God's Foreknowledge, Predestination, and Grace with Human Freedom], q. 3, chap. 6, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 221 vols (Paris: Garnier and J. P. Migne, 1844–1864), 158:528B. Eng. trans. in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, eds. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (New York: Oxford, 2008), 435–474.

In seeking to undermine the Church's interpretive authority by insisting that "Scripture alone" was sufficient for salvation, the reformers unwittingly set in motion a series of intellectual processes by which the Bible eventually came to be secularized during the Enlightenment and the subsequent rise of liberal theology and historical-critical exegesis in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Nowadays, this secular approach to Scripture is the preferred and uncontested methodology in the academy and in many seminaries and ecclesial centers of higher learning. And as the modern period has progressed into what is now regarded as "post-modernity," it has become plain to see: removed from their origin and context in the Church's living traditions of faith and worship, the Scriptures possess no inherent authority and there is no necessary reason to presume that they are true, accurate, or reliable. In the academy today, the Bible is often treated as simply another ancient text, the veracity of which is subject to the skeptical evaluations and criteria of an elite of secular authorities.

Much of biblical interpretation today begins with the assumptions, not of faith, but of a positivistic rationality that denies the truth or historicity of any claims or events that cannot be demonstrated by means of the natural sciences; in other words, it begins by denying the possibility of what the Scriptures assert on every page—that God can act and speak in human history, that the material and natural world is open to a world that is spiritual and supernatural.

Practically speaking, that means today's dominant methodology for reading Scriptures starts by presuming that many of the events recorded in the Scriptures—including one of the central truth claims of the Christian faith, Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead—did not actually take place. The consequences of this interpretive method have been disturbing, some would say devastating, not only for theology and exegesis, but for all aspects of the Church's faith, worship, mission, and spiritual life. These consequences have not been confined to Catholicism; indeed, they have spread to every Christian confession.²⁷

The widespread erosion in the assumption that Scripture is the true Word of God forms the broader context for the articles and studies in this volume of *Letter & Spirit*. As we see it, the work we present in these pages is no ivory tower exercise. It is no exaggeration to say that at stake in this discussion is the future of the identity of the Church and the mission of the Word incarnate. If the Scriptures cannot be trusted to communicate the truth about God and his saving message, if they do not bring us to the encounter with the living God who speaks his Word, then it must be asked: what is the meaning and purpose of the Church?

In previous eras, the Church proclaimed the Word with confidence that it was the good news, the *Verbum Vitae* ("Word of life") that spoke to the deepest yearnings and desires of the human condition. Believers could entrust themselves to this Word, order their lives by it; they could seek in it the highest beauties and

²⁷ See the important investigation by G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to the Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

truths and the meaning of history. The Word marked out the new horizons of their identity and the new direction of their lives in Christ. In a world they understood to be passing, amidst a generation they understood to be crooked and perverse, the Christian would live by the light of this Word—"holding fast the Word of life" in anticipation of the day of Christ, the day when he will come again.²⁸

This certainty has been shaken, and the repercussions can be felt everywhere in the Church and in the broader secular civilization of the West. At least since the time of St. Jerome, the Church has recognized an essential and reciprocal relationship between the Scriptures and Christ—that faith in Christ is indissolubly bound up with how we approach the testimony about Christ that we find in the Scriptures.²⁹ Jerome argued that ignorance of the Scriptures means ignorance of Christ. In our day we can see very clearly what he was talking about. The widespread skepticism concerning the truth of Scripture has accompanied a widespread crisis of faith in Christ and in God.

So it becomes crucial that we take up afresh the theological question of Scripture's inspiration and truth. We believe that means recovering the ancient analogy by which the Word inspired is understood in light of the Word incarnate. For us, this analogy is the key to avoiding the two false snares of modern biblical interpretation—on the one hand, a fideism or fundamentalism that denies the human character of the Word, and on the other, a critical skepticism that denies the divine character of the Word.

The analogy of the Word incarnate and the Word inspired suggests a fruitful approach to the mysterious realities by which the divine was made human in order to make the human divine. This is the reality no less of sacred Scripture than it is of Jesus Christ. And this analogy suggests a hermeneutic that unites faith and reason, and roots the reading of the sacred page in the continuities of the Church's liturgical tradition and rule of faith.

We agree with the consistent teaching of the Catholic magisterium that the study of literary genres and historical context is indispensable for understanding the literal meaning of the sacred texts. But we also believe with the Church that any interpretation of Scripture is incomplete and ultimately inadequate if it stops at the "letter" of the text and does not reckon with the spiritual message—the saving truths that God desires to communicate to his Church through the sacred text.

To extend the metaphor between inspiration and the incarnation, we might suggest that much of today's scholarship is guilty of a kind of "scriptural Ebionism." The Ebionites were Jewish Christians who believed that Christ, while a great prophet, was nonetheless only a man and not the divine and eternal Word of God. Much scholarship today is based on a similar conviction about the Scriptures—that

²⁸ Phil. 2:15–16.

²⁹ See St. Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah*, Prol., in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 221 vols (Paris: Garnier and J. P. Migne, 1844–1864), 24:17.

while perhaps strangely beautiful specimens of ancient literature, they are only that. We must recover a sense of the “theandric” mystery of the sacred Scriptures. As Christ is fully God and fully human and hence cannot be understood apart from this “theandric” or divine-human reality, neither can the Scriptures be understood apart from their dual authorship—by “men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”³⁰

If historical and literary study is indispensable to the interpretation of Scripture, the reckoning of the text in light of the mystery of its inspiration and divine authorship is even more so. With the saints and Fathers of the Church, the exegete must be open in humility to the influence of the Holy Spirit, guided by confidence in the methods of reason and by a lively sense that he is in prayerful dialogue—what the ancients called *lectio divina*—with the Word of God.



The articles and studies in the pages that follow were composed in the wake of the month-long Synod of Bishops convened at the Vatican, October 5–26, 2008, by Pope Benedict XVI to examine the subject of “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church.” They were thus written well in advance of *Verbum Domini*, Benedict’s official response to the Synod, which he issued in the weeks before this volume was to be published. It is perhaps providential, however, that this volume of *Letter & Spirit* anticipates and addresses many of the profound themes and concerns in the new papal document.

Verbum Domini represents the most authoritative papal statement on sacred Scripture in more than sixty years—and it is perhaps the most comprehensive official Catholic treatment of the subject ever.³¹ Benedict proposes a deeper, more richly Marian, ecclesial and eucharistic reflection on the analogy of the Word incarnate and the Word inspired. He writes: “As the Word of God became flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, so sacred Scripture is born from the womb of the Church by the power of the same Spirit.”³²

Benedict forcefully restates the Church’s traditional teaching that the Word of God is true. He quotes at length from the decisive passage in the Second Vatican Council’s *Dei Verbum*:

As the Council’s teaching states ... the inspired books teach the truth: “since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit,

30 1 Pet. 1:21.

31 Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* [“The Word of the Lord”], Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church (September 30, 2010) (Boston: Pauline, 2010).

32 Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 19.

we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures. Thus, ‘all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work’ (2 Tim. 3:16–17, Greek).”³³

If the Scriptures are to be read and interpreted properly as the Word of God, we must have the correct understanding of their inspiration and truth, according to Benedict: “Whenever our awareness of its inspiration grows weak, we risk reading Scripture as an object of historical curiosity and not as the work of the Holy Spirit in which we can hear the Lord himself speak and recognize his presence in history.”³⁴

Benedict suggests the need for deeper study of the relationship between the process of inspiration and the truth of the sacred texts. “Here I would express my fervent hope that research in this field will progress and bear fruit both for biblical science and for the spiritual life of the faithful,” he writes.³⁵

Hence, we offer the research and reflections in these pages as a humble response to the Pope’s hopes, which we share. It is our fervent hope that this volume of *Letter & Spirit* will contribute to the progress of biblical science, the spiritual life of the faithful, and the mission of the incarnate Word—that the Word of the Lord might grow and prevail mightily.³⁶

³³ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 19, quoting *Dei Verbum*, 11.

³⁴ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 19.

³⁵ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 19.

³⁶ See Acts 19:20.

