

PILLARS OF FAITH
14 Days Through Dei Verbum
Day Eight

THE MARVELOUS CONDESCENSION OF GOD

Today, we conclude Chapter Three of *Dei Verbum* with section 13.

Sections 11 and 12 taught that Sacred Scripture has God as its author, that the sacred writers are true human authors and that Scripture must be interpreted according to both its human forms and the divine authorship.

Section 13 now draws these truths together in a brief but beautiful comparison.

In Sacred Scripture, God stoops down to speak to us in human language. He does this without ceasing to be God and without sacrificing His truth or holiness. The Council calls this the marvelous “condescension” of eternal wisdom.

Here, condescension does not mean contempt, superiority or speaking down to someone. It means that God lovingly lowers Himself to our capacity so that we may know Him. The infinite God speaks through finite human words.

He communicates divine mysteries through human vocabulary, grammar, images, history and literary forms. He does not do this because human language can contain the fullness of God. He does it because, unless God accommodated His communication to our weakness, we could not receive it.

Section 13 compares this mystery with the Incarnation. The eternal Word of the Father truly took to Himself a human nature. He became man without ceasing to be God. He assumed the weakness of human flesh without sin, falsehood or moral corruption.

In a similar way, the words of God are truly expressed in human language without ceasing to communicate divine truth. The language is human. The truth is God’s.

This is not a lowering of divine truth into error. It is the loving act by which divine truth is brought within our hearing.

WHERE DID CONFUSION ENTER?

Section 13 is short, but its language has sometimes been separated from the doctrinal safeguards that govern its meaning.

The phrases “adapting His language,” “weak human nature” and “made like human discourse” can be misunderstood when taken by themselves. Some have treated them as though God accommodated Himself not only to human language but also to human error, ignorance, prejudice or false religious belief.

Under this interpretation, Scripture might be said to contain mistaken historical claims, defective moral judgments or merely cultural opinions that the modern interpreter is free to correct.

But section 13 does not begin with human weakness. It begins with the declaration that “the truth and holiness of God always remains intact.” That statement governs everything that follows.

God adapts His manner of speaking to our capacity. He does not adapt His truth to falsehood.

Section 13 must also be read with the preceding sections.

Section 11 teaches that the books of Scripture, in their entirety and with all their parts, have God as their author. It states that the sacred writers wrote everything and only those things God willed. It teaches that everything asserted by the sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Ghost.

Section 12 explains that literary forms, historical circumstances and customary ways of speaking must be studied so that we may determine what the sacred writer actually asserted.

These principles allow for truly human language. They do not allow for divine error. The background of section 13 makes this even clearer.

Pope Pius XII had already used the same comparison between the Incarnation and the words of Scripture. He taught that, as the eternal Word became like man in all things except sin, the words of God were made like human speech “in every respect, except error.” The final words, “except error,” are especially clear.

Section 13 does not repeat that exact phrase at the conclusion of its comparison. Instead, it places the safeguard at the beginning by stating that the truth and holiness of God always remains intact.

The doctrine has not disappeared. But the Council’s more compact wording can be made vulnerable to misuse when its opening safeguard and the teaching of section 11 are forgotten.

This helps us answer honestly where ambiguity may have entered. The Council did not teach that the human character of Scripture permits error. But the description of divine words taking on the likeness of human discourse could be isolated from its context and expanded beyond what the Council actually said.

Human limitation was then sometimes made to include falsehood. The cultural setting was made to include doctrinal corruption. Literary form became a means of dismissing difficult events. Historical development became a reason to place modern judgment above the inspired text.

Under the supposed “spirit of Vatican II,” attention shifted increasingly toward the human elements of Scripture while divine authorship was acknowledged in theory but neglected in practice.

The Bible was studied as a collection of human religious documents shaped by competing communities, social pressures, political interests and evolving beliefs. The Church’s Faith, Sacred Tradition and the supernatural action of the Holy Ghost were sometimes treated as obstacles to objective scholarship rather than essential principles of Catholic interpretation.

This was not required by the text of *Dei Verbum*. It resulted from reading selected phrases apart from the whole document and apart from the Church’s perennial teaching.

The authentic spirit of a council cannot contradict its written teaching. Nor can a council be interpreted as though everything taught before it has become irrelevant. Where language admits more than one possible reading, the Catholic reading must be the one that agrees with Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition and the previous Magisterium.

The Council must be interpreted within the Faith of the Church. It cannot become a new authority standing over that Faith.

GOD STOOPS DOWN SO THAT MAN MAY HEAR HIM.

HIS WORDS ARE EXPRESSED IN GENUINELY HUMAN LANGUAGE.

THEIR HUMAN FORM DOES NOT DESTROY THEIR DIVINE TRUTH.

THE TRUTH AND HOLINESS OF GOD ALWAYS REMAIN INTACT.

i. READ – DEI VERBUM, CHAPTER 3, SECTION 13

13. In Sacred Scripture, therefore, while the truth and holiness of God always remains intact, the marvelous "condescension" of eternal wisdom is clearly shown, "that we may learn the gentle kindness of God, which words cannot express, and how far He has gone in adapting His language with thoughtful concern for our weak human nature." (11) For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men.

NOTICE FIRST WHAT SECTION 13 PRESERVES:

The truth of God remains intact.

The holiness of God remains intact.

God's condescension does not involve deception or falsehood.

Human language truly communicates what God wills to reveal.

The weakness of the human instrument does not overcome the power of the divine Author.

NOTICE WHAT SECTION 13 TEACHES ABOUT DIVINE CONDESCENSION:

God lovingly stoops down to our capacity.

He adapts His language with concern for our human weakness.
His accommodation reveals gentleness rather than distance.
The infinite God makes Himself known through finite words.
God speaks so that man may truly hear, understand and respond.

NOTICE FINALLY THE COMPARISON WITH THE INCARNATION

The eternal Word truly became man.
He assumed human weakness without ceasing to be divine.
The words of God truly enter human language.
They employ human vocabulary, idiom and literary form.
Yet the truth and holiness of their divine Author remains intact.

A NOTE ABOUT DIVINE CONDESCENSION

God is infinite. Our minds are finite. We cannot comprehend God as He comprehends Himself. If God had not revealed Himself, we could not discover the inner mysteries of His divine life by our natural powers.

Therefore, God comes down to us. He speaks of Himself through names, images and comparisons that we can understand. Scripture calls God a father, shepherd, king, judge, rock and fortress. None of these human words exhausts the mystery of God. Yet they truly reveal something about Him.

When Scripture calls God our Father, it does not mean that divine fatherhood is merely a human projection. Rather, earthly fatherhood possesses its truth and meaning because all fatherhood ultimately comes from God.

When Scripture speaks of the hand or arm of God, it does not teach that God has a material body. It uses human language to reveal His action and power.

When Scripture describes God as angry, it does not mean that God is subject to uncontrolled human passion. It reveals God's holiness, His opposition to sin and His last judgment.

Divine condescension therefore requires careful interpretation. We must distinguish between the human form of expression and the divine truth communicated through it.

But we must not imagine that, because the expression is adapted to man, the truth is merely human.

God's language is accommodated. God's truth is not corrupted.

A NOTE ABOUT THE INCARNATION AND SCRIPTURE

The comparison between the Incarnation and Scripture is an analogy. Sacred Scripture is not the Incarnation. Only the eternal Son of God became flesh and dwelt among us. Nevertheless, the Incarnation helps us understand how something genuinely human can serve a divine purpose without destroying either the human or the divine.

Jesus Christ is true God and true man. His humanity is not an appearance. He possesses a real human body, a real human soul, a human will and human intelligence. Yet His humanity does not make Him less divine. Nor does his divinity make His humanity unreal.

In a similar way, the human language of Scripture is not an appearance. The sacred writers truly wrote. They used their own vocabulary, abilities, cultural knowledge and literary forms. Yet their genuine human activity does not make Scripture less truly the Word of God.

The analogy also contains an essential safeguard. Christ assumed human nature in all things except sin. Human weakness did not mean moral evil in Him. Likewise, the words of Scripture resemble ordinary human speech without becoming the assertion of falsehood.

Human language can be poetic, symbolic, approximate or arranged according to ancient conventions without being erroneous.

A writer may describe the sun as rising without teaching a scientific theory about the movement of the solar system. He may use a rounded number without claiming mathematical exactness. He may arrange events according to a theological or literary purpose without attempting to provide a modern chronological transcript.

Such human forms must be interpreted according to what the sacred writer intended to affirm. But once that assertion has been properly identified, it must be received as asserted by the Holy Ghost.

II. SCRIPTURE

John 1:14 (Douay-Rheims)

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we saw his glory, the glory as it were of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”

The eternal Word did not merely appear to be human. He truly became man and dwelt among us. Yet His entrance into human weakness did not diminish His divine glory of truth. He remained the only-begotten Son, full of grace and truth.

Section 13 asks us to see in this mystery the pattern of divine condescension. The God who came near to us in human flesh also comes near to us through human words.

Hebrews 1:1-2 (Douay-Rheims)

“God, who, at sundry times and in divers manners, spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, last of all, in these days hath spoken to us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the world.”

God spoke, “in divers manners.”

He used prophecy, history, poetry, law, wisdom, vision and parable. The diversity of human forms does not imply many conflicting divine authors. The one God speaks throughout the history of Revelation. All of His words reach their fullness in His Son.

Hebrews 4:15 (Douay-Rheims)

“For we have not a high priest, who cannot have compassion on our infirmities: but one tempted in all things like as we are, without sin.”

Christ truly entered human weakness. He experienced hunger, weariness, suffering, temptation and death. Yet He remained without sin.

This distinction is vital for understanding section 13.

Condescension means that God truly enters our human condition. It does not mean that He takes falsehood or sin into Himself.

III. REMEMBER – WHAT CAME BEFORE?

A. St. John Chrysostom

The language of divine condescension comes from the Fathers, especially St. John Chrysostom.

He frequently spoke of God adapting His manner of speaking to the weakness of His hearers. For Chrysostom, this accommodation revealed the goodness and patience of God.

God does not overwhelm man with what he cannot bear. He leads, teaches and raises him gradually.

Condescension did not mean that God teaches error. It means that He communicates truth in a manner suited to those receiving it.

The Father's teaching therefore supplies the correct setting for section 13. God's accommodation is an act of mercy ordered toward truth.

B. St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas taught that divine things are presented in Scripture according to manners of speaking commonly used among men. This is necessary because all our natural knowledge begins through created things.

We speak about God by using words drawn from the world we know. The language is limited, but it is not meaningless. Human words can truly signify divine realities even though they cannot comprehend them fully. This distinction protects us from two opposite errors.

We must not treat every biblical image as a crude physical description. But neither may we claim that human language is incapable of communicating objective truth about God.

C. Pope Pius XII

In *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, Pope Pius XII encouraged Catholic scholars to study ancient languages, literary forms, idioms and ways of narration. He recognized that the sacred writers used approximations, figures of speech and modes of expression common among ancient peoples. But he placed this study firmly within the doctrine of inspiration.

The words of God were made like human speech “in every respect, except error.” This formula makes clear that human language does not cease to be human when God employs it. It also made clear that God cannot become the author of falsehood.

Literary study should help demonstrate Scripture’s immunity from error by determining what the sacred writer truly intended to assert. It must never become a method for assuming error before interpretation begins.

D. The First Vatican Council

Vatican I taught that the books of Scripture are sacred and canonical because they were written under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, have God as their author and were handed on as such to the Church.

They are not inspired merely because the Church later approved human books. Nor are they inspired only in selected religious passages.

Dei Verbum received this teaching and repeated it in section 11. Section 13 must therefore be read within that doctrinal continuity.

The human character of the language does not divide the Bible into divine truths surrounded by merely human errors. The whole of Scripture is received as inspired.

IV. BENEDICT XVI – THE WORD BECAME SMALL FOR US

Pope Benedict XVI frequently returned to the theme of divine condescension. He taught that God’s condescension reaches its summit in the Incarnation. The eternal Word became small enough to enter our history. He became a child who could be seen, heard and held.

The Word did not remain an abstract idea. He took a human face. In a related way, God’s Word enters the humility of human speech. It comes to us in words that can be

read, proclaimed, remembered and handed on. This humility should produce wonder rather than suspicion.

The fact that God speaks in human words does not mean that Scripture is merely human. It means that God has drawn near to man.

Benedict also warned against methods that examine only the human dimensions of Scripture. Historical study is necessary because God truly acted in history and spoke through real men. But when scholarship excludes divine action from the beginning, it no longer receives Scripture according to what Scripture is.

A method that assumes miracles are impossible, prophecy cannot occur or divine inspiration cannot produce truthful human words has imposed a philosophy upon the text.

Faith does not eliminate serious study. It allows reason to remain open to the whole reality of the inspired Word.

The Catholic interpreter therefore receives both dimensions. These are genuinely human words. And through them, God truly speaks.

V. PILLARS COMMENTARY

WHAT DOES “CONDESCENSION” MEAN?

Divine condescension is God’s loving accommodation of His communication to human weakness. He speaks in a manner suited to our finite minds. He uses human words, images, events and forms of expression so that we may know truths that we could never discover by ourselves.

Condescension does not mean that God despises man or speaks falsely to him. It reveals His gentleness.

The eternal Wisdom bends down so that His children may hear His voice.

WHY DOES GOD USE HUMAN LANGUAGE?

Human language is the natural means by which human beings communicate and receive intelligible truth. God could have remained silent. Instead, He chose to enter the conditions of human history and speech.

He spoke through prophets and Apostles who lived in particular cultures and used particular languages. Their words do not exhaust the divine mystery. Nevertheless, under inspiration, they communicate everything and only what God willed them to write.

DOES ADAPTING HIS LANGUAGE MEAN THAT GOD ACCOMMODATED HIMSELF TO ERROR?

No.

The first words of section 13 declare that the truth and holiness of God remain intact.

God may adapt the manner in which truth is expressed. He does not change truth into falsehood.

A mother may explain a profound truth to a child in simple language without lying. A teacher may use analogy and approximation without teaching error. Human expression need not be exhaustive or technically modern in order to be true.

The interpreter must determine what Scripture actually asserts. He may not assume that an assertion is false merely because it is expressed through an ancient human form.

WHERE IS THE LANGUAGE OF SECTION 13 MOST VULNERABLE TO MISUSE?

Its final comparison says that the words of God have been made like human discourse, just as the eternal Word took to Himself the flesh of human weakness.

Read alone, “human weakness” might be expanded to include error, prejudice or doctrinal defect.

Pope Pius XII’s earlier formulation ended with the explicit qualification “except error.” Section 13 does not repeat those words at that point.

This makes it especially important to retain the section's opening declaration that God's truth and holiness remain intact and the teaching of section 11 that everything asserted by the sacred writers is asserted by the Holy Ghost.

The omission of an especially clear phrase can make a text easier to misuse. It does not authorize an interpretation contrary to the doctrine the Council has already affirmed.

HOW DID THE “SPIRIT OF VATICAN II” GO BEYOND THE TEXT?

It went beyond the text whenever human authorship was treated as though it could be separated from divine authorship.

It went beyond the text whenever a cultural setting was used to dismiss a biblical teaching rather than understand what the sacred writer asserted.

It went beyond the text whenever literary form became a convenient label for denying miracles, prophecy or historical events.

It went beyond the text whenever Scripture was submitted to an academic authority independent of the Faith and judgment of the Church.

It went beyond the text whenever the assumptions of the modern world became the standard by which the Word of God was corrected.

None of these developments is demanded by section 13.

They arise when “human language” is emphasized while “the truth and holiness of God” is forgotten.

HOW MUST SECTION 13 BE READ?

It must be read with sections 11 and 12.

It must be read with the teaching of Vatican I, Pope Leo XIII, Pope Pius XII and the Fathers.

It must be read within the Church's doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy.

It must be read according to the analogy of Faith.

When read in the continuity, section 13 expresses a profoundly Catholic truth.

God has spoken through genuinely human words. Because the words are human, they require careful interpretation. Because they are inspired by God, they must be received with Faith.

DOES SECTION 13 PRESERVE THE CATHOLIC FAITH?

Yes, when it is read according to its own opening words and within the doctrinal context established by the Council.

The truth and holiness of God remain intact. God's condescension explains why Scripture is accessible to man. It does not explain away divine inspiration.

The difficulty entered when the language of accommodation was detached from its safeguards and used to suggest that Scripture contains the defective judgments of its age.

The remedy is not to deny the human character of Scripture. The remedy is to restore the unity of the Catholic teaching:

God is the principal Author.

The sacred writers are true authors.

Their language is genuinely human.

Their assertions are asserted by the Holy Ghost.

And the truth and holiness of God remains intact.

DIVINE CONDESCENSION DOES NOT MEAN THAT GOD LOWERS HIS TRUTH

IT MEANS THAT GOD LOWERS HIMSELF TO BRING HIS TRUTH TO US.

VI. REFLECT

1. Do I recognize the kindness of God in His Word?

God has stooped down to speak in words that I can hear and understand. Do I receive Scripture with gratitude, or do I take this divine gift for granted?

2. Do I confuse human language with human falsehood?

The language of Scripture is genuinely human. Do I study it carefully while still believing that God speaks truthfully through it?

3. Do I allow the spirit of the age to judge the Word of God?

When Scripture conflicts with modern assumptions, do I presume that Scripture must be corrected? Or do I first ask whether my own understanding and assumptions need correction?

4. Do I read the Council within the whole Faith of the Church?

When conciliar language appears capable of different interpretations, do I choose the interpretation consistent with Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition and the previous Magisterium?

VII. DEEPER THOUGHTS TO CONCLUDE THIS DAY

God did not remain distant.

The eternal Word became flesh.

The infinite entered the finite.

The Creator entered His creation.

He took to Himself the weakness of human flesh and dwelt among us.

In Sacred Scripture, God performs another act of marvelous condescension.

He places His Word within human words.

He speaks through the vocabulary, literary forms and historical circumstances of men.

He makes His truth accessible to minds that could never reach Him by their own power.

This should fill us with reverence.

The human language of Scripture is not an embarrassment to be overcome.

It is the chosen instrument of divine mercy.

At the same time, divine condescension must not be confused with divine surrender to error.

God does not cease to be Truth when He speaks to man.

The eternal Word did not become sinful when He assumed human nature.

The inspired Word does not become false because it is expressed in human speech.

We must therefore hold together everything Chapter Three has taught.

God is the author of Scripture.

The sacred writers are true authors.

Their language must be studied according to its historical and literary forms.

Their assertions must be received as assertions of the Holy Ghost.

Scripture must be interpreted within its own unity, the living Tradition of the Church, the harmony of the Faith and the judgment of the Church.

And throughout this divine and human mystery, the truth and holiness of God remain intact.

The confusion of the postconciliar period did not arise because Catholics took all these principles too seriously.

It arose when they were separated.

Human authorship was detached from divine authorship.

Historical study was detached from Faith.

Accommodation was detached from truth.

The Council was detached from the Tradition that gives its words a Catholic meaning.

The remedy is to restore what should never have been divided.

We read Scripture with careful human intelligence and supernatural Faith.

We receive the Council according to its actual words and within the perennial teaching of the Church.

We reject a supposed "spirit" that contradicts the letter, the Faith or the Tradition it claims to interpret.

God has stooped down to speak to us.

He has not lowered His truth.

He has lowered Himself in love so that His truth may raise us to Him.

TOMORROW, we will begin Chapter Four and consider the Old Testament: God's preparation of His people, the lasting value of the ancient covenant and the unity of the Old and New Testaments.

VIII. THE CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the marvelous condescension of Thy eternal Wisdom.

Thou hast not remained silent or distant.

Thou hast stooped down to our weakness and spoken to us in words that we can hear and understand.

Give us reverence for Thy inspired Word.

Teach us to recognize its truly human language without ever forgetting its divine Author.

Preserve us from careless literalism, but also from every method that uses human language as an excuse to attribute error to Thee.

Keep us faithful to Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition and the teaching of Thy Church.

When words are ambiguous, guide us according to the sure rule of the Catholic Faith.

When the spirit of the age conflicts with Thy Word, give us the humility to submit our judgment to Thine.

Grant wisdom and courage to the shepherds and scholars of the Church.

May they study Thy Word carefully, interpret it faithfully and never separate it from the Holy Ghost by whom it was written.

Above all, draw us more deeply to Jesus Christ, the eternal Word made flesh.

As He humbled Himself to share our human weakness, may we humble ourselves to receive His truth.

May Thy Word enlighten our minds, purify our hearts and raise us from the weakness of this world to the everlasting life of Heaven.

Through the same Christ our Lord.

Amen.