

PILLARS OF FAITH
14 Days Through Dei Verbum
Day Thirteen

**THE WORD OF GOD IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH – SCRIPTURE, THE
EUCCHARIST, AND WHO HAS AUTHORITY TO INTERPRET**

Today we begin the sixth and final chapter of *Dei Verbum*, “*Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church*,” with sections 21, 22, and 23.

We have traveled a considerable distance to arrive here. *Dei Verbum* began with Revelation itself: God speaking, God revealing Himself, and God drawing man into communion with Himself. It then considered how that Revelation is handed on through Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture within the Church.

It taught that Scripture is inspired by the Holy Ghost and has God as its Author. It considered the interpretation of Scripture. It led us through the Old Testament and showed us its preparation for Christ.

It brought us into the New Testament, where the Word became flesh, the Gospel was proclaimed by the Apostles, and the four Gospels faithfully handed on what Jesus Christ really did and taught.

Now the Council asks a practical question: What place should Sacred Scripture have in the actual life of the Church?

Section 21 answers with extraordinarily elevated language.

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures. She receives from the table of God’s Word and from the table of Christ’s Body the bread of life. Scripture, together with Sacred Tradition, stands as a supreme rule of faith. The inspired books communicate God’s word without change. Through them, the voice of the Holy Ghost resounds in the Church.

The Council then says something beautiful: In the sacred books, the heavenly Father comes lovingly to meet His children and speaks with them. Scripture therefore, cannot be reduced to information about God.

God speaks.
God teaches.
God corrects.
God consoles.
God calls.
And the Christian listens.

But section 21 also contains one of the statements in Chapter Six that deserves particularly careful examination.

The Council says that the Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures “just as she venerates the body of the Lord.”

What does that mean?

Does it place Sacred Scripture and the Holy Eucharist on precisely the same level?
Does the Church venerate the written Word in the same manner in which she adores Jesus Christ substantially present in the Blessed Sacrament?

Certainly not.

And later Pope Benedict XVI would make this distinction particularly clear: the Church honors the Word of God and the Eucharistic Mystery with profound reverence, but not with the same worship. That distinction matters enormously.

Sacred Scripture is truly the inspired Word of God. But the consecrated Host is not a sacred text pointing us toward Christ. It is Christ – Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity.

Under the appearances of bread and wine, the same Jesus Christ who was born at Bethlehem, died upon Calvary, rose from the dead, and reigns in Heaven is substantially present upon the altar.

The Bible is not substantially God. The Eucharist is God substantially present.

Therefore, if section 21 is interpreted as though Scripture and the Eucharist are simply two equivalent manifestations of Christ’s presence, Catholic doctrine has been distorted. But is that what *Dei Verbum* actually teaches?

No.

The paragraph itself speaks of two tables and distinguishes God's Word from Christ's Body. Nevertheless, the parallel is strong enough that it requires careful theological understanding. And that brings us once again to one of the recurring questions of our investigation:

Can a statement be orthodox in its proper theological meaning and yet be expressed in a way that becomes vulnerable to an unbalanced postconciliar interpretation?

Section 22 then moves to another subject.

“Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful.”

For modern Catholics, this may sound completely unremarkable. Bibles are everywhere. They are on our shelves. They are on our telephones. They are available in countless translations. But historically, this sentence belongs to a much larger Catholic story.

The Church never taught that Scripture should be hidden from Christians simply because Scripture was dangerous. The Church herself preserved the Scriptures. Copied them. Read them publicly. Preached them. Sang them. Placed them throughout her liturgy. Filled her prayers with them. Built her theology upon them.

But she also knew something the modern world often forgets: An inspired book can be misinterpreted.

The question was therefore never merely whether Christians should possess Scripture. The question was also: Who translates it? Who explains it? Within what doctrinal framework is it read? What happens when an individual interpretation contradicts the Faith handed down by the Church? And who possesses the authority to decide?

Section 22 does not abolish those concerns. Indeed, it says that the Church herself, by her authority and with maternal concern, sees that suitable and correct translations are produced.

Even cooperation with separated Christians is qualified by ecclesiastical approval. The principle is not: **Give everyone a Bible and let every reader decide Christianity for himself.**

The principle remains Catholic: **Give the faithful Scripture within the life, authority, Tradition and teaching of the Church.**

This section 23 turns directly to biblical scholarship. The Church encourages deeper study. She encourages study of the Fathers of East and West. She encourages study of the sacred liturgies. She encourages Catholic exegetes and theologians to labor diligently in exploring and explaining Scripture.

But then come words that must not disappear: **“under the watchful care of the sacred teaching office of the Church.”**

Those words establish a boundary. The exegete serves the Word of God. The theologian serves the Word of God. The professor serves the Word of God. The university serves the Word of God.

The scholar does not become a new magisterium standing over Revelation. And scholarship does not possess the authority to overturn what the Church has definitively received and taught.

That is what makes sections 21-23 particularly important for our larger investigation. These paragraphs contain the seeds of a genuinely Catholic biblical renewal. But they also contain language that would later be invoked within a very different atmosphere.

The question becomes: **Did Catholics after the Council receive more Scripture while remaining more deeply rooted in Tradition and the Magisterium?**

Or did increased biblical access sometimes accompany a gradual Protestantizing of Catholic attitudes toward Scripture? Did renewed biblical scholarship deepen confidence in the inspired Word? Or did academic biblical criticism sometimes become an authority capable of overruling the Fathers, the saints, traditional exegesis, and even the apparent meaning of Scripture itself?

Did the two tables – Word and Eucharist – strengthen one another? Or did an imprecise understanding of their relationship sometimes contribute to a diminished awareness of

the unique and incomparable reality of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and the Real Presence?

Those questions require careful distinctions. And once again, the answer cannot be found by simply praising everything that followed Vatican II, nor can it be found by blaming Vatican II for everything that followed.

We must examine the text. We must remember what came before. We must examine what changed. And we must ask what happened afterward.

I. READ – DEI VERBUM, CHAPTER SIX, SECTIONS 21-23

Read the complete official text of sections 21, 22 and 23 before continuing.

21. The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body. She has always maintained them, and continues to do so, together with sacred tradition, as the supreme rule of faith, since, as inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the word of God Himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles. Therefore, like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: "For the word of God is living and active" (Heb. 4:12) and "it has power to build you up and give you your heritage among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32; see 1 Thess. 2:13).

22. Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful. That is why the Church from the very beginning accepted as her own that very ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament which is called the Septuagint; and she has always given a place of honor to other Eastern translations and Latin ones especially the Latin translation known as the Vulgate. But since the word of God should be accessible at all times, the Church by her authority and with maternal concern sees to it that suitable and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books. And should the opportunity arise and the Church authorities approve, if these translations are produced in cooperation with the separated brethren as well, all Christians will be able to use them.

23. The bride of the incarnate Word, the Church taught by the Holy Spirit, is concerned to move ahead toward a deeper understanding of the Sacred Scriptures so that she may increasingly feed her sons with the divine words. Therefore, she

also encourages the study of the holy Fathers of both East and West and of sacred liturgies. Catholic exegetes then and other students of sacred theology, working diligently together and using appropriate means, should devote their energies, under the watchful care of the sacred teaching office of the Church, to an exploration and exposition of the divine writings. This should be so done that as many ministers of the divine word as possible will be able effectively to provide the nourishment of the Scriptures for the people of God, to enlighten their minds, strengthen their wills, and set men's hearts on fire with the love of God. (1) The sacred synod encourages the sons of the Church and Biblical scholars to continue energetically, following the mind of the Church, with the work they have so well begun, with a constant renewal of vigor. (2)

Pay particular attention to the principal affirmations.

Section 21

The Council teaches that:

- The Church has always venerated Sacred Scripture.
- Scripture and the Body of Christ both nourish the faithful within the sacred liturgy.
- Sacred Scripture, together with Sacred Tradition, serves as a supreme rule of faith.
- Scripture is inspired by God.
- It communicates God's Word without change.
- Through Scripture the voice of the Holy Ghost continues to resound.
- The Church's preaching must be nourished and governed by Scripture.
- The Word of God strengthens the Church.
- It strengthens the faith of her children.
- It feeds the soul.
- It is a pure and lasting source of spiritual life.
- In Scripture the heavenly Father lovingly meets His children and speaks with them.

Notice immediately what section 21 does not say. It does not say Scripture alone is the rule of faith. It says Scripture together with Sacred Tradition. And Chapter II has already taught that Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium are so connected that one cannot stand independently of the others. That safeguard must accompany everything Chapter VI now says.

Section 22

The Council teaches that:

- The faithful should have ready access to Sacred Scripture.
- The Church historically received the Septuagint.
- She has honored ancient Eastern translations.
- She has particularly honored the Latin Vulgate.
- The Church is responsible for ensuring suitable and accurate translations.
- Such translations may be made from the original biblical texts.
- Under appropriate circumstances and with ecclesiastical approval, translations may even be undertaken in cooperation with separated Christians.

Again notice the governing Catholic principle. The Council does not merely say: Translate the Bible. It says the Church, exercising her authority and maternal care, ensures that suitable and accurate translations are provided. Accessibility is therefore not separated from ecclesiastical authority.

Section 23

The Council teaches that:

- The Church seeks an increasingly profound understanding of Scripture.
- She encourages study of the Fathers of both East and West.
- She encourages study of the sacred liturgies.
- Catholic exegetes and theologians should labor diligently.
- Their work is to be conducted under the watchful care of the Church's teaching authority.
- Their work should nourish those who preach the divine Word.
- Scripture should enlighten minds.
- It should strengthen wills.
- It should set hearts aflame with love for God.
- Biblical scholars are encouraged to continue their work energetically.
- But they are to do so according to the mind of the Church.

Those final words are essential. Scholarship is encouraged. But scholarship is not sovereign.

II. SCRIPTURE

II Timothy 3:16-17 (Douay-Rheims)

“All scripture, inspired of God, is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice, that the man of God may be perfect, furnished to every good work.”

This passage stands at the heart of Catholic belief concerning Sacred Scripture. Scripture is not merely inspiring. It is inspired of God. Its usefulness follows from its divine origin.

It teaches. It reproves. It corrects. It forms. It prepares the Christian for good works. But notice what St. Paul does not say. He does not say Scripture is the only authority Christ gave His Church. Indeed, the same Apostle commands Christians to hold fast to traditions received by work or by epistle.

The Catholic Church therefore receives the tremendous affirmation of II Timothy 3 without turning it into *sola Scriptura*. Scripture is inspired. Scripture is authoritative. Scripture is necessary to the Church's life. But Scripture was given to the Church, not apart from her.

Acts 20:32 (Douay-Rheims)

“And now I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, who is able to build up, and to give an inheritance among all the sanctified.”

Section 21 draws directly upon this passage. The Word of God builds. It strengthens. It gives life. There is therefore something profoundly wrong whenever Scripture becomes merely an object of academic dissection.

The final purpose of Scripture is not that scholars should produce increasingly complicated theories about sources. God gave Scripture for salvation. The Word is meant to build saints.

Hebrews 4:12 (Douay-Rheims)

“For the word of God is living and effectual, and more piercing than any two-edged sword; and reaching unto the division of the soul and the spirit, of the joints also and the marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

The Word of God does not merely sit before us waiting to be analyzed. It analyzes us. We read Scripture. But Scripture also reads us. It exposes motives. It reveals sin. It destroys excuses. It brings hidden things into the light.

This is why genuine Catholic reading of Scripture cannot remain purely academic. The ultimate question is not merely: **What does this passage mean?** It is also: **What does God require of me because it is true?**

Luke 24:27, 30-32 (Douay-Rheims)

On the road to Emmaus, Christ begins with Moses and the prophets and interprets the Scriptures concerning Himself. Then He sits at the table. He takes bread. He blesses. He breaks. Their eyes are opened. And afterward the disciples say: **“Was not our heart burning within us, whilst he spoke in the way, and opened to us the scriptures?”**

Here we find something remarkably close to the pattern section 21 wants us to see. Christ opens the Scriptures. Then He is recognized in the breaking of bread. Word and Sacrament belong together. But they are not interchangeable. Scripture leads to Christ. The Eucharist gives us Christ sacramentally and substantially present.

The Word prepares the heart. The Eucharistic Lord gives Himself. Emmaus therefore protects us from two opposite errors. We must not neglect Scripture. And we must not reduce the Eucharist to another form of proclamation.

The disciples heard Him. Then they recognized Him in the breaking of bread.

John 6:51-56 (Douay-Rheims)

Christ says: **“I am the living bread which came down from heaven.”** And then: **“Except you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you.”**

These words prevent us from treating the Eucharistic language of section 21 as a mere literary metaphor. Christ does not merely nourish us by teaching. He gives us His Flesh. He gives us His Blood. The Eucharist is not simply another way in which God’s Word reaches us. It is the sacramental presence of the Incarnate Word Himself.

II Peter 1:20-21 (Douay-Rheims)

“Understanding this first, that no prophecy of scripture is made by private interpretation. For prophecy came not by the will of man at any time: but the holy men of God spoke, inspired by the Holy Ghost.”

Here we find two truths that modern Christianity frequently separates. Scripture comes from the Holy Ghost. And Scripture is not delivered into the hands of isolated private judgment. Divine inspiration and authoritative interpretation belong together.

That principle becomes crucial when we read sections 22 and 23. Making Scripture widely available does not mean making every Christian his own final doctrinal authority.

III. REMEMBER – WHAT CAME BEFORE?

I. The Council of Trent – Scripture and Tradition

The Council of Trent confronted the Protestant claim that Christian doctrine should be established by Scripture alone. Its answer was not to diminish Scripture. Its answer was to preserve the whole manner in which Christ entrusted Revelation to His Church.

The Gospel was handed down through written books and unwritten traditions received from Christ and the Apostles under the guidance of the Holy Ghost. Trent therefore gives us an indispensable framework for reading section 21.

When *Dei Verbum* calls Scripture, together with Sacred Tradition, a supreme rule of faith, it cannot legitimately mean that Scripture has replaced Tradition. Nor can it mean that the individual Christian armed with a Bible becomes the final judge of Christian doctrine.

The Word of God has been entrusted to the Church. The Church received Scripture. The Church preserved Scripture. The Church recognizes its canon. The Church interprets it authoritatively. The Church lives from it.

II. The Council of Trent – The Vulgate and Interpretation

Trent also gave special recognition to the Latin Vulgate in the public life of the Church. And it insisted that no one, relying upon his own judgment, should distort Scripture

contrary to the sense held by Holy Mother Church or contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers. This is important when we reach sections 22 and 23.

Dei Verbum encourages translations from the original languages. That is not itself a rejection of Trent. Pius XII had already encouraged Catholic scholars to make serious use of the original Hebrew and Greek texts. But something in emphasis has clearly changed.

The older Catholic posture placed strong emphasis upon the ecclesiastical reception of Scripture, the Vulgate, traditional interpretation and the danger of private judgment. *Dei Verbum* places stronger emphasis upon accessibility, original languages, translation and scholarly investigation. These emphases do not necessarily contradict one another. But they must be held together.

When the older safeguards disappear and only the newer emphasis remains, Catholic biblical renewal can begin to resemble Protestant biblicism or academic historicism.

III. Pope Leo XIII – Providentissimus Deus

Pope Leo XIII strongly encouraged the study of Scripture. But he simultaneously insisted that Scripture belongs to the Church and must be interpreted with the Church as guide and teacher.

Leo knew the danger of two opposite errors. One was neglect of Scripture. The other was interpretation detached from ecclesiastical authority. For Leo, genuine biblical scholarship was not autonomous. It existed within the Faith. That is particularly important for section 23.

When *Dei Verbum* tells Catholic exegetes to labor under the watchful care of the teaching office, it stands in continuity with Leo XIII. The problem arises if the encouragement remains while the watchful care disappears.

IV. Pope Pius XII – Divino Afflante Spiritu

Pius XII is especially important because he prevents us from constructing a false history in which Catholic biblical scholarship was closed and suspicious until Vatican II suddenly opened the windows. That is not what happened.

In *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, Pius XII encouraged serious Catholic study of the original languages, textual criticism, historical circumstances and literary forms. He also explicitly taught that the authority of the Vulgate did not prevent Catholic scholars from consulting the original texts or producing vernacular translations from them for the benefit of the faithful with ecclesiastical approval.

Therefore, section 22 did not suddenly invent Catholic interest in original-language translations.

This matters greatly for our investigation. If we want to identify a possible rupture, we must identify the real one. The problem cannot simply be that Vatican II allowed Catholics to study Hebrew and Greek. That had already been encouraged. Nor can the problem simply be that Vatican II encouraged biblical scholarship. That too had already occurred.

The more important question is whether the postconciliar period changed the relationship between scholarship and ecclesiastical authority. Did scholarship remain a servant of Revelation? Or did scholarship gradually become an independent tribunal before which Revelation itself was required to stand trial?

V. The Traditional Catholic Principle

The older Catholic tradition therefore gives us a remarkably balanced principle. Scripture belongs to the faithful. But it belongs to them through the Church. Scripture should be studied. But within the Faith. Translations should be made. But they should be accurate and ecclesiastically approved. The original languages should be studied. But the Church's received Faith is not overturned whenever a scholar proposes a new translation.

The Fathers should be consulted. The liturgy should be consulted. Tradition should be consulted. The Magisterium should be obeyed. And the Bible should never be torn from the supernatural organism in which God placed it.

IV. BENEDICT XVI – WORD AND EUCHARIST, EXEGESIS AND FAITH

Pope Benedict XVI is particularly valuable for these sections because he returned repeatedly to precisely the questions raised here. In *Verbum Domini*, Benedict

emphasized that Christianity is not simply a “religion of the book.” That statement deserves attention.

Catholics believe every word of Sacred Scripture is inspired. But Christianity is not ultimately founded upon a book detached from a living Person. The eternal Word became flesh. Jesus Christ is the fullness of Revelation. The inspired Scriptures bear witness to Him within the living Apostolic Tradition of His Church. Therefore the Bible cannot be separated from Christ. And Christ cannot be separated from His Church.

Benedict then addressed the relationship between Scripture and the Eucharist. This is particularly important for understanding section 21.

He strongly affirmed their profound unity. Scripture leads toward the Eucharist. The Eucharist illuminates Scripture. The same Christ who speaks in His Word gives Himself sacramentally to His people.

But Benedict also supplied an enormously important clarification: The Church honors the Word of God and the Eucharistic Mystery with profound reverence, but not with the same worship.

That distinction protects Catholic doctrine. There is analogy. There is relationship. There is profound unity. But there is not identity.

We do not genuflect before a Bible because Jesus Christ is substantially present under the pages. We do genuflect before the tabernacle. We do not expose the Scriptures in a monstrance for Eucharistic adoration. We expose the consecrated Host. We do not say that ink and paper have been transubstantiated into Christ.

At the words of consecration, however, the substance of bread and wine becomes the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. The distinction is not an insult to Scripture. It protects the truth about both Scripture and the Eucharist. Scripture is God’s Inspired Word. The Eucharist is the Incarnate Word substantially present.

Benedict also returned to the problem we last encountered. Catholic exegesis requires two levels. There is legitimate historical investigation. But there must also be theological interpretation within the Faith. Scripture must be read according to the unity of Scripture, the living Tradition of the Church and the analogy of faith.

Benedict warned that when the theological dimension disappears, a secularized hermeneutic enters in its place – one that can operate as though divine intervention in history were impossible.

Now we return to section 23.

Catholic scholars are encouraged to explore Scripture. But they are to do so: under the watchful care of the teaching office of the Church and according to the mind of the Church. Benedict's later concerns therefore raise an unavoidable question.

If section 23 explicitly contains these safeguards, why did Catholic biblical scholarship in many places nevertheless develop as though academic exegesis possessed practical independence from the Magisterium?

Again, this does not prove that *Dei Verbum* taught the error. It did not. But it tells us something important about the reception of the Council. The permission was remembered. The encouragement was remembered. The scholarly freedom was remembered. The call for renewed biblical study was remembered. But the words “under the watchful eye of the sacred teaching office” became much less prominent. And once again we encounter the phenomenon we have been calling the “spirit of Vatican II.”

A genuine Catholic renewal becomes detached from the Catholic boundaries that were supposed to govern it.

V. PILLARS COMMENTARY

Is Section 21 Teaching *Sola Scriptura*?

No.

This must be said clearly: Section 21 calls Sacred Scripture, together with Sacred Tradition, a supreme rule of faith. And the preceding chapters of *Dei Verbum* have already taught that Scripture cannot stand apart from Tradition and the Magisterium. Therefore a Protestant reading of section 21 is impossible without ignoring the document's own teaching.

The Catholic principle remains: Scripture. Tradition. Magisterium. Not three competing revelations. Not three unrelated authorities. But the one deposit of faith entrusted by Christ to His Church.

Then Why is the Language So Strong?

Because Scripture deserves extraordinarily strong language.

Catholics should never answer Protestant errors by becoming practically indifferent to the Bible. The Bible is inspired by God. The Holy Ghost speaks through it. The Church is nourished by it. The liturgy is filled with it. Doctrine is illuminated by it. Prayer is formed by it. Saints are nourished by it. The preaching of the Church must be saturated with it.

If Catholics do not know Scripture, something is wrong. If Catholics preaching rarely opens Scripture, something is wrong. If Catholic families possess a Bible but never read it, something is wrong. If Catholics imagine Scripture belongs principally to Protestants, something has gone terribly wrong.

The answer to *sola Scriptura* is not less Scripture. The answer is Scripture restored to its proper home.

Sacred Scripture and the Catholic Church

“Just as She Venerates the Body of the Lord”

Here we must proceed carefully. Taken in isolation, the wording can sound as though the Bible and the Eucharist receive the same kind of veneration. That would be incorrect. The Holy Eucharist possesses an absolutely unique reality. After consecration, Jesus Christ is truly, really and substantially present. The Eucharist is not merely a sacred sign directing our thoughts toward an absent Christ. Christ Himself is present.

Therefore Eucharist adoration belongs to the Eucharistic Lord in a manner that cannot simply be transferred to Scripture. But section 21 must not be interpreted that way.

The paragraph speaks about the Church being nourished from both the table of God's Word and the table of Christ's Body. The point is that the Church receives divine nourishment through both.

Later Benedict XVI's clarification becomes extremely useful.

Profound reverence toward both does not mean identical worship of both. That distinction should be stated explicitly whenever this passage is taught.

Could the Wording Have Been Clearer?

Yes.

Given the confusion that later developed concerning modes of Christ's presence, the Council might have protected the distinction more explicitly. It could have said that Scripture is venerated as God's inspired Word while the Blessed Sacrament is adored because Christ Himself is substantially present under the Eucharistic species. That would have prevented an easy flattening of the two realities.

Again, this does not mean section 21 denies the Real Presence. It does not. The question is one of precision and consequence. When a Council deliberately introduces a strong parallel between Scripture and Eucharist, theological precision matters.

Did This Contribute to a Diminished Understanding of the Eucharist?

We should be cautious here. It would be historically irresponsible to draw a straight line: *Dei Verbum* 21 = loss of Eucharistic faith. Many other factors were involved in postconciliar liturgical and catechetical changes. But a broader shift in emphasis certainly occurred in many places.

Catholics increasingly heard language about two tables. The Liturgy of the Word received greater emphasis. Scriptural readings expanded. Biblical preaching was encouraged. None of those things is intrinsically wrong. They can be genuinely good. But if the distinction between the modes of Christ's presence was poorly taught, Catholics could gradually receive the impression that Christ is present in essentially the same way in the readings, the assembly, the priest and the consecrated Host. That would be a serious distortion.

Catholic theology recognizes different modes of Christ's presence. But the Eucharistic Presence is unique. Christ is substantially present in the Blessed Sacrament. No renewal of Scripture should ever obscure that truth. Indeed, authentic biblical renewal should deepen Eucharistic faith. John 6 should lead us there. The Last Supper should lead us there. Emmaus should lead us there. St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians should lead us there.

Scripture and Eucharist do not compete. Scripture leads us to the Eucharistic Christ.

“Easy Access” to Scripture

Section 22's declaration that the faithful should have easy access to Scripture became one of the characteristic principles of postconciliar Catholic life. In itself, this is good. Catholics should know the Bible. Catholics should read the Gospels. Catholics should know the Psalms. Catholics should know Genesis, Exodus, the Prophets, the Wisdom books, Acts, St. Paul and the Apocalypse. Catholic children should grow up hearing Scripture. Catholic homilies should contain Scripture. Catholic prayer should be scriptural. But there is a danger in forgetting why the Church historically exercised caution.

The Church was not afraid of God's Word. She was afraid of God's Word being distorted. The Protestant Reformation demonstrated dramatically what happens when Scripture is separated from an authoritative Church.

The same Bible was appealed to for contradictory doctrine. Baptism. The Eucharist. Justification. Church government. Predestination. Divorce. Sacraments. Holy Orders. Tradition. Different interpreters claimed Scripture for mutually incompatible conclusions. Therefore Catholic caution about translations and interpretation was not necessarily hostility to Scripture. It was often recognition of a fundamental truth: A Bible without an authoritative interpreter does not produce doctrinal unity.

Did Vatican II Protestantize Catholicism Here?

Not in the text itself. Section 22 does not teach private interpretation. It does not teach *sola Scriptura*. It does not remove ecclesiastical authority. It specifically places translations under the authority and maternal care of the Church. Therefore we must not accuse the paragraph of teaching Protestant doctrine. But something subtler deserves investigation.

The postconciliar period often encouraged individual Bible reading without equally strong catechesis concerning the Church's authority to interpret Scripture. The first half of the message could be heard loudly: Read the Bible. The second half could become quieter: Read it with Sacred Tradition and under the teaching authority Christ gave His Church.

When the second disappears, a Catholic practice can gradually acquire a Protestant mentality even though the Council itself did not formally teach Protestantism. That is precisely the kind of distinction our investigation requires.

What About Modern Translations?

Section 22 requires translations to be suitable and correct. Those words should not be overlooked. Accessibility is not the only criterion. Accuracy matters. Theological precision matters. Fidelity to the inspired text matters. Continuity with the Church's received language matters.

Translation is never completely neutral. A translator must choose words. Those choices can illuminate doctrine. They can also obscure it. Therefore Catholics should resist the assumption that whatever translation is newest must necessarily be best. Nor should we imagine that every older translation is therefore perfect.

The proper question is: **Does this translation faithfully communicate the sacred text in harmony with Catholic faith?**

What About the Vulgate?

It is noteworthy that section 22 explicitly says the Church has always held the Vulgate in honor. The Council therefore does not discard the Vulgate. At the same time, it encourages translations especially from the original texts. Again we see a change of emphasis without a necessary doctrinal contradiction.

The danger arises when renewed attention to Hebrew and Greek becomes contempt for the Latin biblical tradition through which Western Catholic theology, liturgy and spirituality developed for centuries. The Vulgate belongs to the patrimony of the Western Church. It should not be treated as an embarrassing relic of a precritical age.

Cooperation with “Separated Brethren”

Section 22 also permits, under appropriate circumstances and with ecclesiastical approval, translations produced in cooperation with separated Christians. This is another place where Vatican II’s ecumenical orientation becomes visible.

Can Catholics cooperate with non-Catholic Christians in producing an accurate translation? In principle, yes. Language can be studied together. Manuscripts can be examined together. Grammar does not become Protestant because a Protestant scholar understands Greek. But theological presuppositions matter.

A Protestant translator and a Catholic translator may approach passages concerning justification, Tradition, ecclesiastical authority, the Eucharist or Mary with very different theological assumptions. Therefore the Council’s safeguard matters: **the approval of Church authority.**

Ecumenical cooperation cannot mean doctrinal indifference. Unity cannot be purchased by making disputed passages vague enough for everyone to accept.

Section 23 and the Fathers

One of the most important statements in section 23 may also be one of the easiest to overlook. The Council encourages the study of the Fathers of both East and West. This is profoundly important. A truly Catholic biblical renewal should not merely send us forward into modern scholarship; it should also send us backward into the ancient Church.

St. Augustine. St. Jerome. St. John Chrysostom. St. Ambrose. St. Gregory the Great. St. Cyril. St. Athanasius. St. Irenaeus.

The Fathers read Scripture within the Faith of the Church. They read Christologically. They saw the unity of the Testaments. They recognized typology. They saw Scripture fulfilled in Christ, the sacraments and the Church.

If postconciliar biblical renewal had been equally a patristic renewal, many modern distortions might have been resisted more effectively.

Section 23 and the Sacred Liturgy

The Council also encourages study of the ancient liturgies. That is significant because the Church interpreted Scripture liturgically long before modern universities existed. The ancient liturgy tells us how the Church understood biblical passages.

What texts were read at Easter?

What texts accompanied Baptism?

Which Psalms were associated with Christ?

Which Old Testament events were understood as types of the sacraments?

The liturgy is therefore not merely something biblical scholars explain. It is itself a witness to the Church's traditional interpretation of Scripture. This matters because a modern exegete can construct a theory in an office. But the Church may have prayed a passage according to a particular Christological meaning for fifteen centuries. That liturgical witness cannot simply be dismissed.

“Under the Watchful Care of the Sacred Teaching Office”

These may be the most important words in section 23 for our investigation. They establish hierarchy. The Magisterium does not receive its authority from biblical scholars. Biblical scholars do not possess jurisdiction over the deposit of Faith. Expertise is real. Authority is also real.

A scholar may know Akkadian better than a bishop. He may know textual criticism better. He may know first-century archaeology better. He may know every manuscript variant in a particular passage. That expertise deserves respect. But expertise does not give him authority to redefine the Faith.

The Magisterium possesses an authority scholars do not possess because Christ established the Church and entrusted the Apostolic office to her shepherds. The distinction became increasingly difficult in the modern Church. The theologian could become a media authority. The professor could become an alternative magisterium. “Scholars say” could become more persuasive to ordinary Catholics than: “The Church teaches.” And once that happens, something fundamental has shifted.

Did Vatican II Cause That?

Again, not simply. Section 23 explicitly says the opposite. It places exegetes under the watchful care of the teaching office. Therefore an autonomous scholarly magisterium cannot honestly claim section 23 as its justification. But the Council's strong encouragement of modern scholarship occurred at a historical moment when universities and professional experts already possessed enormous cultural prestige.

If ecclesiastical authority became hesitant while academic authority became confident, the balance could shift rapidly. The Council encouraged scholars. The postconciliar atmosphere sometimes treated the correction of scholars as repression. The Council encouraged investigation. The "spirit" could transform investigation into independence. The Council said under the watchful care of the Magisterium. The "spirit" could hear only: continue energetically. That is precisely how selective reception works.

Where Does the "Spirit of Vatican II" Appear?

Once again, perhaps not primarily through formal contradiction. It appears through selective emphasis. Accessibility without authority. Scholarship without Tradition. The historical method without the Fathers. Ecumenical cooperation without doctrinal vigilance.

The table of the Word without sufficient emphasis upon the unique sacrificial and substantial reality of the Eucharist. Renewal without inheritance. Expertise without obedience. The Council itself repeatedly includes safeguards. But if the safeguards become parenthetical while the innovations become programmatic, something different from the written Council emerges. That something can legitimately be investigated as the "spirit of Vatican II."

Could Sections 21-23 Have Been More Guarded?

Yes.

Section 21 could have distinguished more explicitly between reverence for Scripture and the worship due to Christ substantially present in the Eucharist.

Section 22 could have said more explicitly that increased access to Scripture must never encourage private interpretation detached from Tradition and the Magisterium. It could have more forcefully preserved the importance of the Church's traditional biblical language while encouraging translations from original texts.

Section 23 could have defined more concretely what “under the watchful care” of the Magisterium requires when scholarly conclusions conflict with received doctrine. It could have repeated more explicitly the dangers of rationalist and naturalist criticism already identified by earlier popes.

Would such wording have prevented every abuse? Certainly not. But clearer boundaries might have made later distortions more difficult to justify under the Council’s name.

But What is Beautiful Here?

Much. And fairness requires us to say so.

Section 21 gives us a magnificent vision of Scripture. The Father speaks to His children. Think about that. When we open Scripture reverently, we are not opening a dead archive. The Father speaks. The Holy Ghost speaks through prophets and Apostles. The Word strengthens faith. The Word nourishes souls. The Word gives spiritual life.

Section 22 reminds us that this treasure should not remain inaccessible.

And section 23 reminds scholars why scholarship exists. Not for novelty. Not for reputation. Not for academic fashion. Not for reconstructing Christianity according to the assumptions of the age. But so that ministers of God’s Word can nourish God’s people, enlighten their minds, strengthen their wills and set their hearts on fire with the love of God. That is a magnificent standard by which Catholic scholarship can be judged.

Does it produce faith? Does it illuminate truth? Does it strengthen the will? Does it lead to holiness? Does it increase love for God? Or does the Catholic leave the classroom less certain that Christ spoke, less certain that miracles occurred, less certain that Scripture is inspired, less certain that the Church can teach, and less certain that anything can really be known?

If scholarship repeatedly produces the latter fruit, something has gone wrong. Not because Catholics fear scholarship. But because Catholic scholarship is supposed to serve Truth.

SUMMARY

Sections 21-23 begin *Dei Verbum's* final chapter by placing Sacred Scripture at the heart of the Church's life.

Section 21 teaches that:

- The Church venerates Sacred Scripture.
- Scripture nourishes the faithful.
- Scripture and Tradition belong together.
- Scripture is inspired by God.
- The voice of the Holy Ghost resounds through it.
- The Church's preaching must be nourished by it.
- The Word strengthens faith.
- It feeds the soul.
- Through Scripture the heavenly Father speaks lovingly to His children.

But the strong comparison between Scripture and the Body of Christ requires an essential Catholic distinction. Scripture is truly God's inspired Word. The Holy Eucharist is Jesus Christ substantially present – Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. The two belong together. They are not identical.

Section 22 teaches that the faithful should have ready access to Scripture. The Church should provide suitable and accurate translations. Original biblical languages may and should be consulted. The Vulgate retains its place of honor. And cooperation with separated Christians may occur when ecclesiastical authority approves. Again, the Catholic principle is not: Bible without Church. It is: Bible within Church.

Section 23 encourages biblical scholarship. But it simultaneously gives that scholarship boundaries. Exegetes should study Scripture. They should study the Fathers. They should study the sacred liturgies. They should employ appropriate scholarly methods. But they should work: under the watchful care of the teaching office and according to the mind of the Church.

Here once again our investigation of the "spirit of Vatican II" becomes important. The Council did not formally teach *sola Scriptura*. It did not teach private interpretation. It did not place biblical scholars above the Magisterium. It did not deny the unique reality of the Eucharistic Presence. It did not tell Catholics to abandon the Fathers. Indeed, its text contains safeguards against all of these things.

But after the Council, the newer emphases could sometimes become separated from those safeguards. Accessibility could become individualism. Ecumenism could become doctrinal vagueness. Scholarship could become autonomy. Historical criticism could become skepticism. The table of the Word could be emphasized without sufficient catechesis concerning the incomparable mystery of the altar.

And academic consensus could begin functioning as a practical authority alongside – or even above – the Church’s teaching office.

Once again, therefore, we must distinguish:

- What Vatican II actually taught.
- What Vatican II emphasized differently.
- What Vatican II left insufficiently guarded.
- What later interpreters claimed Vatican II authorized.
- And what the perennial Catholic Faith requires us to hold.

That distinction prevents two opposite errors. We need not pretend everything after Vatican II came directly from Vatican II. But neither must we refuse to ask whether changes of language, emphasis and method helped create the environment in which the postconciliar revolution occurred.

The truth requires something more difficult. We must read carefully. Compare honestly. Preserve what is Catholic. Identify what is ambiguous. Reject what contradicts the Faith. And receive the Word of God as the Church has always received it: **within the living Faith of the Catholic Church.**

VI. REFLECT

- 1. When I open Sacred Scripture, do I really believe that through these inspired words my heavenly Father desires to speak to me?**
- 2. Have I ever treated the Bible as something primarily Protestant rather than recognizing it as a treasure entrusted by God to the Catholic Church?**
- 3. Do I understand the profound relationship between Sacred Scripture and the Holy Eucharist while also preserving the essential distinction between reverence for God’s inspired Word and adoration of Christ substantially present in the Blessed Sacrament?**

4. When I hear the phrase “the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist,” do I remember that these realities belong together without pretending that Christ is present in precisely the same manner in each?
5. Do I read Scripture within Sacred Tradition and under the teaching authority of the Church, or have I unconsciously adopted the modern assumption that my private interpretation should be final?
6. When a biblical scholar proposes something contrary to the perennial Faith of the Church, which authority do I instinctively trust?
7. Have I learned to distinguish genuine biblical scholarship from methods built upon assumptions that exclude supernatural Revelation?
8. Do I know the Scriptures well enough to recognize how deeply Catholic doctrine, worship and sacramental life arise from them?
9. Have I allowed familiarity with the Bible to make its words ordinary, forgetting that these are words inspired by the Holy Ghost?
10. Above all, when the Father speaks through Scripture, am I willing not merely to understand His Word – but to allow His Word to change me?

VII. DEEPER THOUGHTS TO CONCLUDE THIS DAY

There is something almost overwhelming in one sentence from section 21.

In the sacred books, **the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them.**

Perhaps we should remain there for a moment. The Father speaks. Not merely to scholars. Not merely to priests. Not merely to theologians. To His children. To us.

The God who said, “Let there be light,” speaks. The God who called Abraham speaks. The God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush speaks. The God who thundered from Sinai speaks. The God who spoke through Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel speaks. The God who sent Gabriel to Nazareth speaks.

And finally the Word Himself became flesh. He walked among us. He spoke with a human voice. He called fishermen. He forgave sinners. He rebuked Pharisees. He comforted the brokenhearted. He raised the dead.

He said:

- “Come to me.”

- “Follow me.”
- “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”
- “This is my body.”
- “He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath everlasting life.”
- “Behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world.”

And those words did not disappear into history. The Holy Ghost inspired men to write. The Church received those writings. She guarded them. She copied them. She proclaimed them. She carried them across empires. Monks bent over manuscripts by candlelight. Missionaries carried the Gospel across oceans. Martyrs died confessing the truths contained within it. Priests proclaimed it at altars. Saints memorized it. Doctors of the Church spent lifetimes penetrating its mysteries. Generation after generation received the same Word. And now it reaches us.

There is something almost tragic about possessing Scripture so easily and hearing it so little. A Bible can sit three feet away from us while we spend hours absorbing the words of the world.

We know what commentators say. We know what celebrities say. We know what politicians say. We know what strangers on the internet say. But do we know what God says?

Perhaps this is one place where the authentic desire of Chapter Six should convict traditional Catholics as much as anyone else. It is not enough to defend Tradition while rarely reading Scripture. It is not enough to defend the Latin Mass while failing to recognize how saturated that Mass is with Scripture. It is not enough to reject Protestant *sola Scriptura* if our practical answer becomes **almost no Scriptura**.

The Catholic answer is richer. Scripture belongs to us. Tradition belongs to us. The Fathers belong to us. The ancient liturgy belongs to us. The Vulgate belongs to us. The Gospels belong to us. The Psalms belong to us. St. Paul belongs to us. The Apocalypse belongs to us. Not because we possess God’s Word as something under our control. But because God entrusted it to His Church. And yet Scripture does not end with Scripture.

The Word points beyond ink. Beyond paper. Beyond scholarship. Beyond the lectern. The eternal Word became flesh. And this is where the relationship between Scripture and Eucharist becomes breathtaking.

At Emmaus Christ opened the Scriptures. The disciples listened. Their hearts burned. But then He took bread. Blessed it. Broke it. And their eyes were opened. There is the Catholic pattern. Word. Sacrifice. Communion.

The Scripture prepares us to recognize Christ. The Eucharistic Christ gives Himself to us. And perhaps this is why we must be so careful when speaking of the two tables. We must never diminish the Word. But neither can we flatten the altar. The Bible is inspired. The Eucharist is Jesus. The Bible contains the written Word of God. The Eucharist contains, under sacramental appearances, the Incarnate Word Himself. We listen to Scripture with reverence. We kneel before the Eucharistic Lord in adoration. And both draw us toward the same Jesus Christ.

This is what genuine Catholic biblical renewal should produce. Not Catholics who become less Catholic because they read the Bible. Catholics who become more Catholic because they finally discover how Catholic the Bible is.

They should discover:

- The Mass.
- The priesthood.
- Sacrifice.
- Confession.
- Baptism.
- Tradition.
- Authority
- The Church.
- The communion of saints.
- Our Blessed Mother.
- The necessity of grace.
- The necessity of obedience.
- The necessity of persevering to the end.
- And above everything else: **Jesus Christ.**

This is also why biblical scholarship must remain humble. The scholar stands before something he did not create. He can study manuscripts. He can examine languages. He can investigate history. He can compare texts. He can illuminate customs. All of that can serve the Church beautifully. But eventually he must remember: **This is God's Word.**

The scholar does not sit in judgment over God. The Word judges him. And perhaps this is where much of modern biblical scholarship went wrong. It forgot which one was on trial. Man placed the Scripture beneath the microscope. He separated sources. Reconstructed communities. Proposed layers. Questioned authorship. Reclassified miracles. Explained prophecy. Demythologized narratives. And sometimes, after all the investigation, there was very little left that God was actually permitted to have done.

But Hebrews tells us something different. The Word of God is alive. The Word penetrates. The Word divides. The Word judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart. We do not master it. It masters us.

And so perhaps section 21 gives us exactly the disposition with which we should approach the final chapter of *Dei Verbum*. Not suspicion. Not naivete. Not academic arrogance. Not sentimentalism.

Reverence.

We receive Scripture from the Church. We read it with the Fathers. We hear it in the liturgy. We understand it within Tradition. We submit its interpretation to the Magisterium. We allow genuine scholarship to illuminate it. We reject scholarship that begins by denying what God can do. And then we allow the Father to speak.

Because behind all the debates about translations, manuscripts, literary forms, historical methods, Vatican II and the “spirit of Vatican II,” there remains something astonishingly simple:

GOD HAS SPOKEN.

His Word has been entrusted to His Church. And He still speaks through it. The question at the end of the day is therefore not merely:

What do I think about section 21?

Or: Was section 22 sufficiently guarded?

Or: What happened to Catholic exegesis after section 23?

Those questions matter. We should ask them. We should not be afraid of them. But eventually there is another question. A more personal one. When the heavenly Father comes lovingly to meet His child in the pages of Sacred Scripture – **will His child listen?**