The Biblical Commission’s Instruction,  
*On the Historical Truth of the Gospels*  
(*Sancta Mater Ecclesia*)  

And Present Magisterial Attitudes  
Toward Biblical Exegesis

In the history of the Magisterium’s relationship with modern critical biblical exegesis, the dogmatic implications of the historical results of biblical criticism, particularly in regard to the Gospels, stands out as one of the most important and contentious issues. Examination of magisterial teachings, beginning with the 1893 encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, reveals a fascinating and cyclical history of struggle, compromise and partial acceptance. An important but now little-studied milestone in this history is *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1964 Instruction on the historical nature of the Gospels. This article traces the history of the Magisterium’s responses to the historical results of biblical criticism of the Gospels, with particular emphasis on the immediate events surrounding the promulgation of *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, stressing throughout the continued significance of the Instruction in the on-going discussion in the Church over the validity of modern exegesis for historical study of the Gospels. A recent, but essential contribution to this discussion is

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2 In preparing this study, the following archives were consulted: Archivio Secreto Vaticano, Archivum Pontificii Instituti Biblici Romae, and the Archief Abdij van Tongerlo, which houses the papers of the Rev. Benjamin Wambacq, O.Praem., Secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (= PBC) during Vatican II. Thanks are due to the Most Rev. Mons. Sergio Pagano, Prefect of the Vatican Secret Archives, Rev. Maurice Gilbert, S.J., former rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute (= PBI), Abbot General Thomas Handgrätinger, O.Praem., and Prior Stephen Mark Boyle, O. Praem., of the Norbertine Generalate in Rome, Abbot Jeroen de Cuyper, O.Praem. and Archivist Rev. Emiel Lauwers, O.Praem., of Tongerlo Abbey, and Connie Hackl Meulemans, St. Norbert College.
3 O. ARTUS, «Dei Verbum: L’exégèse catholique entre critique historique et renouveau des sciences bibliques», *Gregorianum* 86 (2005) 76-91 explores the related, but distinct, question
the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* which, when placed in this historical context, appears to represent a diminishment in magisterial approval of historical-critical exegesis.

I. PRECONCILIAR MAGISTERIAL TEACHING FROM LEO XIII TO PIUS XI

By the beginning of the 20th century, the official attitude of the Church toward critical biblical scholarship may be described as something between suspicion and hostility. The papacy was still reeling from the political upheaval of 1870 in Italy, itself but one of many such revolutionary political developments in Europe. The intellectual currents fuelling these upheavals, both those that espoused a doctrine of progress as well as those that called for a return to origins, viewed the Church as an impediment to necessary changes in the political, social and economic life of Europe. In the relatively new academic discipline of biblical studies, the intellectual trends of the 19th century led to a view of the biblical text itself as a product of a developing tradition. This approach was often combined with a privileging of the earliest layers of that tradition and the dismissal of the later layers as the product of rigid, institutional religion. The Gospels were understood to be collections of theological and, in some instances, mythological accretions onto the life of Jesus. The task of the exegete was at once both historical and literary — to distinguish and strip away these later, inferior, additions of the early Church in order to arrive at the historical bedrock of Jesus of Nazareth.

Faced with what it saw as an all-out assault on its legitimacy, and scarred by the loss of temporal power, the Roman hierarchy felt itself — perhaps not without reason — to be in great danger. It responded by taking refuge in secure, eternal verities dogmatically expressed. Recourse to atemporal truths provided a rebuke to the historicism that dominated a great deal of contemporary European

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6 Cf. the condemnation in the *Syllabus of Errors* (*Enchiridion Biblicum*, n. 75).

intellectual life, and by the end of the 19th century, neo-Thomism had been granted a privileged place in Catholic theology, with truths often couched in ironclad, syllogistic form. Regarding the Bible, doctrinal assertions were expressed in three closely related axioms: the Bible was inspired; hence, it was inerrant; therefore, it had to be completely historical. The on-going presence of this neo-Thomistic understanding of inspiration, inerrancy and historicity throughout much of the 20th century was to be the major obstacle to the Church’s ability to incorporate modern biblical exegesis into its theology.

Pope Leo XIII’s 1893 encyclical Providentissimus Deus, marked the first significant attempt by the Church to deal with modern exegesis. The encyclical is itself a complex document, seeking a balance between openness and prudence. On the one hand, biblical scholars are encouraged to engage in philological study of the sacred texts in their original languages, and given permission to go beyond patristic interpretation when it was clear that the Fathers’ reading of a text was based upon their pre-scientific view of the world. At the same time the encyclical also mandates adherence to patristic exegesis in theological matters and affirms a complete inerrancy of the biblical text. In its attempt to hold both openness to new scholarly insights and fidelity to traditional interpretations in creative tension with each other, Providentissimus Deus established the terms for the debate about the place of modern exegesis in the Church that continues to this day.

In 1902, Leo XIII established the PBC with the charge to keep abreast of exegetical developments and to remain vigilant against the spread of errors in Catholic scholarship. Such magisterial oversight of exegesis soon resulted in direct intervention as part of the anti-Modernist measures of Pius X. Given the emphasis on historical development in Modernist thought, it should come as no surprise that certain exegetical positions merited papal opprobrium. In the 1907 encyclical, Pascendi dominici gregis, Pius X explicitly condemns those exegetical opinions that see the Gospels as expressions of the early church’s faith, that argue for theological development from the time of Jesus until the time of the Gospels’ composition, or that deny actual authorship of the Gospels to the traditional authors. That same year, in Lamentabili, the Holy Office listed among Modernist errors the claims that some of the words or deeds attributed to Jesus in the Gospels were theological rather than historical, and that John the Evangelist was not a follower of Jesus but a

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8 J. Prior, The Historical Critical Method (cf. nt. 5), 96.
9 Enchiridion Biblicum, nn. 81-134.
Christian who lived at the end of the first century. Although new, the PBC had not been idle during this time either, issuing fourteen responsa to disputed exegetical questions between 1905 and 1915. In these responsa, the PBC made clear that the Scriptures must always be affirmed as expressing objectively true history, unless it can be shown that such was not the intention of the author. Consequently, it was stated that the Apostle John was the sole author of the Fourth Gospel; that the discourses of Jesus in that Gospel were uttered by Jesus; that Matthew’s Gospel is the earliest of the canonical Gospels; that Matthew did not re-arrange or adapt his material for theological purposes, and that the Synoptic Gospels were composed before the destruction of Jerusalem. These responsa would cast a long shadow over the Church’s approach to exegesis for the next several decades, even while the PBC itself became more amenable to modern exegesis. Further evidence of the Church’s negative attitude toward critical exegesis during this period can be found in the various sets of examination topics from the Gregorian University. Students are asked to defend theses supporting the Bible’s complete inerrancy, affirming traditional authorship and complete historicity of the four canonical gospels, and refuting the Two-Source Hypothesis. The root problem, namely, the tension between critical exegesis and dogmatic theology that Leo XIII had tried to reconcile in his encyclical, was in the anti-Modernist period tilted significantly in favour of the dogmatic approach.

Steps also were taken to train new scholars in methods deemed doctrinally acceptable. In 1909, Pius X established the Pontifical Biblical Institute as a centre where Catholic scholars might both be trained in academically rigorous philology and equipped to resist the errors of Modernism. Later Pius XI, expressing concern for the well-being of the faithful in the face of rationalist attacks on the Bible, and stressing the need for teachers of the Bible never to deviate from Church teaching, issued a motu proprio in 1924 requiring anyone expecting to teach biblical studies in seminary to obtain his degree in Rome either from the PBC or the PBI. However, given the inherent tensions between...
ween the use of modern scholarly methods to support the interpretive results of the pre-modern period, it was inevitable that conflict would arise between the faculty of the PBI and other voices in the Roman church, both in the universities and the curia, that came to see the PBI as espousing opinions contrary to magisterial teaching. Crucial to gaining papal support for the work of the PBI was its rector, Augustin Bea, who arranged for Pius XI to preside over the thesis defences of two of the Institute’s doctoral students, which provided opportunities for the Pope to offer effusive praise of the PBI and its work.18

II. PIUS XII TO VATICAN II

While the significance of Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical, *Divino afflante spiritu*, is well-known, it is important to remember that the papal text was precipitated in 1941 by a pseudonymously published attack on historical-critical exegesis. The PBC responded with a statement, signed by Cardinal President Eugène Tisserant and Secretary Jacques Vosté, which argued vigorously that biblical exegesis is not only a legitimate practice in the Church, but absolutely necessary in order to avoid misinterpreting the Bible. This is because only historical-critical exegesis can determine the author’s intent, which the letter equates with the literal sense of the text. Here, the tension between traditional dogmatic assertions and biblical exegesis is bridged by the claim that historical-critical exegesis is the best means to determine the intent of the biblical author, understood to be working under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, theology and exegesis are not antagonists, but partners in the common task of interpreting the word of God for the good of the Church. However, while this claim might be made in the abstract, tensions were bound to resurface whenever exegetical results contradicted long-accepted theological claims. Aware of the on-going potential for conflict, the PBC’s letter mentions that, at times, the Magisterium allows for revision of long-held opinions.

As with the defence of the PBI during the last years of Pius XI’s pontificate, Bea played an important role. He, along with Vosté and Lucien Cerfaux, a PBI

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19 *Enchiridion Biblicum*, nn. 538-569.

alumnus who would go on to be one of the authors of Sancta Mater Ecclesia, worked on Divino afflante spiritu. It is therefore no surprise that the encyclical reiterates the claim from the PBC statement that exegesis is necessary for discovering the literal meaning of the biblical text, equated with the biblical author’s intent. Where the encyclical breaks new ground is in its emphasis on the importance of determining the various literary genres of the Bible in order to avoid misinterpreting the text’s message. The Pope cautiously acknowledges that, among the genres used by the biblical authors were those that expressed truths in hyperbolic or other non-literal ways, hence allowing that some biblical narratives, particularly the early chapters of Genesis, may not recount historical events. This important allowance is further developed in the 1948 PBC letter to Cardinal Emmanuel Suhrad, which echoed Divino afflante spiritu in encouraging exegesis to study historical questions with complete freedom, and, specifically in regard to the narratives of Genesis 1-11, understood biblical truths to be expressed in figurative language.

Without diminishing the significance of Divino afflante spiritu, in particular its tone of support and encouragement for exegesis, it is important to stress that the encyclical’s ironic stance toward critical exegesis is limited to the OT, particularly the early chapters of Genesis. However, in the Pope’s text could one construe papal approval for the critical study of the Gospels as it was being practiced by exeges at the time. Indeed, even this new openness to exegesis of Genesis would later be qualified by Pius XII’s 1950 encyclical, Humani Generis, which forbade exeges from limiting inspiration only to the moral or religious truths of these texts or from claiming that a biblical text was inferior to an extra-biblical counterpart in any way. Divino afflante spiritu and Humani generis must be looked at in tandem, for in many ways they are in fact two very different magisterial texts on the same issue. Whereas the great tensions between doctrinal tradition and the results of modern exegesis had been placed side by side throughout Leo XIII’s encyclical on biblical studies, they were placed to the fore in the juxtaposition of these two encyclicals of Pius XII. In the years leading up to Vatican II, antagonists in the dispute over the validity of critical exegesis would look to one or the other of these encyclicals for support.

The foregoing discussion shows that the PBC had changed in outlook since its foundation as a bulwark to protect the Church from the errors of modern exegesis. Further indication of this is a 1955 article by Athanasius Miller and Arduin Kleinhans, the PBC Secretary and Under-Secretary, respectively, regarding the recently published second edition of the Enchiridion Biblicum.
which, notably, contained the *responsa* of the PBC from the pontificate of Pius X, alongside Pius XII’s encyclical *Divino afflante spiritu* and the PBC’s letter to Cardinal Suhard. In an attempt to help readers of the *Enchiridion* negotiate the apparent contradictions in magisterial teaching, Miller and Kleinhans argue that those early *responsa* must be placed in their historical context and not be seen as perpetually valid. Given the extreme nature of rationalist attacks on the Bible during the reign of Pius X, it was necessary for the Church to mount a vigorous defence, but from the authors’ standpoint in 1955, such measures almost laughable. The *Enchiridion* thus functions as a witness to the apologetic efforts of the Magisterium throughout history to safeguard the truths of the faith. Where decrees of the PBC do not touch upon matters of faith or morals, Miller and Kleinhans state, the exegete is to work «in aller Freiheit», provided his results do not contradict the constant teaching of the Church. The article caused a stir in Rome, with Giuseppe Pizzardo, Cardinal Prefect of the Holy Office, demanding a public refutation by the PBC. For Pizzardo and others in the Curia, the article was proof that the more open approach to exegesis in the years since Pius XII’s encyclical had allowed Modernism to infiltrate the Church, and it was therefore necessary to return to the zeal and vigilance of Pius X’s pontificate. Pizzardo was vigorously opposed by the PBC’s Cardinal President Tisserant, who replied strongly that the PBC would not issue a retraction. The significance of this incident cannot be overlooked. Many of the PBC’s *responsa* dealt with historical issues in the Gospels. Now, over a decade after *Divino afflante spiritu* allowed for a more critical historical understanding of Old Testament texts, the PBC itself, by contextualizing the anti-Modernist *responsa*, cautiously and indirectly extended that exegetical license to the study of the Gospels. This was not lost on those Roman prelates and academics for whom any rapprochement with historical-critical exegesis was a compromise of the essentials of the faith, and not long afterward the debate resurfaced. In early 1961, Monsignor Antonino Romeo, an assessor for the Holy Office, published a very long article alleging that some of the PBI faculty embraced the opinions condemned by the Magisterium during the anti-Modernist period. In direct conflict with Miller and Kleinhans, Romeo asserted that appeal to *Divino afflante spiritu* is insufficient justification for ignoring the earlier papal pronouncements and *responsa* of the PBC. PBI rector Ernest Vogt published a rebuttal, and the

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25 A. Miller «Das neue biblische Handbuch» (cf. nt. 24), 49-50.


PBC became involved as well, issuing a statement unanimously affirming its support of the PBI\textsuperscript{28}. However, four months later, and with specific reference to \textit{Humani Generis}, the Holy Office issued a \textit{monitum} which noted the prevalence of opinions that cast into doubt «germanam veritatem historicam et obiectivam Scripturae Sacrae non modo Veteris Testamentis [...] verum et Novi, etiam quoad dicta et facta Christi Iesu». It warned biblical scholars to exercise prudence when speaking or writing about the life of Jesus, keeping ever in mind both patristic and magisterial teaching on this subject\textsuperscript{29}.

Thus, on the eve of the Council, there was still uncertainty among bishops and exeges concerning exactly how the directives and encouragements of Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical were to be followed. Underlying this was the lingering unease regarding biblical scholarship’s relationship to doctrine. For example, the pre-conciliar \textit{votum} submitted by the Holy Office, with specific mention being made of the historicity of the Gospels, expressed concern that Catholic exeges were abusing the plain sense of \textit{Divino afflante spiritu} in order to practice Modernist biblical criticism. By contrast, the PBI’s \textit{votum} urged that the Council not make definitive pronouncements on questions which were still open, but rather asked that it present a multiplicity of positions that could exist in the Church\textsuperscript{30}. As the list of issues condensed from all of the submitted \textit{vota} of the bishops clearly illustrates, the controversies over modern critical exegesis which began during the reign of Leo XIII and had resurfaced periodically ever since were still of prime concern. With the exception of the question regarding the use of different biblical translations, every one of the issues dealing with the Bible was connected in some way to the question of modern biblical exegesis and its relation to dogma\textsuperscript{31}. Thus, as the Theological Commission undertook its

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\textsuperscript{28} Pope John XXIII expressed «dis gust» at Romeo’s article, as noted in the diary of Sebastien Tromp, former faculty member at the Gregorian who was by this time secretary of the Theological Commission, and later secretary of the Doctrinal Commission throughout the Council. For 6 February 1961, he notes: «[A]udio Papam telephonice communicasse cum Rectore “Civilità Cattolica” et per eum cum Rectore Instituti Bibliici, Pontificem legisse articulum Prof. Romeo in “Divinitas” pur non entrando nel merito della causa, aveva letto con dispiacere e disgusto l’articolo», A. VON TEUFFENBACH, ed., \textit{Konzilstagebuch mit Erläuterungen und Akten aus des Arbeit der Theologischen Kommission}, I-II, Rome 2006, I/1, 167.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Enchiridion Bibliicum}, n. 634; while the \textit{monitum} boasts that it was published «consentientibus etiam Em.mis Patribus Pontificiae Commissionis Biblicae» this refers only to the Cardinal members of the PBC, and not to any of the exeges who were the consultors; cf. J. FITZMYER, «A Recent Roman Scriptural Controversy» (cf. nt. 27), 442-444.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Acta et Documenta Concilii oecumeticii Vaticanii II} apparando (Antepraeparatoria), Vatican City 1960-61, III, 328-33, IV, 123-136.

task to draft a document on the Bible, it worked in the long shadows cast by the anti-Modernist controversies of fifty years before.

The draft of the schema, De fontibus revelationis, was chiefly the work of the Jesuit Sebastien Tromp, a former Gregorian professor, and Salvatore Garofalo, a PBC member, along with minor input by other Theological Commission members32. Among this latter group, two other PBC members: Lucien Cerfaux and Alexander Kerrigan, along with PBI rector Vogt attempted to introduce nuance and moderation into the draft’s statements regarding the role of exegetes and the understanding of revelation, inspiration and inerrancy. For example, the September 1960 draft of De fontibus, while acknowledging the historicity of the Gospels, also admits that not all of the events in the Gospels were recorded in the order in which they occurred. The preaching of the early Church had influenced the Gospels: «modus autem liberior agendi hagiographorum in narrandis et ordinandis factis vel verbis, non afficit rerum historicitatem [...] nec illa fidelitas minuitur, quomodocumque praedicatio Apostolica, vel fides Ecclesiae primaevae influXux habuerint in compositione Evangeliorum»33. Much of this nuanced input was nullified in the final editing by Tromp34, and the overall tone of the draft sent to the bishops in the summer of 1962 was one of negativity and suspicion toward modern exegeticis. In four brief paragraphs, De fontibus revelationis, stated that the traditional authors of the Gospels were indeed their actual authors; claimed that the Gospels fully handed down («sincere tradere») the history of Jesus’ words and deeds, argued that they should not be subject to the criteria of modern historiography, and «damnat errores, quibus denegatur vel extenuatur, quovis modo et quavis causa» the full historicity of the deeds and words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels35. The circulated draft met with opposition, not least from Bea, who urged for substantive revision. Tromp, incorporating only about half of all proposed changes, defended his decision———


33 Text in R. Burigana, La Bibbia nel Concilio (cf. nt. 26), 467.

34 Texts of successive drafts and discussion in K. Schelkens, Catholic Theology of Revelation (cf. nt. 31), 75-110, 169-219. In a letter to fellow Theological Commission member Gerard Philips, Cerfaux argues for the possibility that the early Christian community exerted some influence on the Gospels (ibid., 96).

35 Text of the draft in H. Sauer, Erfahrung und Glaube (cf. nt. 32), 649-651. During the editorial stage, there was debate in the Theological Commission as to whether the text ought to use «reprobare» or «damnare» in its condemnation of those who denied the Gospels’ historicity. Voting on the choice resulted in a tie, which was broken by Cardinal Ottaviani, who opted for the stronger term, «damnare». R. Burigana, La Bibbia nel Concilio (cf. nt. 26), 73, n. 90. Cf. also J. Wicks, «Pieter Smulders and Dei Verbum: 1. A Consultation on the Eve of Vatican II», Gregorianum 82 (2001) 246-247.
to Bea with the assertion that Catholic exegetes did not enjoy scholarly freedom, but rather falsely claimed it on the basis of misinterpretation and abuse of *Divino afflante spiritu*.

### III. VATICAN II, «SANCTA MATER ECCLESIA» AND «DEI VERBUM»

_*De fontibus revelationis* was the second schema taken up by the Council, with discussion commencing on 14 November 1962. Many Council Fathers spoke against it, including Bea and Tisserant. Among the periti, Edward Schillebeeckx argued that the Gospels express both the words of Jesus and the mind of the early Christian community, while Karl Rahner pointed out the danger of condemning those who diminish in any way the historical nature of the Gospels, because to do so would stifle serious academic inquiry and lead to an intemperate use of historical-critical methods to attack the Gospels. Rahner also noted that the schema should not assert the historical truth of the identity of the evangelists, but merely state that this is what has been held in faith, although not definitively so. Exegetes were also actively working to alert the bishops about the problems with *De fontibus revelationis*. Barnabas Ahern gave a presentation to the American bishops on the literary character of the Gospels, during which he argued about the validity of modern exegesis with the apostolic nuncio to the United States. Although Cerfaux had taken part in the drafting of the schema, he was angered by the editorial violence done on the draft by Tromp, and therefore had enlisted two other Belgian...
exegetes, Jacques Dupont and fellow PCB member Beda Rigaux to draft an alternative text\textsuperscript{41}.

The November 1962 vote on De fontibus and subsequent intervention by John XXIII are well-known events in the history of Vatican II, and have taken on almost legendary proportions\textsuperscript{42}. Noteworthy are two letters to the Pope from prelates unhappy with the removal of the schema. In one, an Italian bishop argued that modern biblical criticism was essentially rationalist and, hence, a revival of Modernism\textsuperscript{43}. Another letter, signed by nineteen cardinals, expressed concern over publications by Catholic scholars which seemed to impugn the historical truth of the Gospels\textsuperscript{44}.

The historical picture surrounding the origins of the PBC’s Instruction on the Gospels is unclear, but this much may be reconstructed\textsuperscript{45}. As early as the spring of 1962, John XXIII wanted the PCB to be more involved in the debates over historical-critical exegesis. Indeed, he wrote the Cardinal Secretary of State on 21 May threatening to dissolve the PCB and reconstitute it with new members if they did not do so\textsuperscript{46}. While not acting on his threat, John XXIII did appoint new members to the PCB in the summer of 1962, and promoted Wambacq — who had defended his PBI thesis before Pius XI — to Secretary. At about the same time the Pope asked the PCB to prepare an Instruction that addressed the critical points of contention regarding the Bible in the life of the Church. In a September 1963 account of the removal of Lyonnet and Zerwick from their teaching posts at the PBI, Vogt recollected that, in May 1962, this matter was to be referred to the PCB, but the Commission did not take it up because it was at that time obliged to produce a document on the role of biblical exegesis in Catholic theology\textsuperscript{47}. Confirming Vogt’s statement is a PCB meeting agenda for June 1962 that includes time for discussion of an Instruction, but with no further details\textsuperscript{48}. In March 1963, PCB member Rigaux mentioned to Dupont that the PCB was working on a document dealing with the historicity of the Gospels. Any work on the Instruction done during this time would have been suspended with the death of John XXIII in June 1963, but Paul VI must have authorized it to continue, because in February 1964, Wambacq sent a draft of the Instruction to the Cardinal members of the PCB, with Bea presiding over formal discussion of

\textsuperscript{41} K. SCHELKENS, Catholic Theology of Revelation (cf. nt. 31), 97-103, 255-263.
\textsuperscript{42} E.g., G. RUGGIERI, «The First Doctrinal Clash» (cf. nt. 39), 233.
\textsuperscript{43} Text in H. SAUER, Erfahrung und Glaube (cf. nt. 32), 671.
\textsuperscript{44} Archivio Secreto Vaticano, Concilio Vaticano II, 327.1.
\textsuperscript{47} M. GILBERT, Pontifical Biblical Institute (cf. nt. 16), 228.
\textsuperscript{48} R. BURIGANA, La Bibbia nel Concilio (cf. nt. 26), 103, n. 151.
the draft the following month\textsuperscript{49}. The final version was approved by Pope Paul VI on 21 April and published on 14 May.

The Instruction can be divided into two parts. The larger, first portion is addressed to exegetes and, in the spirit of Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical, offers them praise and encouragement in their study of the Gospels. They are urged to utilize historical critical methods in their broadest sense («universim considerata»), and specifically asked to utilize form criticism, provided the method is purged of certain unnecessary presuppositions which render it hostile to Christian faith. The Instruction next describes how the four canonical Gospels developed, distinguishing three different stages in this process: the life and preaching of Jesus, the preaching of the apostles, and the writing of the evangelists\textsuperscript{50}. In each of these stages, the Instruction stresses, the content of the preaching was both deepened by the on-going reflection of the early Christian community on the life of Jesus, and adapted to the needs and capacities of hearers. Indeed, the Instruction mentions three times in rapid succession that the apostles adapted the content of their message according to the situations of their audience. The Instruction also explicitly affirms that the evangelists edited their historical materials for theological reasons and arranged them in varying sequences in order to make theological points. Consequently, exegetes are obliged to look at the context of a Gospel pericope in order to fully understand its theological import, here equated with the intention of the evangelist. However, the Instruction also makes clear, following Augustine, that the mere fact that the evangelists have recontextualized and in some cases reinterpreted certain episodes in their respective Gospels in no way impugns the historicity of those episodes\textsuperscript{51}.

While authorship of the specific sections of \textit{Sancta Mater Ecclesia} cannot be definitively demonstrated, a note written by Dupont in December 1965 states that the Instruction was due mainly to the efforts of Cerfaux and Rigaux working with Wambacq\textsuperscript{52}. With this information, it is rather easy to trace ideas in the Instruction back to specific publications of these scholars. The emphasis on the role of tradition in the handing down of the Gospel from Christ to the apostles and then to the evangelists, with a subsequent deepening awareness of the theological meaning of the tradition, owes much to the thought of Cerfaux\textsuperscript{53}. The Instruction’s positive view of form criticism,

\textsuperscript{49} R. BURIGANA, \textit{La Bibbia nel Concilio} (cf. nt. 26), 276-277.
\textsuperscript{50} This is already a significant departure from Vatican I, which speaks only of tradition «quae ipsius Christus ore ab Apostolis acceptae, aut ipsis Apostolis Spiritu Sancto dictante quasi per manus traditae» (\textit{Enchiridion Biblicum}, n. 77).
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Enchiridion Biblicum}, nn. 650-652.
\textsuperscript{52} F. LAPLANCHE, \textit{La Crise de l’Origine} (cf. nt. 5), 476.
provided it is separated from any particular philosophical presuppositions harmful to faith echoes a major article on history and the Gospels by Rigaux\textsuperscript{54}. Evidence of significant influence by Bea — most likely via Wambacq — can be seen in several points of contact between the Instruction and a pamphlet the Cardinal produced for the Council Fathers in 1962 to acquaint them with results of modern exegesis of the Gospels\textsuperscript{55}. Most importantly, Bea states at the outset of his treatment, and repeatedly throughout, that the directive in \textit{Divino afflante spiritu} that the exegetes study the different modes of expression in antiquity is as equally applicable to the study of the Gospels as it is to Genesis. In the same way that these modes of expression in the Book of Genesis are prone to exaggerations or non-literal language, so too is the language of the Gospels\textsuperscript{56}.

Appearance of the Instruction caused a flurry of publications in Catholic journals, and even attracted the attention of non-Catholic scholars\textsuperscript{57}. For the most part, it was greeted by exegetes with the same enthusiasm that greeted \textit{Divino afflante spiritu}. For those less convinced of the salutary effects of modern biblical criticism, the Instruction contained cautions and reaffirmed magisterial oversight. Any sober assessment of \textit{Sancta Mater Ecclesia} in the light of the preceding decades of conflict in the Church over critical exegesis cannot but see the Instruction as a major milestone. Although it clearly owes much to Pius XII’s encyclical, in some ways the Instruction is even more ground-breaking, being the first magisterial document to explicitly and positively set forth certain specific results of modern biblical exegesis. Just as important, in its stress on the constant pastoral needs which shaped the preaching of Jesus, the Apostles and the Evangelists, the Instruction echoes John XXIII’s address at the Council’s opening session, which stated that the purpose of the Council was not to change Church dogma, but to express it in new ways in order to meet the pastoral needs of the modern world\textsuperscript{58}.

Given that John XXIII’s reason in directing the PBC to write an Instruction on the historical nature of the Gospels was to find a way forward out of the conflicts over critical exegesis that had preceded and then dominated


\textsuperscript{56} E.g., A. BEA, «La Storicità dei Vangeli Sinottici» (cf. nt. 55), 417, «Il Carattere storico dei Vangeli» (cf. nt. 55), 539.


\textsuperscript{58} JOHN XXIII, «Allocutio in sollemni ss. concilii inauguratione: Gaudet Mater Ecclesia>>, \textit{Acta Apostolicae Sedis} 54 (1962) 786-796.
conciliar debate, it is relevant to our interests to trace the role of Sancta Mater Ecclesia in the writing of Dei Verbum. Just as work on the Instruction was nearing completion in March 1964, the Council’s Doctrinal Commission had established a subcommission to write another draft of the schema on revelation to be sent to the bishops prior to the Council’s Third Period in the fall of 1964. Tromp’s handwritten account of the Doctrinal Commission’s work from this time notes that the subcommission members writing the new schema’s section on the New Testament included Cerfiaux and Rigaux and was headed by Bishop André Charue of Namur, another Louvain trained exegete. Working independently at first, the subcommission members met as a group from 20-25 April 1964 to edit and revise their individual contributions. This is the very same week that Paul VI received Wambacq in private audience and approved Sancta Mater Ecclesia, an event that did not go unnoticed by the subcommission members working on the schema. At the June 4 plenary meeting of the Doctrinal Commission, mention is made of the need to revise the New Testament section of the schema in light of the Instruction. This was done prior to sending a printed copy of the revised schema to the bishops that summer, with material from Sancta Mater Ecclesia included in paragraph number 19.

Debate on the revised schema, now entitled De revelatione, took place during the first week of October 1964. If there had been hopes that Sancta Mater Ecclesia would help to quell disagreement over critical exegesis of the Gospels, these were quickly dashed, as it soon became clear that the Instruction had done little to change the minds of those already firmly set against modern biblical scholarship and the perceived dangers it posed to the faith of the Church. Conversely, the debate over the schema was itself a means to determine how Sancta Mater Ecclesia’s positive evaluation of critical

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60 Archivio Secreto Vaticano, Concilio Vaticano II, 758.245, 3.

61 The minutes for the subcommission’s last meeting on April 25, note that, after discussion of the section on the New Testament, «placuit ut ratio haberetur novi documenti mox addendi a Commissione Pontificia Biblica». Archivio Secreto Vaticano, Concilio Vaticano II, 758.245, 4.


exegesis would be accepted by the bishops assembled in Council\textsuperscript{65}. The lines of the discussion may be illustrated by the interventions of two Cardinals on 2 October 1964. Speaking against the schema, Ernesto Ruffini argued that there was no need for the Church to change the way it has read the Bible for centuries and, moreover, that the schema needed to provide clear guidelines for Catholic exegetes about what constituted orthodox scholarship. Franz König, representing all the German-speaking bishops, praised the schema and pointed out that contemporary biblical scholarship was necessary to the Church because it helped it to see places where the Bible may be deficient in matters of geography or history, without impugning the text’s status as inspired regarding matters of faith\textsuperscript{66}. In spite of the spirited debate — or perhaps in part because of it — there was not enough time to vote on the schema during the Third Period, and the Doctrinal Commission revised it on the basis of oral and written feedback from the bishops, distributing a revised text in November 1964 in preparation for voting during the Fourth Period to be held the following year\textsuperscript{67}. This vote proceeded on the schema one section at a time. Not surprisingly, the highest number of non placet votes was for paragraph 19\textsuperscript{68}. Of the almost 1500 modi submitted for the schema, the majority concern the historicity of the Gospels. Hundreds of modi are identical typewritten copies of a request that the term «historica» be used to describe the Gospels, noting that it is used in previous magisterial documents, and stating that failure to include the term would leave the door open for ambiguity and encourage exegetical abuse\textsuperscript{69}. Another several hundred pre-typed modi requested that, in the specific place in the schema where Sancta Mater Ecclesia is quoted describing the editorial activity of the evangelists, the phrase «ita semper ut vera et sincera de Iesu nobis communicaret» be rewritten to read «ita tamen ut, quoad factorum historicitatem, obiectivam veritatem semper communicarent», the fear being that failure to affirm such a constant teaching of the Church would have dire consequences\textsuperscript{70}. On the other hand, many other pre-typed modi wanted paragraph 19 to back away from too rigid a claim for the historical character of the Gospels, and


\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Acta Synodalia}, III/3, 273-276.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Schema Constitutionis De Divina Revelatione. Emendationes a patribus conciliaribus}, Vatican City 1964.

\textsuperscript{68} C. Théobald, «The Church Under the Word of God» (cf. nt. 65), 278, n. 15.

\textsuperscript{69} Archivio Secreto Vaticano, Concilio Vaticano II, 217.3.

\textsuperscript{70} Archivio Secreto Vaticano, Concilio Vaticano II, 217.3. Ruffini, a Cardinal member of the PBC, yet an inveterate opponent of modern exegesis, included in his modus the wry observation: «Propeterea, salva Pont. Commissionis biblicae auctoritate, cuius indignum membrum sum, opinor de explanatione silendum esse omnino».
requested that the phrase «vere trade» regarding the traditions about Jesus preserved in the Gospels be changed to read, «fideliter trade», to stress that the process of transmission included theological and pastoral adaptations which did not fundamentally detract from the traditions’ historical nature.\footnote{Archivio Secreto Vaticano, Concilio Vaticano II, 217.3.}

Between 29 September and 11 October 1965, the working group of the Doctrinal Commission met to discuss the modi and emend the schema. Debate arose concerning how to interpret Sancta Mater Ecclesia, and there was confusion and frustration on the part of some because of what they believed to be the Instruction’s lack of an explicit affirmation of the Gospels’ historicity. Cardinal Michael Browne, an opponent of much modern exegesis, asked fellow PBC member Giorgio Castellino to explain the reasoning behind this omission in the Instruction. Castellino claimed that the PBC had wanted to include such an affirmation, but had been urged by several bishops to avoid doing so. Rigaux, one of the Instruction’s main authors, was then asked for his view on the matter. He offered a different explanation from Castellino, and instead stated that the PBC deliberately avoided such an affirmation not because of pressure from bishops, but rather because of the varied attitudes of the episcopate on the question as a whole. In other words, the Instruction’s silence on the direct question of the Gospels’ historicity reflected the still open nature of how best to deal with the question among the bishops gathered at the Council. After this exchange, the working group voted not to revise paragraph 19 of the schema.\footnote{Acta Synodalia, V/2; R. Burigana, La Bibbia nel Concilio (cf. nt. 26), 408-409; C. Théobald, «The Church Under the Word of God» (cf. nt. 65), 314-316.}

At this point, one might have thought the matter resolved, but the curtain was not ready to drop on a text that has been referred to as «the problem-child of the Council».\footnote{The phrase is attributed to J. Neuner, Council peritus, in H. Sauer, «The Doctrinal and the Pastoral» (cf. nt. 64), 202.} Ever since John XXIII had removed De fontibus revelationis from the Council in November 1962, the possibility of papal intervention had played a role in the workings of Vatican II. Paul VI had shown his willingness to intervene when, in November 1964, he issued the now famous nota explicativa praevia regarding the debate on episcopal collegiality. Now, with the historical nature of the Gospels, Paul would act again. On 12 October, the Pope met with bishops Charue and Ermenegildo Florit, who chaired the working group for this portion of the schema and expressed his discomfort with some aspects of the text, one being the phrase «vere tradere» in paragraph 19 to describe the activity of the evangelists’ handling of the words and deeds of Jesus. Paul wanted there to be an unequivocal affirmation of the Gospels’ historicity, and stated at the meeting that in this regard he believed nothing less than fidelity to authentic doctrine...
was at stake. After consulting with Bea, the Pope had the working group reconvene and send them a proposed emendation to paragraph 19. After noting that it would be impossible for him to approve a document that in any way cast doubt upon the historicity of the gospels, the Pope suggested that the phrase, «veritatem fides historica tradere» be inserted in place of «vere tradere». Meeting on 19 October, the working group, taking its cues from Bea, voted overwhelmingly in favour of the Pope’s suggestion and even strengthened it by adding a phrase expressing that, in regard to the Gospels, the Church, «quorum historicitatem incunctanter affirmat» would become part of the final text of *Dei Verbum*, although it was immediately apparent that not all of the theologians who worked on the *schema* were pleased with the papal intervention. Yves Congar, for example, found the new language infelicitous, and scholarly analysis of the text written thirty years after the Council refers to «die vorsichtige und zögernde Sprache des Artikel 19».

**IV. POSTCONCILIAR MAGISTERIAL TEACHING**

The promulgation of *Dei Verbum* quite naturally shifted attention away from *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* among scholars and ecclesiastical authorities. Indeed, one finds little published on it after the mid-1960’s, the exceptions being brief summaries of the Instruction in works that deal mainly with other subjects. However, the legacy of the Instruction, both in its incorporation into *Dei Verbum* and as its own text, has been significant. Catholic exegesis of the Gospels in the years after the Instruction has made significant scholarly contributions, even as the question of the Gospels’ historical veracity has been debated with much intensity among exegetes.

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77 Enchiridion Biblicum, n. 698.
Among post-conciliar magisterial documents that have also treated the issues taken up in *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, three merit discussion. Almost thirty years ago, the PBC issued a major document on the Bible and Christology\(^2\). This detailed and lengthy text affirms several important ideas that are grounded in openness to New Testament exegesis, most importantly in the repeated emphasis on the historical and developmental qualities of Christological reflection as it occurs both in the Gospels and in the on-going life of the Church\(^3\). In their equally detailed 1993 document on biblical interpretation, the PBC stresses again the absolute necessity of the historical-critical method for the study of Sacred Scripture. Regarding the Gospels, the text goes out of its way to stress that even the most atomistic and historically critical types of form-criticism, while certainly raising certain theological objections, also served to underscore the early Christian community as the locus for the origins of the Gospels\(^4\).

The third and most recent magisterial text to deal with this issue, Pope Benedict XVI’s Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, issued in November 2010 after the Twelfth World Synod of Bishops, takes a markedly different tone. While the acknowledgement of limitations to historical-critical exegesis has been a part of all magisterial texts in the post-conciliar era, *Verbum Domini* has expanded this to an outright criticism of the method and the call for a retrieval of more traditional forms of analysis. The basic approach of *Verbum Domini* is founded upon one of the fundamental affirmations of *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, i.e., that the biblical text originates in and is in response to the ecclesial life of the Christian community. Consequently, the Bible itself witnesses to the truth of the principle that authentic interpretation happens only in the life of the Church. Benedict XVI cites approvingly the PBC’s 1993 affirmation of the need for historical-critical exegesis and bases this need on the fact that the biblical texts are founded upon historical events and not myth\(^5\). Benedict notes that «Magisterium Ecclesiae [...] sapienti prudentia intervenit in iis quae pertinere ad iustum criterium servandum in novis methodis historicae investigationis inducendis». He observes that, while academic exegesis has been exemplary in its use of historical-criticism, it

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\(^82\) *Enchiridion Biblicum*, nn. 909-1039.

\(^83\) *Enchiridion Biblicum*, nn. 917, 919, 923, 962, 1027.


\(^85\) Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, nn. 29, 32.
lacks a similar level of sophistication in regard to the theological aspects of Scripture. This has resulted in an unfruitful separation («infructuosa disiunctio») of exegesis and theology, which runs counter to the teaching of Dei Verbum. That the problem lies on the part of exegetes is made clear by the Pope’s recommendation that exegetes be given adequate theological training — an implicit criticism of the education they now receive86.

Benedict goes on to discuss the gravest consequences («urgentiora consecutaria») that are to be avoided by exegetes. Among these dangers is that of replacing the hermeneutic of faith with a secularized approach which can only result in doubt or denial of the historical nature of «fundamentalia mysteria christianismi», which Benedict lists specifically as the institution of the Eucharist and the resurrection. At this point, he takes a significant step, stating that, because exegesis has become separated from theology, the Bible is unable to be the true soul of theology that Dei Verbum called for it to be. Modern exegesis has strayed from the role outlined for it in Dei Verbum, and it is therefore necessary to re-examine the relationship between exegesis and theology as taught by the Council87. As the foregoing discussion has shown, the premiere exegetical issue leading up to the promulgation of Dei Verbum was the historicity of the Gospels and, the Conciliar decree, while adopting a nuanced position, relied upon the 1964 PBC Instruction, which was itself very positive in its evaluation of exegesis and its contribution to the Church. With the call to revisit this question, particularly in relation to Dei Verbum, Benedict signals a concern on the part of the Magisterium that modern biblical exegesis has had a not wholly beneficial influence on Catholic theology and doctrine. As such, there is a cautious tone to Verbum Domini that calls to mind — albeit with full acknowledgement of the different historical contexts — the attitudes of the Magisterium toward biblical exegesis prior to Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical. Specifically, in a way that echoes Leo XIII’s encyclical and the Holy Office’s monitum of 1961, Benedict recommends the necessity of patristic interpretation, prefacing this with the perfunctory acknowledgement of «pondus et necessitatem methodi historico-criticae», but with the added aside «quamvis cum proprie restrictionibus»88.

Naturally, modern biblical scholarship encompasses a range of methods beyond that of historical-criticism, as the Biblical Commission’s 1993 document makes clear in its detailed discussions of such methods as rhetorical, narrative and semiotic analysis. These methods are fully integrated into the scholarly discipline of biblical studies and have given rise to a significant body of scholarship in their own right89. While not sufficient for proper

86 BENEDICT XVI, Verbum Domini, n. 75.
87 BENEDICT XVI, Verbum Domini, n. 35.
88 BENEDICT XVI, Verbum Domini, n. 37.
89 See, e.g., the work of the International Society for the Study of Biblical and Semitic Rhetoric (RBS), and the Réseau de Recherche en Narratologie et Bible (RRENAB).
understanding of the Bible, historical-criticism is still necessary. However, it seems clear that, after a period of magisterial optimism and openness to historical-critical exegesis, first clearly evident in Divino afflante spiritu, achieving a high-water mark in Sancta Mater Ecclesia, and carried through Dei Verbum and post-conciliar documents, the most recent papal text on the question signals a re-evaluation of exegesis and, in a manner analogous to the discussion surrounding the liturgy, offers another example of the post-conciliar «reform of the reform».

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SUMMARY

An overlooked but important document in the history of magisterial pronouncements on historical-critical biblical scholarship is the 1964 Instruction of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Sancta mater ecclesia. This article traces the history leading up to the Instruction and analyzes its importance during the Second Vatican Council and afterward. A careful examination of the recent Apostolic Exhortation on the Bible by Pope Benedict XVI, Verbum domini, shows that the rather optimistic evaluation of historical-criticism that characterized the Magisterium’s attitude in the post-conciliar era has now been tempered and a «reform of the reform» is perhaps underway regarding the relationship between exegesis and theology.

Un documento trascurato ma importante nella storia dei pronunciamenti magisteriali sull’esegesi storico-critica è l’Istruzione della Pontificia Commissione Biblica, Sancta Mater Ecclesia del 1964. In questo articolo viene illustrato il contesto storico che ha portato all’Istruzione e ne analizza l’importanza durante e dopo il Concilio Vaticano II. Inoltre, un attento esame della recente esortazione apostolica di Papa Benedetto XVI sulla Bibbia, Verbum Domini, mostra che la valutazione storico-critica piuttosto ottimista, che ha caratterizzato l’atteggiamento del Magistero nel periodo postconciliare, ora è più moderata e sembra essere una «riforma della riforma» riguardante il rapporto tra esegesi e teologia.