

# Official Roman Catholic Teachings on the Bible

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## *Dei Verbum*

### “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation”

(Second Vatican Council - Nov. 18, 1965)

#### Chapters:

Preface (§1)

- 1) **Revelation Itself** (§§2-6)
- 2) **The Transmission of Divine Revelation** (§§7-10)
- 3) **Sacred Scripture, Its Divine Inspiration and Interpretation** (§§11-13)
- 4) The Old Testament (§§14-16)
- 5) The New Testament (§§17-20)
- 6) **Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church** (§§21-26)

#### Full Text:

- Walter M. Abbott, S.J. *The Documents of Vatican II*. New York: America Press, 1966.
- Austin Flannery, O.P. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-conciliar Documents*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984; 1992.
- **Online** at [Vatican Website](#) or [cin.org](#)

## *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

### The Profession of Faith: “I Believe” - “We Believe”

(Part One, Section One, Chapter Two - §§51-141)

#### Article 1: **The Revelation of God** (§§51-73)

1. God Reveals His “Plan of Loving Goodness”
2. The Stages of Revelation
3. Christ Jesus – “Mediator and Fullness of All Revelation”

#### Article 2: **The Transmission of Divine Revelation** (§§74-100)

1. Apostolic Tradition
2. The Relationship between Tradition and Sacred Scripture
3. The Interpretation of the Heritage of Faith

#### Article 3: **Sacred Scripture** (§§101-141)

1. Christ - The Unique Word of Sacred Scripture
2. Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture
3. The Holy Spirit, Interpreter of Scripture
4. The Canon of Scripture
5. **Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church**

#### Full Text:

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994; 2nd edition, 2000.
- **Online** at [Vatican Website](#) or [USCCB](#) or [St. Charles Borromeo](#).

## Overview and Analysis:

**A)** Concerning the Sacred Scriptures, the most recent document with the highest level of authority in the Catholic Church is called the “**Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation**,” often referred to by its Latin title, *Dei Verbum* (*DV*), which was officially promulgated on November 18, 1965, by the bishops meeting at the Second Vatican Council. A more recent summary of the Church’s official teachings is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (*CCC*, 1994). Not only does the *Catechism* clearly present the same teachings as *Dei Verbum*, but the structure of this *CCC* chapter closely parallels the structure of *DV*:

1. **Article 1** of this portion of the *CCC* (§§51-73) expands upon the teachings of chapter 1 of *DV*.
2. **Article 2** of the *CCC* (§§74-100) further develops the material presented in chapter 2 of *DV*.
3. **Article 3** of the *CCC* (§§101-141) summarizes the main points of chapters 3-6 of *DV*.

**B)** Official Catholic teachings about the Bible do not deal immediately with the written scriptures, but begin from a much broader perspective, first presenting the Church’s teachings about “**The Revelation of God**.” In Catholic understanding, divine revelation is much *more* than just the Bible; it is also *more* than God revealing verbal messages to humanity. Rather, it is the entire process by which God reveals or expresses Himself in our world, what we might call “God’s self-revelation.” Moreover, this process of divine revelation can be seen in four main historical stages:

1. God’s self-revelation in **creation**, in everything that exists in the universe, from inanimate material, to plants and animals, in what we today call “nature.”
2. God’s self-revelation in and to the **human race**, who are not only “created in God’s image and likeness” (see Gen 1:26-27), but who are endowed with reason, which gives us the ability to know God.
3. God’s special revelation to the **people of Israel**, the “chosen people,” giving them more direct knowledge about God and the world, working in and through their history, sending them messages that were passed down orally and eventually written down in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament).
4. God’s self-revelation in **Jesus Christ**, “the Word made flesh” (see John 1:14), whose words and actions reveal even more clearly everything we need to know about God and our world, about life and love, about forgiveness and salvation.

C) After presenting the broader concept of “Revelation,” but before addressing the written scriptures, Catholic teachings explain “**The Transmission of Divine Revelation**,” that is, the process by which God’s revelation is “transmitted” or “handed down” or “passed on” (Latin *traditio*) through the ages. Again, this is a complex process involving several different stages or steps, which one must carefully distinguish from one another. The following stages apply both in the OT era and in the NT era:

1. **Historical Events:** the actions of the patriarchs, prophets, kings, and all the people of Israel (in the OT era), or the actions of Jesus, his own disciples and apostles (in the NT era).
2. **Oral Traditions:** the stories about what happened, and the teachings of various people, as passed down from one generation to the next, often by anonymous people.
3. **Written Documents:** the various books of Moses, the prophets, and teachers of Israel (in the OT); and the recorded Gospels, letters, and other writings of early Christian leaders (in the NT).
4. **Canonization and Interpretation:** the “transmission” of God’s revelation did not end with the writing of the individual books of the Bible, but continues in the activity of the Church, first in collecting and “canonizing” the collections of scriptures we now call the Old and New Testaments, as well as in the ongoing teaching, interpretation, and application of God’s revelation in the lives of individuals and communities throughout the centuries.

D) Only after understanding the Catholic Christian teachings about Revelation and Tradition can we also come to a proper understanding of the Church’s teachings about the Bible, the Sacred Scriptures. Only now can we properly see the intertwined relationships between **Revelation, Tradition, and Scripture**:

1. Contrary to the polemical Reformation-era debates (and popular misunderstandings still today!), “Scripture” and “Tradition” are *not opposed* to each other; they are *not* two separate entities. Rather, “Scripture” (the written Bible) is *part* of the larger reality called “Tradition” (the transmission of divine truth), which is itself part of the larger process called “Revelation” (or better, “God’s self-revelation”). Expressed with mathematical symbols, one might say **Revelation > Tradition > Scripture**.
2. Although the Bible is a very old and crucial part of Church Tradition, handing on God’s Revelation, it is *not the only part*. Much of God’s self-revelation has been and continues to be handed on to humanity through other aspects of the Church’s Tradition (esp. the liturgy), and even more broadly in various ways. Put differently, although the Scriptures contain Revelation, not all of God’s self-revelation is recorded in the Bible (since God has revealed and continues to reveal Himself in nature, people, and many other ways).
3. However, since **the Bible** contains the indispensable “core” of God’s Revelation, so to speak, Christians believe that *no other revelations* would ever change or contradict what God teaches us in and through the Old and New Testaments. Moreover, as the core of Revelation, the Bible contains all the truths necessary for our redemption and salvation, so that we neither seek nor need any other revelation to supplement or complete God’s revelation as found in the Scriptures.
4. It is also crucial to understand that the Word of God, in Catholic understanding, is not primarily the Bible (the written text), but is **Jesus Christ** (the incarnate Word). The most important part of Christian faith is *not the Bible, but Jesus* himself. Jesus came *before* the Bible (before the NT books were written, and before the complete scriptures were canonized).
5. **The Church** also came *before* the Bible! Not only did the oral preaching of the apostles precede the writing of the NT books (by several decades), but it was the early Church that determined the Canon of the Bible (not until several centuries after Jesus’ life).

E) Chapter 3 of *DV* (and the corresponding paragraphs of *CCC*), also summarize the Catholic Christian teachings about the “divine inspiration” of the **Scriptures** and their proper interpretation. In contrast to a naïve fundamentalistic view of biblical authorship, which sometimes reduces the role of biblical writers to little more than dictation machines, Catholic understanding of the “divine inspiration” of the Bible is a good example of the Church’s overall **BOTH/AND** approach to theology:

1. The Bible is *both* the Word of God *and* written in human languages. One can properly say *both* that God is the author of the scriptures *and* that the human writers acted as real authors. They did not merely record the exact words whispered into their ears by the Holy Spirit (as graphically portrayed in much medieval art), but rather made use of their own human abilities in writing their texts (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, of course).
2. Because the Bible is written in *human* languages (indeed, *ancient* languages very different from our own!), the proper interpretation of the Scriptures requires not only that we are aware of the limitations of all human language (and the difficulties of translation from one language to another), but also that we pay attention to the various literary forms and modes of expression used by the ancient authors.
3. The “inspiration” of the Holy Spirit applies not only to one stage, but to all stages in the long process of the transmission of divine revelation. Not only were Moses, the prophets, Jesus, the apostles, and other biblical characters inspired by the Holy Spirit in their words and actions; not only were the biblical authors inspired by God’s Spirit as they were busy writing; not only was the Church leaders inspired by the Spirit when they selected which books to include in the biblical canon. Rather, the Holy Spirit was active at all these stages of the process.
4. Finally, the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Christian Church in the correct understanding and proper application of the scriptures for our own lives in community and as individuals. Although this goes beyond the traditional doctrine of the “divine inspiration of sacred scripture,” one can properly say that the Holy Spirit still actively guides the Church in its use of the scriptures in many ways: in liturgical prayer, in small-group discussions, in personal prayer and study, and in many other facets of our individual and communal lives.