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The God Who Speaks: *Verbum Domini* as a Means of Renewal in Seminary Formation in the Word of God

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Introduction

At both scholarly and popular levels of society, a deterioration of sound, orthodox views of biblical inspiration is all too evident. Much academic scholarship rests upon a hermeneutic that ignores, weakens or altogether disregards biblical inspiration. In place of it are, all too often, various constructs and hypotheses that treat Sacred Scripture as a mere historical reality, rather than a word of divine origin. Similarly, at the cultural level, there have been many developments which have not only dismissed the concept of biblical inspiration, but in its place are speculative theories about the Bible's origins. One only needs to visit the local bookstore, tune in to a cable television documentary – or worse yet, listen in on a Sunday morning homily to experience firsthand some of these toxic realities.

Thus, as a seminary professor of Sacred Scripture, I eagerly awaited, along with many, Pope Benedict XVI's recently published Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini* ("Word of the Lord").¹ As I initially read the document, my thoughts returned again and again to several

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*. Promulgated in Rome on Sept. 30, 2010 (Frederick, MD: The Word Among us Press, 2011). The document is available online at the official website of the Holy See (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations). The release of *Verbum Domini* on Sept. 30, 2010 is quite fitting as it coincides with the Feast of St. Jerome, the Doctor of Holy

pertinent questions: What are the most essential principles of Catholic biblical interpretation? How can these principles shape the goals and expectations of both instructors and students in Catholic seminaries today?

In exploring these questions, this paper will reflect on *Verbum Domini* as a means of renewal in seminary formation in the Word of God. Specifically, this paper will argue that among the various precepts outlined in the document, none that is raised in *Verbum Domini* is more important than biblical inspiration, and hearing “the God who speaks” in Sacred Scripture. Adherence to and promotion of a robust conception of biblical inspiration is intrinsically necessary to not only the health of biblical exegesis but also the life and mission of the entire Church. As the pope writes, “Our whole existence becomes a dialogue with the God who speaks and listens, who calls us and gives direction to our lives” (*VD* § 24).

Thus, it is crucial that our future priests are well-equipped to receive the Word of God as true and inspired; and to hear “the God who speaks” as they study, pray and proclaim Sacred Scripture. As seminary professors, the recent release of *Verbum Domini* represents a timely opportunity to evaluate our own work and to consider how we might contribute to the vision of Pope Benedict in *Verbum Domini*. It is hoped that in some way, this paper stimulates further thought and action in the formation of Catholic seminarians with regard to biblical inspiration.

***Verbum Domini* – Principles and Practices for the Renewal of Seminary Formation in the Word of God**

Three contextual remarks are offered about *Verbum Domini* and its relevance to all who teach in Catholic seminaries today.

First, *Verbum Domini* is a significant papal document – and one that deserves to be taken seriously. This point may be obvious, but is worth emphasizing, given how prolific this pope has been recently.² *Verbum Domini* may not have garnished as much popular attention as the Pope’s two-volume *Jesus of Nazareth* project, yet it is, objectively speaking, weightier than these two very impressive volumes of biblical exegesis. At nearly two hundred pages, *Verbum Domini* represents Pope Benedict’s formal reflection on the Twelfth Synod of Bishops, over which he presided and which convened in Rome from Oct. 5-20, 2008. The aim of this particular Synod is well captured in its wide-ranging title: “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church.” In all, the Synod fathers submitted fifty-five *propositio* (propositions). Most of these propositions were taken up in one form or another by the Holy Father in *Verbum Domini*. As such, this document carries papal authority and reflects Benedict’s own thoughts on the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church today, and in addition, the concerns of the Synod fathers.³ The document is filled with

Writ, who translated the Sacred Scriptures from their original languages (Hebrew and Greek) into Latin, the common language of the early Church.

² I am thinking especially of the pope’s magnificent “Jesus of Nazareth” project: Ratzinger, Joseph (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth (Vol. I): From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007); *Jesus of Nazareth (Vol. II): Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011). It should be recalled as impressive as these two volumes are, Benedict himself insists that he does not present them as “an exercise of the Magisterium” but rather, his own “personal search for the face of the Lord” (*Vol. I*, xxiii-xxiv). In comparison, *Verbum Domini*, as an Apostolic Exhortation, is to be read with due magisterial weight.

³ In the realm of papal writings, the weightiest documents are known as an Apostolic Constitution. These are followed by the Encyclical Letters, Apostolic Exhortations, Apostolic Letters, and finally, Letters and Messages. When Apostolic Constitutions such contain dogma, they are referred to as Dogmatic Constitution (e.g. *Dei Verbum*).

robust and urgent admonitions and practical instructions for bishops, priest and religious and everyone in the Church today. This is no mere document for insiders, i.e., biblical scholars. *Verbum Domini* has much to offer the entire Catholic Church and all who belong to Christ are encouraged to read it. As seminary theologians, we should read the document in a particularly self-reflective manner, asking questions such as those raised above, with sincere interest and openness to being shaped by this papal document.

Second, *Verbum Domini* should be read by all, and especially seminary formators, as a means of further implementing the principles of *Dei Verbum*. The Exhortation does not stand alone, but as a bold exhortation that seeks to implement the biblical directives of Vatican II and more specifically, of *Dei Verbum*.⁴ The very name of the Exhortation reveals much as to Pope Benedict's "conciliar vision" within its pages. Obviously enough, the title *Verbum Domini* bears an uncanny similarity to *Dei Verbum*, Vatican II's "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," a document which Pope Benedict is in constant dialogue throughout the Exhortation.⁵ Several times in *Verbum Domini*, he calls attention to an instrumental phrase of the Dogmatic Constitution. Specifically, he refers to Sacred Scripture as the "soul of theology" (*VD* §31; cf. *DV* §24) and in so doing, points us back to *Dei Verbum* and "the great principles of interpretation proper to Catholic exegesis set forth by the Second Vatican Council" (*VD* §34). Additionally, he recalls the fundamental criteria for proper interpretation of Sacred Scripture outlined in *Dei Verbum*, crucial for proper interpretation of Sacred Scripture.⁶ Clearly, in *Verbum Domini*, the pope is putting forth his vision on Sacred Scripture in keeping with the Second Vatican Council – and he does so as a means of further implementing the Council's principles in the life of the Church today.⁷ Given its clear linkage with *Dei Verbum*, and its comprehensive scope, it is no wonder that upon its release, a number of observers described it as the most important Scripture document since Vatican II.⁸ As the pope writes, "It is my hope that, in

Thus, while Apostolic Exhortations are not as weighty as a Constitution or Encyclical (in that the latter are to be understood as authoritative documents concerning the development of doctrine), they are certainly weightier than other "official" papal writings, as well as "unofficial" writing projects.

⁴ Pope Paul VI, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*. Promulgated at the Second Vatican Council on Nov. 18, 1965. (New York: Pauline Books and Media, 1965). The document is available online at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

⁵ From the Introduction: "[*Dei Verbum* is] a milestone in the Church's history ... Everyone is aware of the great impulse which the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* gave to the revival of interest in the word of God in the life of the Church, to theological reflection on divine revelation and to the study of sacred Scripture." Moreover, Benedict observes that a critical aim of the 2008 Synod is the further implementation of *Dei Verbum*: "By celebrating this Synod, the Church, conscious of her continuing journey under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, felt called to further reflection on the theme of God's word, in order to review the implementation of the Council's directives, and to confront the new challenges which the present time sets before Christian believers" (ibid). See also *VD* § 6, 17-18, 23, 31, 34-35, 38-39, 45, 47, 51 and 86.

⁶ Ibid; cf. *Dei Verbum* §12. (See also: CCC 113-115.)

⁷ For an excellent discussion of these three criteria and their importance in Catholic biblical interpretation, see: Brant Pitre, "The Mystery of God's Word: Inspiration, Inerrancy, and the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Letter & Spirit* 6 (2010): 47-66, 62.

⁸ See Cindy Wooden, "Pope issues 'most important document on Scripture since Vatican II,'" *Catholic Herald* (11/11/2010). Available online at: <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2010/11/11/pope-issues-most-important-document-on-scripture-since-vatican-ii/>; also: Bernardo Cervellera, "Verbum Domini welcoming the Word of God to proclaim to those who do not believe," *Asia News* (11/11/2010). Available online at: <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Verbum-Domini-welcoming-the-Word-of-God-to-proclaim-to-those-who-do-not-believe-19980.html>.

fidelity to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the study of Sacred Scripture, read within the communion of the universal Church, will truly be the soul of theological studies” (*VD* §47).

Third and finally, the very shape of the document, and this is the third point, reveals the pope’s interest in presenting principles of sound Catholic biblical exegesis in a decidedly Johannine fashion. Numerous Scriptural citations occupy the voluminous text of *Verbum Domini*. Yet, it is the thought of St. John the Evangelist that is utilized time and again. In particular, Pope Benedict seizes upon John’s Prologue (and specifically 1:14) as sort of a navigational star for raising essential principles of biblical interpretation. In this way, *Verbum Domini* can be read as an extended discussion of Catholic biblical exegesis that is “built upon” the foundation of St. John’s Gospel. This is more than one seminary professor’s opinion. As Pope Benedict writes in his Introduction:

I would like to present and develop the labours of the Synod by making constant reference to the *Prologue of John’s Gospel* (*Jn* 1:1-18), which makes known to us the basis of our life: the Word, who from the beginning is with God, who became flesh and who made his dwelling among us (cf. *Jn* 1:14). This is a magnificent text, one which offers a synthesis of the entire Christian faith (*VD* §5).

Later, in his Conclusion, this same point is echoed. There, the pope underscores the Johannine foundation of the entire Exhortation that has come before it when he writes, “The Prologue of John’s Gospel leads us to ponder that everything exists *under the sign of the Word*” (*VD* §121, emphasis added).

If one examines *Verbum Domini* as a whole, it is clear that John’s Prologue and its thought provides the contours by which he lays out a number of precepts for Catholic biblical exegesis today. In particular, three broader principles are readily seen, as they correspond to the three subdivisions of the Exhortation itself:

- 1) Sacred Scripture is to be Interpreted as God’s Self-Communication, i.e., as an Inspired Word of the ‘God Who Speaks’ (Part One: “*Verbum Dei*”)
- 2) Sacred Scripture is to be Interpreted as an Intrinsically Meaningful Word, i.e. as a Living and Effective Word to the Church (Part Two: “*Verbum in Ecclesia*”)
- 3) Sacred Scripture is to be Interpreted as a Missionary Word, i.e., as the ‘Logos of Hope’ to the World (Part Three: “*Verbum Mundo*”)

The God Who Speaks: Pope Benedict on Inspiration in *Verbum Domini*

Taken together, these principles have the power to not only illuminate more brightly the sacred pages of Scripture, but also to influence, even transform seminary formation today. While all three principles merit serious attention it is beyond the scope of this paper to take up and discuss each one as put forth by Pope Benedict. Instead, this essay will concentrate on the first principle as a fundamental basis for renewal of seminary formation.⁹ The selection of this first principle is

⁹ It is beyond the limits of this essay to review the various historical theories on biblical inspiration. This essay fully accepts the definitions as laid out in the various Scripture documents of the Catholic Church (see below). For a thorough and cogent review, see: Matthew Levering, “The Inspiration of Scripture: A Status Quaestionis,” in *Letter & Spirit* (2010): 281-314. For a recent review of the Catholic position, see: Pablo T. Gadenz, “Magisterial Teaching on the Inspiration and Truth of Scripture: Precedents and Prospects,” in *Letter & Spirit* 6 (2010) 67-91; cf. J. T. Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration Since 1810: A Review and Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Ignace de la Potterie, “Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Spirit in Which It

anything but arbitrary; unless the foundational principle of biblical inspiration is adhered to, and its implications taken seriously and implemented in programs of seminary formation, any discussion, however well intentioned, of the remaining principles will be utterly fruitless:

Whenever our awareness of [Sacred Scripture's] inspiration grows weak, we risk reading Scripture as an object of historical curiosity and not the work of the Holy Spirit in which we can hear the Lord himself speak and recognize his presence in history (*VD* §19).

Even more recently than *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict has spoken poignantly about biblical inspiration. In his recent message to the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Commission, which is currently discussing the theme “Inspiration and the Truth of the Bible,” the pope reiterates that inspiration is “an activity of God” and adds the following caution,

Indeed an interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures which ignores or forgets their inspiration does not take into account their most important and precious characteristic, the fact that they come from God ... It is in fact essential and fundamental for the life and mission of the Church that the sacred texts be interpreted in accordance with their nature: Inspiration and Truth are constitutive characteristics of this nature.¹⁰

Turning to *Verbum Domini*, the pope zeroes in on biblical inspiration, almost immediately, identifying it as the fundamental principle for all true and proper interpretation of God's Word today. Drawing upon vital passages from John's Prologue (Jn 1:1-3, 14), he describes the “cosmic dimension” of biblical revelation, analogous to the “eternal Word of God made flesh, the one Saviour and mediator between God and humanity ... [and] the foundation of all reality” (*VD* §8).¹¹

The Word of God cannot be properly understood or proclaimed apart from its being firmly and unequivocally rooted in God himself. All of Scripture, he writes, is revealed from God as a “single reality” (*VD* §18), a “single word expressed in multiple ways: a ‘polyphonic hymn’” (*VD* §7).¹² Recalling a key passage in *Dei Verbum*, Pope Benedict underscores that Sacred Scripture originates with God, being given by the Holy Spirit as wholly inspired truth:

We must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully and without error, teach the truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures. Thus, ‘all scripture is inspired by God and is useful

Was Written,” in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives*, vol. 1, ed. René Latourelle (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 220-66.

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, “Message to the Participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Biblical Commission” (Concerning “Inspiration and Truth in the Bible”), May 2, 2011. Available online at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/pont-messages/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20110502_plenaria_pcb_en.html.

¹¹ See also: Col. 1:15-16; Heb. 1:1-3.

¹² Cf. Twelfth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum Laboris* §9. Available online at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20080511_instrlabor-xii-assembly_en.html.

for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work' (2 *Tim* 3:16-17).¹³

These words of the Council are perhaps the most important for him, as he understands inspiration as being “clearly decisive” (*VD* §19) in all biblical interpretation.

At the same time that the pope exhorts the Church to open itself up to the Divine author of Sacred Scripture, he urges that this Word must be simultaneously apprehended as an historical fact and that the “full importance of the human author” must be recognized (*VD* §19). He adds that there is a great need today for a “fuller and more adequate study” of the texts of Scripture “in accordance with their nature” (*ibid*). This particular observation is a fundamental norm of all legitimate Catholic biblical exegesis; God’s word can never be reduced to an either/or scenario. Sacred Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit in which “we can hear the Lord himself speak (*VD* §19) and, at the same time, it is the product of real human authors who bring human meaning and personality to the divine Word. With the Incarnation of Christ, His life, and particularly His death, “the word of God became thoroughly human ‘flesh,’ human ‘history’” (*VD* §13). Here, Pope Benedict relies heavily upon that central truth of John’s Prologue: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (*Jn* 1:14).

Just as the Living Word took on human flesh and walked among us, so too the written Word of God takes human form and must be received as a historical fact, which is the very “constitutive dimension of the Christian faith” (*VD* §32). As such, the Word of God is simultaneously a divine act and a human act that demands to be received accordingly. All true biblical interpretation is integrative and not degenerative in its nature; we cannot embrace one element (e.g. divine) without embracing the other (e.g. human). Neither can we reject the one without rejecting the other, and without risking the whole interpretative enterprise. Just as the Church rejects any rationale that creates a wedge between the divine and human nature of Christ, it follows that in searching for meaning in Scripture, Catholic Biblical interpretation absolutely rejects any “split” between the divine and human dimension.¹⁴

It is clear that Pope Benedict places great emphasis in *Verbum Domini* on the inspiration of Sacred Scripture. If we are to truly help seminarians to become properly formed in God’s Word, then it surely rests upon not only our ability to explain this Catholic doctrine well, but help them to

¹³ *VD* 19, citing *DV* 11. While affirming the Church’s firm belief in the inspiration of Sacred Scripture throughout the document, Pope Benedict seems content not to offer a new definition of “inspiration” itself. Rather, he refers back to the definitive, conciliar statement on inspiration in *Dei Verbum* 11: “Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-20, 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself.” For an excellent summary of the implicit elements of *Dei Verbum*’s treatment of biblical inspiration, see Germain Griesz, “The Inspiration and Inerrancy of Sacred Scripture,” in: *Letter & Spirit* 6 (2010) 181-191. Griesz reconstructs *DV* 11 in twelve logical and sequential statements. Likewise, Levering distills five salient points of *DV*’s teaching on inspiration. Summing up his argument: 1) Inspiration has to do with both texts and human authors, i.e. “the charism of the human authors” cannot be excluded; 2) Inspiration works through the “graced intelligence and freedom” of these human authors; 3) “Scripture teaches the truth about God and humanity in the economy of salvation”; 4) “The whole of Scripture is inspired, although the Gospels have preeminence”; and 5) The inspiration of Scripture is located within the larger context of divine revelation (cf. Levering, 304).

¹⁴ Cf. *VD* §33.

learn how to listen better to the *Divine voice*, to “the God who speaks” in Sacred Scripture. Along the same lines, we must equip them with a hermeneutic of faith that is equally attentive to the *human voice* in Scripture, through a robust encounter of the Word in history. However, the dangers of dualistic and secularized approaches must be understood and avoided. As a guideline in our biblical analysis, Pope Benedict offers a sure help: “No criteria should be adopted which would rule out in advance God’s self-disclosure in history” (*VD* §36).

Biblical Inspiration: Several Challenges for Seminary Formation Today

Having analyzed Pope Benedict’s discussion of biblical inspiration and its “decisive” role (*VD* §19) in biblical interpretation, we now turn to a discussion of several challenges facing seminary theologians with regard to this same issue.

- 1) *Better care must be taken, both in and beyond the classroom, to ensure that every seminarian is well formed in God’s Word as inspired truth given by the Holy Spirit - and capable of transforming their lives.*

All Catholic biblical exegesis must begin with what Pope Benedict calls “the *primacy* of the word of God” (*VD* §22).¹⁵ In the divinely inspired Word of God, the love between Christ and the Church is revealed. This mystery touches every person:

To whom the word speaks, challenges, and calls us to enter this dialogue through a free response. Each of us is thus enabled by God to *hear and respond* to his word ... we cannot understand ourselves unless we are open to this dialogue (*ibid*).

As such, reception of the Word must always begin with its true divine origins, as a Word that stems from and reveals “the inner life of God” (*VD* §6).

This first point cannot be emphasized enough. In my own experience working with seminarians, many enter seminary today with a desire to study Scripture as “God’s own words.” However, a number of candidates for future priesthood enter seminary having been poorly catechized, or worse yet, misinformed as to what “God’s word is inspired” does (and does not) mean. We have a responsibility to clearly affirm “the primacy of the Word” and to do so in ways that can be readily grasped by today’s seminarian. In particular, due attention must be given to reading and explaining biblical inspiration as found within the Catholic documents on Scripture, especially *Dei Verbum*.

Neither should our discussions be limited to the Scripture documents. Rather, they should be properly supplemented and under girded with explanations from the Scriptures themselves, as well as providing a proper historical framework of the development of the doctrine of biblical inspiration (and its corollary, biblical inerrancy). Here, the teachings of patristic, medieval and modern theologians can and should be properly integrated into such discussions. By discussing *Verbum Domini* in conjunction with *Dei Verbum*, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, Blessed John Henry Newman, etc., the seminarian may come to see how inspiration was, is and always will be the most important precept in proper biblical interpretation.

Yet, it is not enough to help seminarians understand “the primacy of the Word” on an intellectual and academic level. Today’s seminarian is in need of receiving God’s inspired word as a *transformative experience*. In fact, we miss the broader vision of *Verbum Domini* almost entirely if we present “the precepts of the doctrine of inspiration” in merely academic and historical fashion,

¹⁵ Cf. *Instrumentum Laboris*, Prop. 4.

devoid of its transformative power. Pope Benedict himself speaks to this crucial point, urging that God's word be approached first and foremost as a dialogue, and he makes this point numerous times in the Exhortation:

The novelty of biblical revelation consists in the fact that God becomes known through the dialogue which he desires to have with us (*VD* §6).

God makes himself known to us as a mystery of infinite love in which the Father utters his Word in the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the Word who from the beginning is with God and is God, reveals God himself *in the dialogue of love* between the divine persons, *and invites us to share in that love* (ibid).

The word of God draws each of us into a conversation with the Lord: the God who speaks teaches us how to speak to him (*VD* § 24).

Given such emphasis in *Verbum Domini* on “dialogue,” and listening to “the God who speaks,” we would do well as seminary formators to ask ourselves questions such as the following: “In the midst of our academic study and pedagogical preparation, how much time do we afford to such listening *ourselves?*” and “Are we training our seminarians to know *how to listen*, and to approach God's word as a vibrant dialogue?”

In addressing such questions, we move beyond the sphere of intellectual acumen and pedagogical expertise, and into the spiritual and experiential realm. The task of forming seminarians in Sacred Scripture is not only in *believing* but also of *receiving* and *being transformed by* God's inspired Word. Above all, such receptivity and transformation must involve the integration of the study of God's Word and the seminarian's life of prayer, as the pope addresses in the Exhortation:

Listening together to the word of God, engaging in biblical *lectio divina*, letting ourselves be struck by the inexhaustible freshness of God's word which never grows old, overcoming our deafness to those words that do not fit our own opinions or prejudices, listening and studying within the communion of the believers of every age: all these things represent a way of coming to unity in faith as a response to hearing the word of God (*VD* §46).

Clearly, as the pope writes, unless we are regularly meditating upon Scripture in such prayerful and humble ways, and allowing our intellect and our affective will to imbibe the “inexhaustible freshness” of God's Word, we risk a kind of deafness, listening only to what we wish to hear. As he writes, “The word ... can only be spoken and heard in silence, outward and inward” (*VD* §66). Here, we would do well to study the Word of God, and encourage our seminarians to do so, in the school of Mary: “Only in silence can the word of God find a home in us, as it did in Mary, woman of the word and, inseparably, woman of silence” (ibid).

The implications of such attentive listening to the Word of God - in prayer and in silence - are worth reflecting upon for all who form seminarians. *Are we allowing time, both in and out of the classroom, for seminarians to experience God's Word in such ways?* Do we train our seminarians in the art of *lectio divina*? How well do we promote such practice today?

When we open ourselves and encourage our seminarians to open themselves to the Word of God in such ways, as the pope suggests, we are entering into a dialogue with the God who has spoken and is speaking. When we permit ourselves and urge our seminarians to go beyond natural predilections and limitations, we begin to listen with “believers in every age,” to the Lord himself.

If this is true, then our pedagogical preparation involves not only intellectual or academic study, but also spiritual rigor. We must discover ways to integrate into our busy lives a reverent silence before God's Word, seeking to open our hearts so that we truly can hear God speaking to us in Scripture. James Keating writes, "The pure heart possesses us and orders our theological work toward its fulfillment in prayerful discourse on the truth of who Christ is."¹⁶ Such transformation *of our own hearts* is necessary, if we desire to move our seminarians beyond an intellectual receptivity of God's Word and towards such "pastoral desire." As Keating continues,

In the formation of the diocesan priest, the pure heart of the professor helps to order the theology he studies toward increasing pastoral desire ... *Seminary theology serves pastoral desire*: It deepens it, purifies it, and orders it rightly in ways that respect the man's capacity to receive the truths of Christ.¹⁷

In short, this first challenge for seminary formators is twofold; first, to better prepare today's seminarian as to the "primacy" of the inspired Word of God. This will require academic rigor, lively discussion, and proper attention to the Scripture documents and other relevant sources on biblical inspiration. All of our pedagogical efforts in this respect must be aimed at helping the seminarian come to see how inspiration was, is and always will be the most important precept in proper biblical interpretation. A second and equally important dimension of this challenge is to help seminarians enter into a dialogue with "the God who speaks" in Scripture. Although there are a number of means of raising this value, it seems that above all, seminary theologians and the seminarians we help form must develop and continue to foster a close relationship between *the study of Sacred Scripture and the life of prayer*. As Pope Benedict writes,

The study of Scripture ought to lead to an increased awareness of the mystery of divine revelation and foster an attitude of prayerful response to the Lord who speaks. Conversely, an authentic life of prayer cannot fail to nurture in the candidate's heart a desire for greater knowledge of the God who has revealed himself in his word as his infinite love. Hence, great care should be taken to ensure that seminarians always cultivate this *reciprocity between study and prayer* in their lives. This end will be served if candidates are introduced to the study of Scripture through methods which favour this integral approach (*VD* §82).

- 2) *Seminary theologians must help future priests to apprehend the Word of God as a truly historical word—while avoiding the pitfalls of a "histocentric" view.*

If we believe that the Word of God was genuinely shaped by authentically human agents, then an equal challenge is this: to encounter, and help our seminarians engage the Scriptures in ways that are historically robust and theologically sound. In other words, as crucial as the previous challenge is for us, i.e., to help our seminarians to encounter *the Divine author*, the "God who speaks," we must also help our seminarians to encounter *the human author* in Scripture.

¹⁶ James Keating, *Resting on the Heart of Christ: The Vocation and Spirituality of the Seminary Theologian* (Omaha: IPF Publications, 2009), 37.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, emphasis added.

Our biblical interpretation must account for salvation history as a “true history, and it should thus be studied with the methods of serious historical research” (*VD* §32). Among other things, due attention must be given to understanding the literary genres of the biblical texts themselves (cf. *VD* §34):

This means asking questions like: What kind of book is this? What is the literary form of the work? Is it poetry, prophecy, history? How one answers will have a direct effect on the interpretation of the text.¹⁸

In my own experience, many misunderstandings of seminarians about various biblical passages stem from a lack of knowledge in this area. Seminary professors need to make a renewed effort to help seminarians become more aware of how literary genre works – and how it contributes to meaningful interpretation of God’s Word. Adequate time must be allocated to this important task. We cannot discuss genre with our seminarians as a “passing remark” and expect that they will sort out the details on their own – no. Neither should seminarians be advised that simple recognition and application of the appropriate literary genre is sufficient. It is not; rather, as *Dei Verbum* instructs, “Sacred Scripture must also be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit in which it is written” (*DV* §12).

If we invest the necessary energy to explaining how *genre* effects biblical interpretation and demonstrate this as specific Scripture passages are discussed, we will help seminarians grow in knowledge and confidence – as they study other passages on their own, even after they leave seminary. Put another way, our dedication now may have long-lasting implications for not only our seminarians but also the people of God they will ultimately serve.

Positively, such efforts may ultimately reach the people of God in a variety of ways. As just one example, having a firm grasp of literary genre may assist the priest when one of his parishioners approaches him, disturbed by some fundamentalist interpretation of a Scripture passage. By being able to discuss the literary genre of the relevant passage intelligently, the priest may be better prepared to offer some pastoral reassurance and biblical guidance.

On the other hand, a lack of preparation in this area may reach the people of God in a negative sense. While many examples could be offered, I am thinking especially of the formation of seminarians in explaining the original meaning of a biblical passage in the context of the homily. In his discussion of “The Importance of the Homily,” Pope Benedict cautions the priest to avoid “generic and abstract homilies which obscure the directness of God’s word” (*VD* §59) as well as “useless digressions which risk drawing greater attention to the preacher than to the heart of the Gospel message” (*ibid*). Certainly, the homily is not the only encounter the people of God will have with Scripture, but it is a privileged occasion for them to hear the truth and beauty of God’s Word – and how it is “present and at work in their everyday lives” (*ibid*). But before the priest addresses the question, “What do the Scriptures being proclaimed *say to me personally*?” he must be able to first ascertain – and proclaim the answer to the question, “What are the Scriptures being proclaimed *saying*?” (Cf. *VD* §59.)

In addition to literary genre, the pope suggests that Catholic biblical exegesis must devote appropriate attention to the historical context in which a given text emerged (cf. *VD* §34). The study

¹⁸ Pitre, “The Mystery of God’s Word,” 62. Cf. *Dei Verbum* §12.

of both genre and context are, according to Pope Benedict, “basic elements for understanding the meaning intended by the sacred author” (ibid).

In the Exhortation, Pope Benedict refers specifically to the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, calling it “indispensable” (*VD* §32). It should be made clear that neither here in *Verbum Domini* nor elsewhere in his thought is Pope Benedict beholden to this method or any one method of biblical exegesis. In the same way, we too should not preference or align ourselves with any one approach of biblical exegesis. Following in the wisdom of previous Scripture documents,¹⁹ the pope reaffirms the historical footing of Scripture study and of Christianity itself: “The history of salvation is not mythology, but a true history, and it should be studied with the methods of serious historical research” (ibid).²⁰ Hence, Pope Benedict is affirming the historical-critical method as “indispensable” in as much as it is bound to *the reality of the Incarnation* as a historical fact.

As a result, seminary theologians are encouraged to prepare seminarians to robustly pursue scientific study and encounter the Bible as a “historical word”; provided that such methodological inquiry does not place a false dichotomy between Scripture and theology: “Only where both methodological levels, the historical-critical and the theological, are respected, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis worthy of this book” (*VD* §34).²¹

At the same time, we must be aware of the dangers of a “histocentric” view of Scripture, and by this, I mean one that reduces the Word of God to *a text belonging to the past*. Along these lines, the pope goes on to cite three dangers of such a dualistic approach. We must be aware of these in our own pedagogy.

First, the pope writes, separating history from theology, and concentrating on the Word only as historiography makes Scripture into something it isn’t, into “a text belonging only to the past” (*VD* §35). While not wishing to repeat the substance of our previous suggestions, such a “reductive” approach does not allow God to speak to us today; neither does it allow us to truly hear the past as God’s revelation, of God speaking in and through history. A second concern raised by the pope is that such dualistic approaches often rest not upon a hermeneutic of faith, but rather, a “*secularized hermeneutic* ultimately based on the conviction that the Divine does not intervene in human history” (ibid). Third and finally, the pope urges that such an approach ultimately ends up harming the faithful, by “casting doubt over fundamental mysteries of Christianity – as, for example, the institution of the Eucharist and the resurrection of Christ” (ibid).

In light of such dangers, can seminary formators really encourage the study of Sacred Scripture on historic grounds? The answer is “yes,” most certainly. But we must steer clear and help our seminarians to know how to steer clear of these perils. The primary impetus for historical inquiry of the written Word, we must remember, is located in the Gospel of John itself: *Verbum caro factum est*: “The word became flesh” (John 1:14).

Authentic Christianity, and authentic study of Sacred Scripture is not merely able to engage history, it is *rooted in history*. Today, some seminarians, especially those who have been put off, or

¹⁹ Cf. Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, Encyclical Letter on the Study of Sacred Scripture (Nov. 18, 1893), 21-22, 40; Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, Encyclical Letter Promoting Biblical Studies (Sept. 30, 1943), 3-4; *Dei Verbum*, 11-12. At present, the Pontifical Biblical Commission is studying the issue of biblical inspiration and truth. See: <http://visnews-en.blogspot>

²⁰ Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, *Intervention in the Fourteenth General Congregation of the Synod* (14 October 2008); *Insegnamenti* IV, 2 (2008), 492.

²¹ Ibid.

even harmed by secularized approaches may wish to avoid at all costs any sort of historical inquiry of Scripture. Such experiences have made some uneasy, even afraid of legitimate historical study. Yet, these fears must be overcome, and faith restored in the logic and necessity of a hermeneutic that involves robust historical and scientific study of God's Word. At the same time, not all of these fears are entirely unfounded and we would do well to speak frankly with our seminarians and reassure them of our commitment to a hermeneutic of faith – and help them to develop and strengthen a sound hermeneutic of faith, and to do so while they are still in seminary.

In light of what Pope Benedict discusses in *Verbum Domini* on this topic, several observations are raised in terms of helping our seminarians develop a healthy biblical hermeneutic.

First, seminary theologians must help seminarians to identify faulty approaches to Scripture, and to learn to critique biblical scholarship and its philosophical underpinnings.²² At the same time we should be careful to avoid sending false alarms to seminarians. While I do not believe most seminary professors wish to transmit such alarms intentionally, sometimes our own negative experiences with secularized approaches to Scripture may “leak out,” transmitting a message to our seminarians that registers as, for instance, “all historical-critical methods are harmful and to be avoided.”

Second, and even more importantly, we must help seminarians arrive to encounter the Word of God in an *integrative* fashion, which rightly harmonizes theology with history and faith with reason. By promoting a hermeneutic of faith aligned properly with reason, the pope writes, we can help seminarians avoid degenerating “into fideism, which in the case of Scripture would end up in fundamentalism” (*VD* §36). At the same time, seminary theologians must help seminarians to develop a biblical methodology which “in its investigation of the historical elements present in the Bible, is marked by openness and does not reject *a priori* anything beyond its own terms of reference” (*ibid*).

Evaluative Questions For Seminary Formators

We have reviewed how “clearly decisive” (*VD* §19) biblical inspiration is in Pope Benedict's *Verbum Domini*. Following this, we discussed two broader challenges for seminary formators today. Now, in closing, the following questions are put forth, in the hopes that they will be stimulate further reflection for all are called to help implement the Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* in the forming of Catholic seminarians.

- 1) *How accurate is it to say that the Word of God is the “soul of theology” in my own coursework, study and theological discussions with seminarians? In what ways could Scripture take a more ‘primary’ place in my formation of seminarians? In presenting ‘biblical inspiration,’ what resources do I rely upon? How much are my seminarians reading the primary sources on inspiration, e.g., Dei Verbum, Encyclicals and Scripture documents? Do my lectures and writing, as best as possible, reflect the depth and breadth of Catholic teaching?*
- 2) *Is adequate attention given in the classroom to helping seminarians discover the ‘human voice’ in Scripture? How to do help my seminarians begin to discover the historic context of a biblical passage? How competent are my seminarians at identifying the genre of a biblical passage? What is my – and*

²² “The time seems to have arrived for a new and thorough reflection on exegetical method ... What we do need is a critical look at the exegetical landscape we now have, so that we may return to the text and distinguish between those hypotheses that are helpful and those which are not.” Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on the Bible and the Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 21-22.

their disposition about historical methods of inquiry? What hopes – and fears – do they have, especially at the beginning of a course, about biblical exegesis?

- 3) *What steps do I take to insure that my seminarians are proficient at “listening” to the God who speaks, and not merely reading Scripture academically / intellectually? Do I encounter the inspired Word in silence? How comfortable are my seminarians with lectio divina? Are they given assignments or encouraged to pursue contemplative reading, either in or out of the classroom? To what extent would my seminarians say that there is a sound link between their study of Sacred Scripture – and their life of prayer? How can I help promote a stronger connection between the two?*

Conclusion

Near the end of *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict observes the following: “Saint John’s proclamation that the Word became flesh reveals the inseparable bond between God’s word and the human words by which he communicates with us” (VD §109). Those of us who strive to form seminarians as best as possible in God’s Word face many challenges. Yet, *Verbum Domini* again reminds us that biblical inspiration is a truly decisive concept and doctrine. Presenting it is a challenge, and one which we must rise to in the formation of healthy and well-prepared future priests. Yet, we may take some comfort knowing that as formidable a challenge as it is, it is one that has, over two millennia, “proved fruitful, as the history of the Church abundantly testifies” (VD §109).