

Faithfully Without Error...

By Graham Osborne

This is may be my last Shy Catholic column. Sadly, it may also be my most controversial.

Does the Catholic Church teach that the Bible contains error? The constant teaching of the Church for two millennia has been a resounding, "no". But surprisingly, many today would unreservedly answer, "yes", citing Scripture passages they claim contradict each other, or seem to contain factual errors concerning history, science or some other discipline.

The significance and magnitude of this situation was driven home to me after one of my lectures several years ago, when I was verbally attacked by a man preparing for ordination to the Permanent Diaconate. I had been discerning a call to the same ministry in my own diocese, and he assured me at the top of his voice in a crowded room that I wouldn't "last a minute" in the discernment process, holding the view of Scripture that I did.

My "view" was that Sacred Scripture is inerrant – it contains no error of any kind.

At this point, we could delve into individual claims of apparent Scriptural error, and give reasonable answers for each case, one by one.

For example, when St Paul is blinded by light on his trip to Damascus, Acts 9:7 claims that bystanders heard a voice speaking, while Acts 22:9 seems to suggest the bystanders did not hear the voice. How do we reconcile this apparent contradiction? The key lies in a proper understanding of the original, inspired Greek text.

In Acts 9:7, the bystanders did indeed hear the voice. But the Greek of Acts 22:9 does not dispute this fact. It merely clarifies that they did not *understand* the voice. Translators often wrestle with how best to present Biblical Greek phrases properly in English, but there is no contradiction here.

Or perhaps you are bothered by places where Jesus seems to suggest that he will return to earth before some now hearing him would die. Two thousand years later, many charge the Second Person of the Trinity with error, not realizing that the apocalyptic language Jesus was using was a reference to his coming in judgment against the Jewish leaders of his day that had rejected him, a judgment which would reach the height of it's fulfillment in the Roman siege of Jerusalem and the consequent destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 AD.

But rather than argue case by case through various disputed texts (there are many excellent books that handle such difficulties well), let's consider what authoritative, magisterial Church teaching has to say on this matter of "inerrancy."

The real controversy around this issue stems largely from Vatican II's document, *Dei Verbum* (DV) 11: "the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation."

All seems clear at first. But many today contend that the phrase, "for the sake of salvation", is intended to somehow limit the inerrancy of Scripture to only matters directly pertaining to salvation. They believe this phrase quietly admits that there indeed could be errors of history, science or other disciplines in Scripture, as long as they do not bear on issues of salvation.

But most can see the immediate danger in such a view: which particular passages of Scripture pertain to salvation, and which do not? Who will decide such questions? Such a proposition would quickly descend into a quagmire of personal subjectivity, much like the misguided doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* has resulted in tens of thousands of contrary views of Sacred Scripture in Protestantism.

But more to the point, such a view forces an interpretation onto the text that is simply *not in the text*. And nowhere in its official, doctrinal teaching does the Church EVER concede that there is error of any kind in Scripture. In fact, it teaches the exact opposite, and minces no words!

Let's start by first looking at the context of this phrase, and then follow with other magisterial texts that *Dei Verbum* (DV) quotes immediately before this phrase as well.

DV 11 begins by making some powerful statements, teaching that since all Scripture has been written "under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it has God as its author."

DV then clarifies the role of the inspired human authors: "In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing *everything and only those things which He wanted*." *Dei Verbum* goes on, confirming that, "*everything* asserted by the inspired authors... must be held to be *asserted by the Holy Spirit*... all Scripture is divinely inspired."

Could the Holy Spirit ever assert error? Impossible! And if the Biblical authors wrote "only those things which (God) wanted", again, how could error possibly enter into things?

With this in mind, the stage is set for our troublesome clause: "the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation"

Renowned Scripture scholar, Scott Hahn wades into the debate here. He has written a whole book on the inerrancy of Scripture, and he points out that, grammatically, the phrase, "for the sake of salvation", does not even apply to, or attempt to limit, Biblical inerrancy at all. It is simply a phrase that explains *why* God put these truths in writing for us: "for the sake of salvation."

Dr. Hahn then points out the obvious conclusion: "if everything asserted by the human authors is likewise asserted by the Holy Spirit, to attribute any form of error to Scripture would necessarily mean attributing that error to God himself." Huston, we have a problem...

Magisterial confirmation of this interpretation comes through the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "*Doctrinal Commentary*" accompanying the "Oath of Fidelity", (an oath to be taken by all those "Assuming an Office to be Exercised in the Name of the Church"). It includes the belief in "the absence of error in the inspired sacred texts" as belonging to the divinely and formally revealed articles of the Catholic faith – without qualification. It completely omits the "sake of salvation" clause, citing our disputed *Dei Verbum* 11 text in the process, thus making it clear that there is no intention by the Church to restrict Biblical inerrancy only to those texts that concern salvation.

But the stunning confirmation comes when we actually take a closer look at the quotes from Vatican I and earlier Papal encyclicals cited in *Dei Verbum* itself, intended to support this exact passage.

Vatican I starts us off, defining that the Books of Scripture, "being written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit... have God as their author." God does not make mistakes!

In his encyclical, *Providentissimus Deus*, Pope Leo XIII literally answers our question unequivocally for us: “It is absolutely wrong and forbidden, either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of Holy Scripture, or to admit that the sacred writer has erred... For all the books... are written wholly... at the dictation of the Holy Ghost; and... inspiration... is... incompatible with error... it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true.”

He then concludes with a strong condemnation of anyone who would counter the Church’s teaching on this matter: “those who maintain that an error is possible in... the sacred writings, either pervert the Catholic notion of inspiration, or make God the author of such error.”

Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, then confirms and reiterates this strong condemnation by Pope Leo XIII: “[When] some Catholic writers, in spite of this solemn definition of Catholic doctrine, by which such divine authority is claimed for the ‘entire books with all their parts’... ventured to restrict the truth of Sacred Scripture solely to matters of faith and morals, and to regard other matters, whether in the domain of physical science or history as... in no wise connected with faith... Leo XIII in *Providentissimus Deus*... justly and rightly condemned these errors.”

Similarly, in his encyclical, *Humani Generis*, Pope Pius XII again writes strongly: “some go so far as to pervert the sense of the Vatican Council’s definition that God is the author of Holy Scripture, and they put forward again the opinion, already often condemned, which asserts that immunity from error extends only to those parts of the Bible that treat of God or of moral and religious matters.

Can it get any clearer? What these references show, over and over, is that without question, God is the ultimate author of Sacred Scripture. If you try to attribute error of *any* kind to Scripture, you are not only attributing that error directly to God, but that such a perversion of doctrine has already been strongly condemned by the Church, and on multiple occasions! I don’t think that is a position that anyone would intentionally want to take!

Additionally, by quoting these previous papal encyclicals and Council decrees, *Dei Verbum* clearly shows that it affirms these earlier statements, and is not intending to introduce a contradictory teaching. Such a contradiction could potentially violate the dogma of infallibility as well.

But finally, some may contend that this concern over Scriptural inerrancy is simply not a big deal. Why does it even matter whether the Bible is inerrant or not?

But this is actually a question of profound importance. If God erred in giving us His Word, where else did he err? What else do we hold as true that isn’t *really* true, or maybe just partly true – and how can we know when truth ends and error begins? If we are not careful, we may find ourselves descending into the depths of uncertainty presented to the very first man and woman: Did God *really* say... (cf. Gen 3:1).

The great St Thomas Aquinas emphasizes this concern, authoritatively stating: “It is *unlawful* to hold that *any* false assertion is contained either in the Gospel or in any canonical Scripture, or that the writers thereof have told untruths, because faith would be deprived of its certitude which is based on the authority of Holy Writ.”

Addressing perceived Scriptural errors in the sciences, he adds: “give belief to those things written in the books of the prophets even though they treat of conclusions of scientific knowledge... the spirit of prophecy inspires the prophets even about conclusions of the sciences.”

Similarly, St. Augustine adds his own warning: “only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error... For it seems to me that most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books.”

So how *do* we properly interpret those difficult passages of Scripture? Again, the Church helps us here. *Dei verbum* emphasizes that, “since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words... attention should be given... to ‘literary forms.’ For truth is... expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse.”

In other words, we need to be attentive to what God intended to originally communicate through the inspired human author, particularly by examining the language and cultural and historical context the sacred author wrote in.

Dei Verbum then sums things up for us, acknowledging that, “In Sacred Scripture, therefore, while the truth and holiness of God always remains intact... words cannot express... how far He (God) has gone in adapting His language... for our weak human nature”, reminding us that, “the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church”.

Certainly there are passages in Scripture that present difficulties of interpretation. But there has been remarkable progress in understanding many such passages in recent years, particularly through improved language and historical scholarship, and most today have good, reasonable explanations.

And there are several great resources that address the apparent inconsistencies in Scripture that we sometimes wrestle with. Scott Hahn’s book, *For the Sake of Our Salvation; The Truth and Humility of God’s Word*, is an excellent starting point, as are several articles and books at CatholicAnswers.com.

But humanly speaking, we simply may not always understand everything we read in Scripture. There maybe times when we have to be humbly content with the great St. Augustine’s answer: “If we are perplexed by an apparent contradiction in Scripture, it is not allowable to say, the author of this book is mistaken; but either the manuscript is faulty, or the translation is wrong, or you have not understood it.”

When St. Paul exhorts us to, “put on the whole armor of God”, in Ephesians 6, that we “may be able to withstand in the evil day”, he lists only a single weapon: “the sword of the Spirit, which *is the Word of God*.” Would we really diminish this weapon because our human minds may not always be able to comprehend the fullness of truth contained there?

Pope Pius XII summarizes the constant teaching of the Church on Scriptural inerrancy beautifully for us in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Reflecting on John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”, he writes: “For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, ‘except sin,’ so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error.” Amen, Amen!

For the Sake of Our Salvation: The Truth and Humility of God's Word, by Scott Hahn

St Augustine: "the Bible has no more difficulties than nature. Whoever has once received these Scriptures as inspired by the Creator of the world, must expect to find in them all the difficulties which meet those who investigate the system of the universe."^[19]

St Augustine: "For it seems to me that most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books."^[20] "For I confess to your Charity that I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error."

St Augustine: "And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it."^[22]
[reply to Faustus the Manichaeon 11.5]

St Augustine noted, the Holy Spirit who spoke through the sacred writers, "did not intend to teach men these things - that is the essential nature of the things of the universe - things in no way profitable to salvation"; which principle 'will apply to cognate sciences, and especially to history . . .'" (Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 3).

St Thomas Aquinas: Aquinas insists that "the author of holy Scripture is God."^[26] Thus "revelation is the basis of sacred Scripture or doctrine."^[27] For "holy Scripture looks at things in that they are divinely revealed."^[28] So it is "in Holy Scripture, through which the divine will is declared to us."^[29] Citing 2 Timothy 3:16 ("All Scripture is inspired of God"), Aquinas refers to the Bible as "Divinely inspired Scripture."^[30] Humankind needs an infallible "divine revelation"; otherwise the truth about God would be apparent to only a few, and only then after a long time and mixed with many mistakes.^[31]

St Thomas Aquinas: give belief to those things written in the books of the prophets even though they treat of conclusions of scientific knowledge... **the spirit of prophecy inspires the prophets even about conclusions of the sciences.** ([*Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*](#), A. 2, C)

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CCC106: God inspired the human authors of the sacred books. "To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more."⁷¹

•**CCC 107:** "The inspired books teach the truth. "Since therefore all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that

the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures.”

•**St. Augustine** (≈ 400 AD): *‘If something in the Scriptures seems to be absurd, it is not permissible to say: “The author of this book does not keep to the truth.” Rather, “Either the codex is faulty, or the translator erred, or you have not understood it.”... it is not permissible to doubt that it is true.’*

SCOTT HAHN:

This means that God is the primary author of the Bible. He certainly employed human authors in this task as well, but he did not merely assist them while they wrote or subsequently approve what they had written. God the Holy Spirit is the *principal* author of Scripture, while the human writers are *instrumental* authors. These human authors freely wrote everything, and only those things, that God wanted: the word of God in the very words of God. This miracle of dual authorship extends to the whole of Scripture, and to every one of its parts, so that whatever the human authors affirm, God likewise affirms through their words.

St. Thomas Aquinas was well aware of this danger and asserted that "all other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal" (*STh I, 1, 10, ad 1*, quoted in CCC 116).

1. We must "[b]e especially attentive 'to the content and unity of the whole Scripture'" (CCC 112).
2. We must "[r]ead the Scripture within 'the living Tradition of the whole Church'" (CCC 113).
3. We must "[b]e attentive to the analogy of faith" (CCC 114; cf. Rom 12:6).

<https://www.calledtocommunion.com/2010/10/vatican-ii-and-the-inerrancy-of-the-bible/>

Restoring Context:

The “limited inerrancy” interpretation is produced by isolating the words “that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.” This error can be corrected simply by restoring these words to their context, taking into account these statements in the very same paragraph:

In composing the sacred books, God chose men [so that] they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit [...]

“[A]ll Scripture is divinely inspired and has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error [...].”

When all four statements are read together, it is clear that the Council is saying that the sacred authors wrote only what God wanted them to write, that everything they wrote was inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus attributed to God, and that everything they wrote was written for the sake of salvation. The phrase “for the sake of our salvation” is not a restrictive clause which separates the “truth” in Scripture from the rest of its contents. On the contrary, it affirms for us that what is taught in Scripture is the truth, and it is taught for our salvation.
