

THE BIBLE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

PART I

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1a Introduction—"The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerates the very body of the Lord. For from the table both of the word of God and of the body of Christ she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life, especially in the sacred Liturgy. . . . For in the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes to meet his children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life' (Vatican II, Constitution, *Dei Verbum*, on Divine Revelation, n. 21). The first theme of this Introduction, in CCHS (1), (art 1. *The Place of the Bible in the Church*), could hardly be expressed more concisely and also more profoundly than by the words which we have quoted from ch 6 of *Dei Verbum*. In consequence, we shall here simply explain and comment in detail on this ch, but we shall insert it in the body of the Constitution, and complete and illustrate it with other conciliar documents. The Constitution on Divine Revelation was in fact among the last documents promulgated by the Second Vatican Council. But the practical consequences which derive from its doctrine for the various aspects of the life of the Church were fairly widely touched upon either in the documents promulgated before this Constitution (e.g. in that on the Sacred Liturgy and in the Decree on Ecumenism), or in those promulgated more or less together with it, as is the case for the documents on the Apostolate of the Laity, on Priestly Formation, on the Ministry and Life of Priests, and on the Missions. In this way the Council itself offers us copious examples of the place which Sacred Scripture occupies in the life of the Church.

b THE PEOPLE OF GOD GATHERED INTO ONE THROUGH THE PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD

First of all let us consider in general what Holy Scripture signifies for the Church. Here is the reason added, in the context of the words quoted above, why the Church has always venerated Divine Scripture and taken care to nourish herself upon it: 'The Church has always regarded the Scriptures together with sacred Tradition as the supreme rule of faith, and will ever do so. For inspired by God as they are, and committed to writing once for all, they impart without change the word of God himself, and they make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles' (ibid). Various conciliar documents introduce us still more deeply into this purpose by indicating what may be called the existential position which the Word of God occupies in the life of the Church. For it is precisely through the preaching of the Gospel that the People of God is gathered together. The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests declares: 'The People of God is gathered into one first of all through the word of the living God' (n. 4). Similarly the Constitution on Divine

Revelation itself explains that the mystery of Christ 'had not been manifested to other generations as it was now revealed to his holy Apostles and prophets in the Spirit, so that they might preach the Gospel, stir up faith in Jesus, Christ and Lord, and gather together the Church' (n. 17). The dogmatic Constitution on the Church returns repeatedly to this thought: 'The Apostles by preaching everywhere the Gospel (cf Mk 16:20) which was received by their hearers under the influence of the Holy Spirit, gathered together the universal Church, which the Lord established on the Apostles and built on blessed Peter, their head, with Jesus Christ himself as the supreme corner-stone (cf Rev 21:14; Mt 16:18; Eph 2:20)' (n. 1, 9). Speaking in a similar way of particular churches, this same Constitution says that in them 'the faithful are gathered together by the preaching of the Gospel of Christ' (n. 26).

Then speaking of the divine mission entrusted by Christ to the Apostles, the same Constitution says that it will endure to the end of the world 'because the Gospel to be handed down by them (the Apostles) is for all time the source of the whole of the life of the Church. For this reason the Apostles took care to appoint successors in this hierarchically structured society' (ibid n. 20). Concerning this same theme of the word of God as principle of life, the Constitution says that the bishops 'by the ministry of the word communicate God's power to those who believe unto salvation' (n. 26).

(1) But what is the meaning in this text of the term 'the word of God'? Naturally by the preaching of the Apostles was meant in the first place the doctrine of Christ which they had received and had originally preached orally. Indeed the Constitution on Divine Revelation observes that the command of Christ 'was faithfully fulfilled by the Apostles who by their oral preaching, by example and by ordinances handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with him and from his works, or what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. It was fulfilled also by those Apostles and apostolic men who under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing' (n. 7). Therefore this same document adds 'Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and sacred Scripture' (n. 9), and 'they form one sacred deposit of the word of God which is committed to the Church' (n. 10). However the declarations of the conciliar texts that the People of God have been united by means of the word of God hold without any doubt also for Holy Scripture. Thus the Constitution on Divine Revelation says that the writings of the NT occupy a prominent place in the sacred deposit of the word of God. 'The word of God which is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe (cf Rm 1:16) is set forth and shows its power in an eminent way in the writings of the New Testament' (n. 17). The reason for this is that these writings are 'a perpetual and divine witness' of the fulfilment of the mystery which was hidden

1e before all ages in God, that is of the Incarnation, the Redemption and the foundation of the Church. Hence it is fully justifiable to interpret the texts mentioned above on the function and place which the word of God occupies in the life of the Church in a specially eminent sense of the written word of God, Holy Scripture.

f (2) What is the **deep meaning** of the doctrine expounded above that the Church is gathered together by means of the preaching of the Gospel and of the word of God? To understand it, we must remember the doctrine of the NT, recalled in the conciliar Constitution on the Church. According to this, just as Israel in its pilgrimage in the desert came to be called 'Church', Ecclesia, Qahal, that is assembly of God (cf Neh 13:1; Nm 20:4; Dt 23:1ff) so the New Israel, the Church of the NT, comes also to be called Church, or assembly of Christ. And the Constitution goes on: 'God has **gathered together** as one all those who in faith look upon Jesus as the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace, and has established them as the Church, that for each and all she may be the visible sacrament of this saving unity' (n. 9). So every time that the word of God rings out, there rings out this divine call which gathers together the people of God.

g We can however penetrate still **more deeply**, always following the doctrine of the Constitution of the Church; 'Christ instituted this new covenant, that is to say, the new testament in his blood (cf 1 Cor 11:25) by **calling together** a people made up from Jews and gentiles; they came together in unity not according to the flesh but in the Spirit and are the new People of God. For those who believe in Christ, being reborn not from a perishable but from an imperishable seed **through the word of the living God** (cf 1 Pt 1:23), not from the flesh but from water and the Holy Spirit (cf Jn 3:5f), are finally constituted "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people, . . . who in times past were not a people, but now are the People of God" (1 Pt 2:9f) (n. 9). So this is the way in which the People of God is gathered together, the Church is united by means of the word of God. The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests adds this significant and clarifying explanation: 'In fact through the saving word the spark of faith is struck in the hearts of unbelievers and fed in the hearts of the faithful. By this faith the community of the faithful begins and grows' (n. 4).

h A **confirmation** for all we have been saying on the function of the Word of God in the life of the Church comes from the repeated declarations of the Council that the duty of preaching the Gospel is among the principal duties both of Bishops and of Priests: 'Among the principal duties of bishops, the preaching of the Gospel has pre-eminence', says the Constitution on the Church (n. 25); and the Decree on Missionary Activity: 'The bishop should be first and foremost the herald of the faith, to lead new disciples to Christ' (n. 20). Then the decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests: 'Priests as co-workers with their bishops, have as their **primary** duty the proclamation of the gospel of God to all'. In this way they fulfil the Lord's command: 'Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature' (Mk 16:15). 'Thus they establish and build up the People of God' (n. 4).

2a THE WORD OF GOD ENTRUSTED TO THE APOSTLES AND THEIR SUCCESSORS

What in more detail is the way in which **the word of God becomes source of the life of the Church**? This comes about through **preaching** and this was entrusted by Christ to **the Apostles and their successors**, the

bishops. This answer is contained in the texts already 2a quoted. Christ entrusted the proclamation of this word to the **Apostles**. Then that the mission entrusted to them by Christ might endure until the consummation of the world, the Apostles entrusted it to their own successors, **the bishops**. This is an essential point of Catholic ecclesiology. As regards the function and place of the Apostles the thing is too clearly attested in the NT to be set in doubt. Hence it is admitted also by those Christians who do not share Catholic ecclesiological doctrine. The difficulty arises over the successors of the Apostles and in consequence over the hierarchical structure of the Church. Obviously we cannot treat it fully here. We shall content ourselves with adducing just one, but that an essential, conciliar text. The Apostles 'that the mission assigned to them might continue after their death, passed on to their immediate co-operators, as by way of testament, the duty of perfecting and consolidating the work begun by them. They charged them to attend to the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit had placed them to shepherd the Church of God (cf Ac 20:28). They therefore chose such men, and thereafter settled that when they died, other approved men should carry on their ministry' (n. 20). Who are principally their successors of the Apostles? The Constitution answers: 'Among the various ministries which from the earliest times were exercised in the Church, as Tradition witnesses, the chief place belongs to the office of those who, appointed to the episcopate through a succession which comes down uninterruptedly from the beginning, possess the lineage of the apostolic seed. Thus, as St Irenaeus testifies, through those who were appointed bishops by the Apostles and their successors down to our own time, the apostolic Tradition is manifested and preserved in the whole world' (ibid). This text already contains in part the relevant proofs taken either from Holy Scripture or from the most ancient Tradition. So we have no need to add others.

(1) Rather than occupy ourselves further with these ecclesiological foundations, it is important for us to see clearly what exactly is the **task of these Successors of the Apostles as regards the Word of God**, and in particular the written Word? It is the age-long problem of the relation between Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, between Sacred Scripture and Teaching Authority of the Church. Here too let us start afresh from basic facts, that is from the beginnings of the Church themselves. The text we have already quoted from the Constitution on Divine Revelation stated that Christ's command to instruct all nations was faithfully carried out both by the Apostles through oral preaching, examples and institutions, and by these Apostles and men of their circle who through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote down the tidings of salvation (cf n. 7). So we have a double way of proclaiming the message of salvation: oral and written. Now as to the latter, two cases have to be distinguished: if he who sets the message of salvation in writing is an Apostle, it is clear that when he writes, as when he preaches, he draws upon his own knowledge and carries out his own mandate—always under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand those who were not Apostles but only 'of the circle' of the Apostles proceed differently. St Luke puts it with his well-known precision in the introduction to his Gospel: they draw upon the testimony of those who were witnesses of the life and death of Christ and became ministers of the word: 'Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, **just as they were delivered to us by those who were from the beginning eyewitnesses and became ministers of the**

2d word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things accurately from the beginning, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have exact knowledge concerning the facts of which you have been informed' (Lk 1:1-4). But let us add immediately that both the writers who were Apostles and the others all wrote 'under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit' through whom their writings 'have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church' (Divine Revelation n. 11).

e What are the results of this whole process, whether of oral preaching or of what is expressed in writing? First of all the fact that the apostolic preaching, besides being handed on to the successors of the Apostles orally, is also 'expressed in a special way in the inspired books' (Divine Revelation n. 8), that is in the books in which the principal author is God himself. There is further a practical consequence which concerns the members of the Church, and that is the **obligation** to hold fast what has been handed on by the Apostles whether orally or by writing: 'The Apostles therefore, in handing on what they themselves have received, warn the faithful to hold fast to the traditions which they have learned either by word of mouth or by letter (cf Thes 2:15) and to fight for the faith which has been handed down to them once for all (Divine Revelation n. 8). What is the **content** of the things handed on? It includes 'all things which contribute to the holiness of life and the increase in faith of the People of God; and so the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she believes' (ibid).

f It is undeniable that the explanation of the way in which the word of God becomes concretely the principle of the life of the Church and the consequences of this doctrine have revealed to us a number of elements determining a somewhat complex situation. The factors which taken together make up the transmission of Revelation, that is the word of God, are thus synthesized by the conciliar Constitution on Divine Revelation: 'It is clear that sacred tradition, sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church are so linked and joined together according to God's most wise design, that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls' (n. 10). So the relative factors are: Sacred tradition, sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church. All three are so intimately united that no one of them can subsist independently of the others; each of them acts according to its own way and all together act under the determining influence of the Holy Spirit. Let us try then to grasp more deeply the way of acting proper to each of these factors and how they co-operate and converge to the same end of handing on the word of God to men and contributing to their salvation.

g (2) Let us start from a **psychological reflection**. Christ had to conceive and realize the way to transmit to humanity across the generations and by means of the Church the doctrine which he had brought from the Father. He found himself faced with the same fundamental problem which meets anyone who desires to transmit to posterity not only a certain number of facts, but especially a certain doctrine, still more a certain spirit. It is the specifically human difficulty met by all great founders in the social, political or religious fields. Two ways are open to them—and they are those which in fact have been followed in various ways in history: that of living transmission by means of men purposely formed, who would then form others, or that of the written word.

Naturally these two means or ways could also be combined 2g and used together. In dealing with the aim to transmit a spirit, it was very natural to think that the better and more effective way would be to do it by means of men prepared for this work who would transmit this spirit to others in a living way. History shows how in the majority of cases if this method was used, there was needed, to give the transmission a minimum of stability, the support of a minimum of formulae, which could be transmitted either with the oral transmission or in writing. Here naturally there arose a new difficulty, that of transmuting and incarnating a spirit into formulae. Moreover from the very way in which they were preserved and transmitted, these had to be not too numerous. The gravest difficulty was the comprehension and interpretation of such formulae in successive generations with all the changes of mentality and sometimes also of language which such succession carried with it. Therefore to the formation of men who would transmit the spirit in question in a living way, there had to be added the transmission of the right **interpretation** of the formulae in which it had been incarnated. Thus little by little the formulae, whether h transmitted orally or by writing, came to be immersed in a living fluid of interpretations and transmitted together with this living stream which went on growing and increasing with the passage of time. This stream of living interpretation which accompanied the formulae across the generations, had to grow the more, the more the spirit in question acquired importance and influence on the life of men. This meant in fact that the men who had the task of transmitting the formulae had time and time again to give life to them, in order to be able to communicate the spirit to ever wider strata of men and make it operative in their lives. Moreover this could not be managed with the immobility in which the formulae by themselves had been preserved and, so to speak, mechanically transmitted, but only on condition that the spirit was ever more deeply understood and assimilated by whoever had to transmit it.

(3) Now let us see how Christ acted with the purpose i of transmitting his doctrine from generation to generation by means of the Church. He chose rather first of all **living transmission**, that is preaching, the proclamation by means of his envoys, the Apostles and their successors, as is expressed in his command: 'Go then and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' (Mt 28:19f). That this way had to last till the end of the world is shown by the words which the Lord adds: 'And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age' (ibid). Besides, living transmission is part of the divine pedagogy already practised in the OT and then continued in the New, as St Paul explains in his letter to the Romans: 'How are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? . . . So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the command [RSV 'by preaching'] of Christ' (Rm 10:14f, 17).

(a) Let us seek to determine more closely the nature j of this transmission. The first and essential element is the **authority** of those sent by Christ: Christ invested them with his own authority and so, in this sense, with a divine authority. In fact he assured them: 'He who hears you, hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me' (Lk 10:16, cf Mt 10:15). The Constitution on Divine Revelation is still fuller and more explicit in this respect. It speaks of the 'living teaching office of the Church, whose

2j authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ' (n. 10). And the Constitution on the Church specifies: 'Bishops are the heralds of the faith who lead new disciples to Christ. They are authentic teachers, endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach to the people committed to them the faith they must believe and put in practice. By the light of the Holy Spirit they make the faith clear, bringing forth from the treasury of Revelation new things and old' (n. 25). The Constitution continues with precision: 'Bishops when they teach in communion with the Roman Pontiff, are to be respected by all as witnesses to divine and Catholic truth. The faithful are to accept the judgement of their bishop, given in the name of Christ in matters of faith and morals, and adhere to it with religious respect. This religious respect of will and intelligence must be shown specially to the authentic teaching of the Roman Pontiff' (ibid).

k The divine guarantee of the truth goes, under determined conditions, even as far as the divine **charisma of infallibility**, as the same Constitution explains further on: 'The individual bishops do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility. Nevertheless even when they are dispersed around the world, provided that they maintain the bond of communion among themselves and with Peter's successor, when in their authentic teaching on faith and morals, they concur on one judgement to be held as definitive, they proclaim the doctrine of Christ **infallibly**. This is still more clearly verified when, gathered together in an ecumenical council, they are teachers and judges of faith and morals for the universal Church. Their definitions must then be adhered to with the submission of faith' (ibid).

In the first of the texts quoted from the Constitution on the Church the expression that the Bishops make the faith clear 'by the light of the Holy Spirit' is to be noted (cf also Divine Revelation n. 10). The thought that the Apostles and their successors are assisted and supported by the Holy Spirit returns repeatedly in various forms in the same context of the Constitution on the Church. We shall speak of it more fully later, but it is important even now to have noticed this fact which is quite simply **decisive** for understanding the way in which Christ willed and realised the transmission of his doctrine.

3a (b) Let us also look at the **fullness of content** of what the Apostles preach and teach in this way. Jesus had given command in the text just quoted to teach and observe all that he had commanded. Now since the Gospel is not an ideology but aims at creating new life, the subject matter of preaching and teaching becomes also very extended. The Constitution on Revelation says on this matter: 'What was handed on by the Apostles includes everything which contributes to the holiness of life of the People of God and to the increase of the faith; and so the Church in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she is herself, all that she believes (n. 8). This fullness of content has consequences also for the way, that is the means, of transmission, which includes not only the word but also examples and institutions, as again the Constitution teaches: The Apostles 'in their oral preaching, in example and in ordinances, handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with him, from what he did, or what they had learned under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit' (n. 7).

b (c) But in his understanding of man and human nature, Christ has nevertheless not disdained the **help of the written word also**. 'Besides living preaching, some men, whether Apostles or men of their circle' 'under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing' (ibid). This same Constitution underlines the advantages possessed by the written word of God. The

divine Scriptures 'inspired as they are by God and committed once for all to writing, impart the word of God himself **without change**, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles (ibid n. 21). Here we are dealing with human words, inasmuch as the preaching of the Apostles is that which has been fixed in these writings by themselves or by their collaborators; nevertheless as these writings have been composed 'through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit', in virtue of this divine inspiration, it is God himself who becomes their principal literary author; the human words are at the same time words of the Holy Spirit (cf art. 'The Inspiration of Holy Scripture').

(d) A further step: the divine written word does **not supplant** or render superfluous the **handing on and the living preaching** of the Apostles and their successors. The task assigned to the Apostles and their successors is the fundamental fact willed by Christ himself for the whole duration of his Church. Besides, the written word of God has need in various ways of the support of living preaching. Not that the Apostles are its 'masters' and can change it or do the like. The written word of God is something definitive which of itself is removed from subjection to any human authority; Sacred Scripture, as we have seen earlier, imparts the word of God without any modification and makes the voice of the Holy Spirit resound. But it cannot witness by itself to its own character as word inspired by God. The peremptory and divine value of its witness can be recognized only **after** its inspired character is certain. So it is living tradition which enables the Church to know the whole canon of the Sacred Books (n. 8), since these books have been entrusted to the Church as they are, that is as inspired (ibid n. 11). Further, this written word has need to be interpreted. The Apostles themselves show that they are clearly aware of the need for an authentic interpretation of the word of God and know that this interpretation is their right and duty. St Peter, speaking of the epistles of St Paul, says that in them 'there are some things hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures' (2 Pt 3:16). And at the beginning of the same epistle he declares very energetically: 'First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of **private** interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but when men spoke for God it was the Holy Spirit that moved them (ibid, 1:21f). To the private and illegitimate explanation is evidently opposed the official interpretation of the 'ministers of the word', of the Apostles and their successors who constitute the living teaching authority of the Church willed by Christ himself. Hence the Constitution on Divine Revelation declares 'The task of interpreting authentically the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ' (n. 10).

(e) Moreover, the living tradition, or preaching 'makes the Sacred Writings unceasingly active' (ibid n. 8). Indeed the office of the Apostles of proclaiming the word of God should not and could not be exercised in a mechanical way. The handing on of revelation to living men who live in such various conditions with various mentalities and cultures, requires absolutely the explanation and interpretation of the gospel message, that it may be gradually assimilated and enter the life of men, in the concrete. Again, this living character requires that the office of interpreting the word of God in all its fullness, whether it is written or handed on by living people, be given and reserved to the Apostles and their successors. In fact the

3b 3e Constitution on Divine Revelation declares: 'The Apostles after the Lord's Ascension handed on to their hearers f what he had said and done. This they did **with that fuller understanding** which they enjoyed after they had been instructed by the events of Christ's risen life and taught by the light of the Spirit of truth' (n. 19). The Constitution also speaks in the same way of the work of the sacred authors who wrote the four Gospels: 'Selecting some of the many things handed down by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some to a synthesis, elucidating some in view of the state of the churches, and retaining the form of proclamation, but always in such fashion that they conveyed the sincere truth about Jesus' (n. 19; the Instruction of the Biblical Commission 'Holy Mother Church', AAS, 56 (1964) 715 can be compared with this and also Augustine Cardinal Bea, *La Storicità dei Vangeli*, Brescia, 1964, 38ff).

c g From this last requirement it appears clearly that Sacred Tradition, however faithful to the command and to the doctrine of Christ, is not and cannot be a thing without movement. There is in it a continuous progress, following upon a **continuous attempt to comprehend and penetrate** more fully what it contains. This agrees with Christ's word to the Apostles: 'I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth . . .' (Jn 16:12f). In this sense our Constitution affirms explicitly that the 'Tradition which comes from the Apostles progresses in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit' (n. 8). And elsewhere it explains: 'The Church, Bride of the Incarnate Word and taught by the Holy Spirit, progresses to attain an ever deeper understanding of Sacred Scripture so that she may unceasingly feed her sons with the divine word' (ibid n. 23). In this way 'there is growth in the understanding both of the things and of the words handed down. This comes through the reflection and study of believers, who meditate upon them in their heart (cf Lk 2:19, 51), through a deep understanding of the spiritual things experienced and through the preaching of those who have received together with episcopal succession, the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward to the fullness of divine truth, until the words of God reach their completion in her' (n. 8).

d h (f) It will be said that everything that has been stated on the task of the teaching authority of the Church is thoroughly clear. And yet it leaves a doubt which is not trifling and can become a preoccupation: If the Church's teaching authority has the task of interpreting and explaining in a living way the word of God, written or handed on, and of rendering it operative, could there not perhaps easily come from all this the danger that the word of God remains at the mercy of men and their arbitrariness? The danger, humanly speaking, is there. But apart from the guarantee of the presence of Christ and the work of his Holy Spirit in the Church—of which we shall say more later—we must indicate also the e i **very clear limits** set to the work of the successors of the Apostles. First of all it results from the NT that the Apostles—and in consequence their successors also—are **not masters** of the deposit of faith, but **only** and exclusively its **administrators**. A very characteristic concept of the teaching of the NT is that of 'handing-on'. This involves knowing how to receive a doctrine, to preserve it and to transmit it faithfully (cf 1 Thes 2:13; 2 Thes 2:15; 3:6; 1 Cor 11:2, 23; 15:1ff; Rm 6:17, etc). We may recall in this connection the well-known formulae of St Paul: 'I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you' (1 Cor 11:23); 'I delivered to you what I received'

(1 Cor 15:3). Time and again the warning is repeated to 3i keep the doctrine as it has been transmitted (cf 2 Thes 2:14; 1 Cor 11:2; 15:2). Indeed St Paul uses the very strong expression: 'Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before so now I say again, If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed' (Gal 1:8of). (Cf on this point, Augustine Cardinal Bea, *Storicità dei Vangeli*, Brescia, 1964, 26f).

The Constitution on Revelation speaks in the same j sense. It says very explicitly: 'The teaching office (of the Church) is **not** above the word of God, **but serves it**, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it prudently, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit. Everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed, it draws from this one deposit of faith' (n. 10). In other words the teaching authority of the Church—not less but in fact more than the faithful—must listen with faith to the word of God, accept it in its fullness, and keep it in its purity with the most absolute fidelity. Hence the Constitution on the Church says: 'When either the Roman Pontiff or the body of bishops together with him defines a judgement, they pronounce it **in accord with revelation itself. All are obliged to abide by and be k ruled by this revelation** which, whether written or preserved by tradition, is transmitted in its entirety through the legitimate succession of bishops and specially through the care of the Roman Pontiff. Under the light of the Spirit of truth it is thus religiously preserved and faithfully expounded in the Church' (n. 25). In order to be thus faithful to Revelation and to the sacred deposit confided to them, the members of the Church's teaching authority have a grave obligation to search out what is the doctrine of the faith with regard to particular points: 'The Roman Pontiff and the bishops, in view of their office and of the importance of the matter, give vigilant care and take appropriate means to inquire properly into that revelation and to give due expression to its contents' (ibid). This was done, for example at the dogmatic definition of Pius IX on the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and for that of Pius XII on the bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven (cf e.g. Vincenzo Sardi, *La Solenne definizione del dogma dell' Immacolato Concepimento di Maria Santissima*. Atti e documenti pubblicati nel 50 anniversario della stessa definizione, Roma, 1904; G. Filograssi, 'L'Assunzione di Maria santissima, dogma di fede', in *Civ. Catt.* 4 (1950) 281–92). This was done, using an enormous apparatus of Commissions and of experts, in interminable discussions with thousands of speeches of the Council Fathers both in the preparation and in the course of the development of the Second Vatican Council. And it is well known in what measure hundreds of theologians collaborated, without speaking of the fact that all this work rested on centuries of studies—exegetical, patristic, theological, etc. Of the collaboration of those who do not belong to the sacred hierarchy with the members of the hierarchy itself we shall speak again presently. And this will constitute a further complement to the concrete image of what is meant by sacred Tradition and the living teaching Authority of the Church and of its position with regard to the word of God in general and the written word in particular.

g) Has what we have said so far completely described m the way in which Christ has provided for the transmission of his Word to humanity across the generations? No. There remains a highly important question: How could

3m Jesus pledge his own divine authority in everything taught by those he sent, the Apostles and their successors? They are and remain poor fragile human beings and as such they can so easily make mistakes, if not altogether abuse their authority. And Jesus certainly cannot cover with his authority either abuses or errors; still less can he demand that teachers who can thus abuse their commission and go wrong should be believed, as he is. And yet he requires that they should be believed as he is believed. How can he? He can do it because he is able to assure the absolute fidelity of his envoys to his doctrine and to the truth. It is for this that when he confers the mandate 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' he adds the assurance: 'Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age' (ibid). Therefore the acceptance or not of the truth of the Teaching Authority of the Apostles and of their successors with all the prerogatives which belong to this Authority—as we have explained above—is a question of faith in Christ and in his promise. That promise is to assist those he sent, continually and even to the end of the world, in order that they may hand on his doctrine faithfully and without error. So faith can truly be put in them as in Christ himself.

4a How does Christ fulfil these promises of his in the concrete? Certainly they also signify that he himself is present and lives in his Church, he being 'the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God' (Col 2:19). All the same he himself assigns the task of assisting the Apostles and their successors, especially in the handing on of his doctrine, **to the Holy Spirit**, who is at the same time his own divine Spirit. This task of course does not concern only that presence whereby the Holy Spirit animates the whole life of the Church and all its members, so that St Paul can say: 'anyone who has not the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him' (Rm 8:9). Nor does it concern only the presence whereby the Holy Spirit gives the baptized access to the Father (cf Eph 2:18), abides in their hearts as in a temple (cf 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19), prays in them, bears witness to their adoption as sons (cf Gal 4:6; Rm 8:15f, 26), and instructs and directs them through various gifts (cf 1 Cor 12–14). In the case of the Apostles and their successors we are concerned, besides all these gifts, with a new and quite special gift. Christ has promised the Apostles his own special assistance with regard **to their office as authentic teachers** of his doctrine. He made this promise in view of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost: 'Behold I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high' (Lk 24:49). And again: 'You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judaea and Samaria and to the end of the earth' (Ac 1:8). In the discourse at the Last supper he spoke repeatedly of the sending of the 'Spirit of truth' (cf Jn 14:17; 15:26) and in particular: 'These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he **will teach you all things**, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you' (Jn 14:25f) 'I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he **will guide you into all truth**; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come' (16:12ff). Hence St Paul can say that 'the Church of the living God (is) the pillar and bulwark of the truth' (1 Tm 3:15).

The Constitution on the Church makes this doctrine **4c** more specific and precise. Speaking of the office of the Apostles and of their successors, it says: 'For the discharging of such great duties, the Apostles were enriched by Christ with a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit coming upon them (cf Ac 1:8; 2:4; Jn 20:22f). **This spiritual gift they passed on to their helpers** by the imposition of hands (cf 1 Tm 4:14; 2 Tm 1:6f), and it has been transmitted down to us in episcopal consecration, (n. 21). A little further on the Constitution declares solemnly: 'It is clear that by means of the imposition of hands and the words of consecration, the grace of the Holy Spirit is so conferred and the sacred character so impressed, that bishops in an eminent and visible way undertake Christ's own role as Teacher, Shepherd and High Priest, and act in his person' (ibid). Only such assistance of the Holy Spirit can offer a valid foundation to the guarantee of truth and still more of infallibility.

We may conclude our rather long but fundamental **d** exposition on the tasks of the Apostles and their successors as regards the word of God with one last observation. It concerns the **spirit** in which these Shepherds ought to fulfil their own mission. Here is the problem: There is no doubt that the office entrusted to the Apostles and their successors is as lofty as it could be. So it is no wonder that in the course of centuries it has caused vertigo in one or other of the Hierarchy, and made him a victim of vainglory or pride; nor that in the history of the Church this office was sometimes repudiated as contrary to Christian humility and to the brotherhood which ought to exist between the disciples of Christ. Hence—while keeping intact the doctrine of the NT and of the Church on the point—it is important to underline the **spirit** with which this great office ought to be exercised. The spirit is that of humble service. The ministry of the Apostles and of their successors is not conceived as an exaltation of one over the rest, but as **humble service of the brethren**. Speaking of the office of the bishop the same Constitution declares that 'the office which the Lord committed to the shepherds of his People is a true **service**. In sacred Scripture it is significantly called 'diaconia' or ministry (n. 24; The Constitution adds in evidence a series of Biblical texts). And again: 'Those ministers who are endowed with sacred power are **servants** of their brethren, so that all who are of the People of God and therefore enjoy true Christian dignity, may work towards a common goal freely and in due order, and arrive at salvation' (n. 18).

SACRED SCRIPTURE IN THE CHURCH

5a

In The Liturgy—We have established the duties and the competence of the Shepherds with regard to the word of God. It remains to see, always in the light of the conciliar documents, how this duty is put into practice, or what practical measures are envisaged by the Council that the written word of God may become effectively the principle of the whole life of the Church. In this connection we have already seen the energetic declaration of the Constitution on Divine Revelation: 'Access to sacred Scripture ought to be wide open to the faithful' (n. 22). Now the first and foremost place where this access is opened and where the Church offers the faithful the bread of life, not only that of the table of the Body of Christ, but also that of the word of God (cf Divine Revelation n. 21) is the **Sacred Liturgy**.

(1) First of all the **deep spirit of faith** which **b**