

SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

VATICAN II ON REVELATION
J. P., I

DOGOMATIC CONSTITUTION ON DIVINE REVELATION

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Vatican II on Revelation

THE Constitution on divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), which is now hailed by Catholics and non-Catholics alike as one of the most important and most beautiful documents of the Second Vatican Council, made an unpromising start in the first session. The original draft presented for discussion reproduced the abstract textbook notion of revelation; it tended to discourage the work of present-day Scripture scholars (it had been preceded by a violent extra-conciliar campaign against the Roman Biblical Institute and the new trends in exegesis); above all, it was distinctly unecumenical, its anti-Protestant inspiration being evident in its very title, *De fontibus revelationis*, intended to stress the controversial doctrine of two distinct sources of revelation. When after a preliminary debate a vote was taken on whether the schema was acceptable as a basis for discussion, it failed to obtain the required majority of two-thirds: while approved by 1,368, it was rejected by 822. After this, Pope John XXIII ordered a revised text to be prepared by a mixed commission (theological commission and secretariat for Christian unity). Cf. *CLERGY MONTHLY* 1963, 48.

This historical vote, taken on November 20, 1962, has been greeted as the end of the Counter-Reformation and the beginning of a new era. It was an indication of the orientation the Council was to take in all the coming debates.

For the second session of the Council a revised text was distributed. It was received without enthusiasm and never came up for discussion. The schema seemed to have been shelved, and many were surprised when Pope Paul VI in his concluding address expressly mentioned it as one of the important matters still to be treated by the Council.

It did come up for a full-scale debate in the third session (Sept. 30-Oct. 6, 1964), but only after the text had been revised once more, this time more deeply, in keeping with the recent progress of theology, exegesis and ecumenism. The new text satisfied not

only the fathers who had rejected the original schema, but eventually obtained almost unanimous approval, despite the objections raised by a small but very active group of conservative bishops (particularly against the chapter on Tradition). (Cf. *CLERGY MONTHLY* 1965, 48).

The voting on the text, after the amendments suggested by the discussion had been made, could take place only at the beginning of the fourth session (September 20-22, 1965). The *modi* proposed in this voting were examined by the commission, and after a last revision¹ the whole text was approved on October 29 by 2,081 *placet* against 27 *non placet*.

On November 18 the Constitution *Dei Verbum* was promulgated after a final vote had been taken which showed 2,344 *placet* and only 6 *non placet*. This is a clear sign of the remarkable evolution which had taken place in the minds of the fathers between 1962 and 1965.

* * *

The theological and ecumenical importance of this document about the very foundation of the Christian faith has been universally recognized. The text calls for close study, as its wording has been very carefully weighed by the commission. For our present purpose it is enough to call attention to a few characteristic points.

The abstract intellectualist conception of *revelation* as found in the original schema has given way to a more complete conception. Revelation is not merely a set of propositions, it is God's

1. At the last moment the Holy Father proposed three *modi*, meant to clarify the text on three delicate points of doctrine. After discussing them, the commission agreed on three changes:

In n. 9 it added the words: "Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything that has been revealed." This leaves open the disputed question of whether Tradition adds any new truths to the content of Scripture. The whole text, however, inclines to a negative answer: Tradition is not presented as a quantitative supplement to Sacred Scripture, but it is needed in order to discover with certainty the full meaning of the sacred text (cf. the report of Cardinal Florit previous to the last voting). Some truths are found in Scripture only implicitly.

In n. 11, regarding the extent of the *inerrancy*, or, as it is now better called, the *truth* of S. Scripture: the previous text might have been interpreted as limiting it to "salutary truth", or matters concerning faith and morals. The new text, while stressing the "salutary" purpose ("the truth which God wanted to be put in the sacred writings for the sake of salvation"), says nothing about the concrete extent of inerrancy.

In n. 19, regarding the truth of the gospels, the Pope wanted the word *historical* to be inserted. The final text has: "the Church unhesitatingly affirms the historicity of the gospels."



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