

The Doctrine of Biblical Inspiration: Illumination from a 19th Century Papal Encyclical

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Hence, because the Holy Spirit employed men as His instruments, we cannot, therefore, say that it was these inspired instruments who, perchance, have fallen into error, and not the Primary Author. For, by supernatural power, He so moved and impelled them to write — He so assisted them when writing — that the things which He ordered, and those only, they, first, rightly understood, then willed faithfully to write down, and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth. Otherwise, it could not be said that He was the Author of the entire Scripture.

Pope Leo XIII
Providentissimus Deus

Introduction

It is appropriate for the Church Militant to have some knowledge of the concept of supernatural revelation. This equates to some familiarity with Sacred Scripture; a familiarity that ought to be appreciated by Catholics who love Tradition. This is so because within Tradition, God’s written word is a subset. In this light, it is beneficial to study a specific truth: the doctrine of biblical inspiration. Such a study will facilitate a future examination on the related theme of biblical inerrancy; Scripture’s freedom from all error.

God’s Providential Use of Written Revelation

Sacred History, beginning with the events related to Creation and ending with the death of the last apostle, testifies that God chose at certain times to have His revelation recorded in written form. Undoubtedly, the Old and New Testaments show God’s word “written” (i.e., Scripture), and God’s word “preached” (i.e., Tradition), being guarded and interpreted by an “authoritative body” — that is, Old Testament leaders and New Testament Magisterium). Tradition and the Magisterium are essential, but for now, our focus is this written word of God.

The Holy Bible reveals many instances of God, or His delegated authorities, making use of a written record to communicate God’s words and deeds. The Old Testament bears witness to “divine writing” in events such as Moses defeating the Amalekites (Ex. 17:14);

the LORD'S counsel to Joshua and Moses (Deut. 31:19); the renewed covenant at the time of Nehemiah (Neh. 9:38); the coming war of Assyria over God's people (Is. 8:1); the future restoration of a "New" Israel via the Catholic Church (Jer. 30:2); the vision of the LORD returning to His "New" Temple (Ez. 43:11); the Chaldean invasion over Judah (Hab. 2:2); the angel Raphael's visit to Tobias and his son (Tob. 12:20); and the acquisition of godly wisdom (Sirach's prologue).

Proceeding to the New Testament, we notice the same pattern with respect to "divine writing." In a general sense, the entire New Testament can be brought forward as proof of such communication. However, some specific examples are worthy of consideration. The Evangelists spread the Gospel with a recorded message (Lk. 1:3, Jn. 20:31). St. Paul repeatedly uses a written medium to justify his authority as an Apostle (Rom. 15:15); to issue commands regarding morals and ecclesiastical order (1 Cor. 5:9, 2 Cor. 13:10); to reveal the mystery of the Catholic Church (Eph. 3:3); to encourage believers (Phil. 3:1); to appeal on behalf of a Christian slave (Phm. 21); and to prevent the faithful from falling back into the Old Covenant system (Heb. 13:22). St. John the apostle writes to his spiritual children on a number of different themes including the forgiveness of sin (1 Jn. 2:12); the eternal sonship of Jesus Christ (1 Jn. 2:13); the overcoming of Satan (1 Jn. 2:14); the incompatibility between truth and falsehood (1 Jn. 2:21); the danger of heretical teachers (1 Jn. 2:26); salvation through God's Son (1 Jn. 5:13); the role of Tradition (2 Jn. 12, 3 Jn. 13); and the vindication of the apostle's authority (3 Jn. 9). St. Jude writes to defend the deposit of faith (Jude 3). Revisiting St. John the apostle, we notice his famous Apocalypse is filled with commands to maintain a written record of God's dealings with mankind (Rev. 1:11; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5).

Not wishing to belabor the points above with endless Scripture references, we wish only to demonstrate that the Holy Bible offers sufficient proof of the place and value of God's written communication. Now, it is necessary to distinguish this inspired writing from mere secular literature.

Pope Leo XIII and Two Aspects of Biblical Inspiration

Sacred Scripture is the only writing of its kind that comes down to us via the special charism called “inspiration.” Trustworthy scholars ought to agree with this basic definition: inspiration is the mysterious “working together” of God and man in the composition of the books of the Holy Bible. The fact of inspiration has been declared at the Ecumenical Councils of Florence in the *Decree in Behalf of the Jacobites* (1441-2); Trent’s *Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures* (1546); and Vatican I’s *Dei Filius* (1870). Although not acting in the same manner as these three previous conclaves, Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum* (1965) does restate the same fact concerning inspiration.

In view of these conciliar declarations above, a classic explanation of Biblical inspiration, foundational for our study, comes from Pope Leo XIII’s *Providentissimus Deus* (1893). At the time of its promulgation, this encyclical was considered by many to be the most extensive magisterial treatment for the field of biblical studies. All subsequent pronouncements build upon this nineteenth century text. *Providentissimus Deus* II, D, 3a is our section under observation (quoted at the beginning of this essay). The text offers a breath of fresh air, which contrasts sharply with today’s stale climate of theological and philosophical pollution. The encyclical will serve as our point of departure as we examine biblical inspiration from two aspects, those of God and man. Along with the magisterial declaration, we will appeal to the Church Fathers and St. Thomas Aquinas for additional insight. The third and ever crucial aspect, the Holy Bible itself as a completed sacred work, will get the proper attention in the future article on biblical inerrancy.

Biblical Inspiration and the Work of God

The portion of the Leonine quote from *Providentissimus Deus*, “For, by supernatural power, He so moved and impelled them to write,” addresses the aspect of biblical inspiration pertaining to God Himself. This sentence contains some key implications that are taken for granted within dogmatic theology. Inspiration is an extraordinary grace given by God to the Biblical writer, not for his own holiness, but for the benefit of the entire Catholic Church. This grace, infallibly efficacious, is a supernatural motion from

God that yields a supernatural effect. Such a grace was limited to a select number, whom we call biblical authors, during a unique time of Sacred History. Thus, the charism of inspiration is a transitory movement and not a permanent habit.

The Pauline text of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is the most important passage for this aspect of our doctrine: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” We will discuss the theological significance of this passage, and return to the practical application for the Church Militant.

Theologically speaking, St. Paul has left us the key term “inspired,” from the Latin Vulgate’s *inspirata*. The foundation for the Vulgate is the Greek term *theopneustos*; a rarity used once in the entire New Testament. Moreover, the term isn’t employed in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), and is also scarce in secular Greek. The Pauline word is telling, consisting of *theos* (God) and *pneo* (breathe, breathe into). The Greek or Latin reveals the same enlightening truth — the breath of God. Fittingly, some contemporary translations render *theopneustos* as “God-breathed” (e.g. New International Version and the Amplified Bible). No matter the translation, the underlying term explicates the divine origin of the Holy Scriptures. Such a term draws the contrast between God’s written word and mere human compositions. Note well: inspiration applies only to the original documents, usually called “autographs.” Subsequent copies are not inspired, although sufficient to furnish an accurate reproduction of the autographs. This point will be discussed in a later article.

Some argue that St. Paul is only addressing the Old Covenant books in the context of 2 Timothy 3. Strictly speaking, this is correct. However, St. Paul appears elsewhere to place both Testaments in the same category of “Scripture,” showing that 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is applicable also to the New Covenant writings. Look at 1 Timothy 5:17-18: “Let the presbyters who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’” Here, St. Paul links a

citation from Deuteronomy 25:4 with Luke 10:7 — identifying both passages as “Scripture.” The Apostle treats the Gospels (although it is uncertain if all four were written by that time) in the same group as the Old Covenant writings: both are God-breathed Scripture. This is a reasonable exegesis and application of 1 Timothy 5:17-18 to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, an interpretation endorsed by the renowned Biblicist, Monsignor John Steinmueller (cf. *A Companion to Scripture Studies* 1:11). Noteworthy is the confirmation from St. Peter in 2 Peter 3:14-16, who uses the same word “Scripture” to identify the very writings of St. Paul.

Practically speaking, the real-life application of God’s work of biblical inspiration is manifold. If Scripture is revealed by God for “teaching,” then the Holy Bible must have a level of prominence for the sacred science of theology; that area of knowledge that assists us in pressing nearer to the Triune God, Our Lady, the saints, and the angels. If Scripture is revealed by God for “reproof,” then the Holy Bible must be able to function as a light for exposing our errors, either in faith or morals. If Scripture is revealed by God for “correction,” then the Holy Bible must serve as an aid in overcoming those very faults brought to our attention, providing a remedy for our theological or spiritual illnesses. If Scripture is revealed by God for “training in righteousness” to make us “complete” for “every good work,” then the Holy Bible ought to be able to educate Catholics to cultivate the supernatural life in union with the Blessed Trinity. Testimony to this last point comes from the greatest spiritual masters of the Catholic Faith, such as de Sales, Faber, and Goodier (to name only a few), who used Scripture in the most sensible fashion to draw Catholics closer to the Savior.

Biblical Inspiration and the Work of Man

The next portion of the Leonine quote from *Providentissimus Deus*, “the things which He ordered, and those only, they, first, rightly understood, then willed faithfully to write down, and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth,” addresses the aspect of biblical inspiration pertaining to man. The Scripture references we cited earlier furnish ample proof of God’s use of certain men to transmit supernatural revelation. We must,

however, make mention of another biblical passage in view of Pope Leo XIII: a text from the first Roman Pontiff.

St. Peter writes: “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:20-21). The first Pope reveals the twofold authorship of the books of Holy Writ; God and man. One can see the influence of this Petrine text in Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical. Two key ideas on inspiration expressed in *Providentissimus Deus* are traceable to 2 Peter: the cooperation of man, and the work of the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. Although there is some mystery here, several points can be stated with confidence about man and God’s written word.

Biblical inspiration employs the intellect, will, and executive powers of the human writers. There is the reality of the divine motion throughout the whole process: beginning with the conception of the writer’s ideas, and ending with the actual production of the book. Throughout the course of action of inspiration, the writer was acting in a human manner: free and intelligible. This is evident from the rich variety of literary styles and modes of expressions found within Holy Writ. For example, St. Matthew’s Gospel is a different flavor from the prophecies of Daniel. The Acts of the Apostles is a unique style apart from the wisdom of Sirach. Many books in the Holy Bible are alike, but many are different — yet all the books are inspired by God and consequently free from all error. Let us now try to penetrate further this human aspect of inspiration with a focus on a key term from Pope Leo XIII: “instrument.” This word requires some attention to the Church Fathers and perennial Christian philosophy (i.e. Thomism).

The Patristic epoch left us several treatises that address, even if only in passing, the role of the human writers during the process of biblical inspiration. The Church Fathers provide some basis for that great Scholasticism which develops in further detail the concept of Supernatural Revelation. Within the Patristic legacy, Athenagoras of Athens speaks of the “Spirit from God, who moved the mouths of the Prophets like musical

instruments” (*A Plea for the Christians* 7; A.D. 177). St. Theophilus of Antioch, writing *To Autolytus* 2.9 in A.D. 181, labels the biblical composers “worthy of receiving this reward, that they should become instruments of God.” *The Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* 2, from St. Hippolytus of Rome in A.D. 200, describes the Scripture writers as “furnished with the Spirit, and largely honored by the Word Himself; and just as it is with instruments of music.” An author whose identity is writes of “the Divine Plectrum itself, descending from heaven, and using righteous men as an instrument” (*Hortatory Address to the Greeks* 8; A.D. 260-302).

Proceeding to the thirteenth century, we discover that St. Thomas Aquinas puts into service the same term “instrument” while discussing biblical inspiration. The Angelic Doctor treats inspiration under the heading “Prophecy” in the *Summa Theologiae* II-II, qq. 171-174. Here, Thomas explains the creature/Creator relationship as follows: “In prophetic revelation the prophet’s mind is moved by the Holy Ghost, as an instrument that is deficient in regard to the principal agent” (II-II, q. 173, art. 4). Certainly, the Angelic Doctor went deeper into the notion of “instrument” than did the Patristic writers.

In view of the Patristic, Scholastic, and papal uses of the term “instrument” mentioned above, let us try to understand how this word provides insight for understanding inspiration. God is the Principal Efficient Cause of inspiration; man is the instrumental efficient cause. Simply stated: God acts by His own virtue or power; man acts not by his own power but insofar as he is moved by God. This “philosophical language” helps explain the fact that Scripture has two authors: God is the Author, by means of a human author. In this vein, Pope Leo XIII also utilizes the term “Primary Author” for God, with man fittingly called secondary author. Note well: “instrument” does not mean robot. Therefore, let us reemphasize an earlier point, that throughout the course of action of inspiration the writer was acting in a human manner, free and intelligible.

The Scholastic explanation above is in complete harmony with 2 Peter 1:20-21. This, by the way, proves the worth of sound Christian philosophical method for grappling with the Catholic Faith. It is no wonder then that Pope Leo XIII, following the Church Fathers

and St. Thomas Aquinas, employs a Scholastic term in his groundbreaking encyclical with reference to the work of man in biblical inspiration.

Final Thoughts on God-breathed Scripture

There will always remain some degree of mystery with regard to the relationship between the divine and human in the matter of biblical inspiration. This is not unlike a study upon Grace and nature or Providence and free will. Still, it is hoped that we have touched upon some noteworthy points from *Providentissimus Deus*; an encyclical that ought to be read in its entirety. Our next article will take our doctrine of Biblical inspiration and consider its logical conclusion: an inerrant and infallible Holy Bible, a sacred work free from all error. We will use the writings of St. Luke to demonstrate the perennial doctrine of biblical inerrancy, a truth that ought to be cherished and defended by all Catholics.

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