

What does **Section 7 of Dei Verbum** teach?

For 2000 years the Church has taught that two Apostles, who had lived with Christ wrote gospels and two men, who knew some of the Apostles, wrote another two. All four should be treated as reliable historical documents.

In 1965, the Second Vatican Council issued *Dei Verbum* as a Doctrinal Constitution. In this the Church restated her teaching, as may be seen from reading an extract from Sections 7. The following is as translated by Walter Abbott, S.J. and published in: ‘The Documents of Vatican II’ of the same year:

“This commission 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 what He did, or what they had learned through** the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The commission was fulfilled, too, **by those Apostles** and apostolic men **who** under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit **committed the message of salvation to writing**”.

In 1975, Austin Flannery, O.P. edited: *Vatican Council II*. He claimed it was: ‘a newer, more accurate translation of the original sixteen documents [of the Council]’. But Flannery’s version of this extract from Section 7 was less accurate than Abbott’s and provided an ambiguous meaning:

“This was faithfully done: it was done by the apostles who handed on, by the spoken word of their preaching, by the example they gave, by the institutions they established, what they themselves had received - **whether** from the lips of Christ, from his way of life and his works, **or whether** they had learned it at the promptings of the Holy Spirit: it was done by those apostles and other men associated with the apostles who under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation in writing.”

The double intrusion of the word ‘whether’ [not in the original Latin] caused the paragraph to imply that the authors may have received their information from the Holy Spirit alone, not directly from being with Christ or listening to his Apostles.

Abbott’s book was not reprinted, so Flannery’s book held a monopoly for many years in the Lecture Halls and classrooms. The arrival of the Internet broke this monopoly. When we read the translation on the Vatican website we find it is the same as Abbott’s, with the exception of the word ‘apostle’ being changed to ‘Apostle’.

The original Latin reads: Quod quidem fideliter factum est, tum ab Apostolis, qui in praedicatione orali, exemplis et institutionibus ea tradiderunt quae sive ex ore, conversatione et operibus Christi acceperant, sive a Spiritu Sancto suggerente didicerant, tum ab illis Apostolis virisque apostolicis, qui, sub inspiratione eiusdem Spiritus Sancti, nuntium salutis scriptis mandaverunt.

To see which translation is correct, we are able to compare them with the wording in other languages.

Italian: Ciò venne fedelmente eseguito, tanto dagli apostoli, i quali nella predicazione orale, con gli esempi e le istituzioni trasmisero sia ciò che avevano ricevuto **dalla bocca del Cristo vivendo con lui e guardandolo agire**, sia ciò che avevano imparato dai suggerimenti dello spirito Santo, quanto da quegli apostoli e da uomini a loro cerchia, i quali, per ispirazione dello Spirito Santo, misero per scritto il messaggio della salvezza.

Spanish: Lo cual fue realizado fielmente, tanto por los Apóstoles, que en la predicación oral comunicaron con ejemplos e instituciones lo que habían recibido **por la palabra, por la convivencia y por las obras de Cristo**, o habían aprendido por la inspiración del Espíritu Santo, como por aquellos Apóstoles y varones apostólicos que, bajo la inspiración del mismo Espíritu, escribieron el mensaje de la salvación.

German: Das ist treu ausgeführt worden, und zwar sowohl durch die Apostel, die durch mündliche Predigt, durch Beispiel und Einrichtungen weitergaben, **was sie aus Christi Mund, im Umgang mit ihm und durch seine Werke empfangen** oder was sie unter der Eingebung des Heiligen Geistes gelernt hatten, als auch durch jene Apostel und apostolischen Männer, die unter der Inspiration des gleichen Heiligen Geistes die Botschaft vom Heil niederschrieben.

French: L'ordre du Christ a été fidèlement exécuté par les Apôtres qui, dans leur prédication orale, leurs exemples, dans ce qu'ils ont établi, ont transmis soit ce qu'ils avaient reçu **de la bouche du Christ, de leurs relations intimes avec lui, de ses oeuvres**, soit ce qu'ils avaient appris sous la suggestion du Saint-Esprit; cet ordre a été fidèlement exécuté par ces Apôtres et ces hommes apostoliques qui, sous l'inspiration du même Esprit Saint, ont consigné par écrit le message du salut.

The highlighted words translated into English are as follows:

Italian: **what they had received from the mouth of Christ, living with him and watching his works, or what they learned from suggestions by the Holy Spirit,**

Spanish: **what they had received by word, by having lived with Christ and his works, or had learned through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,**

German: **what they received from the mouth of Christ, in company with him and through his works, or what they had learnt under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,**

French: **what they had received from the mouth of Christ, from their close relations with him, from his works, and that which they had learnt under the influence of the Holy Spirit ...**

English: **what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with him, and from what he did, or what they had learned through the promptings of the Holy Spirit,**

So the Flannery translation of this part of Section 7 is clearly misleading.

Extracts from Sections 18 and 19 of Dei Verbum support the meaning given by Abbott and the Vatican website:

“The Church has always and everywhere held and continues to hold, that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin. For what **the Apostles preached**, in fulfilment of the commission of Christ, **afterwards they themselves** and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, **handed onto us in writing**: ... the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John”.

“... **the four Gospels** just named, **whose historical character the Church** unhesitatingly **asserts**, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation...”

So the companions of Jesus wrote two Gospels and others, using second-hand information, wrote two. If all four depended on second-hand information, the Fathers of the Council would not have made a distinction between the two sets of authors.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Christians have always recognised that borrowing had taken place between the Synoptic Gospels (those according to Matthew, Mark and Luke). It had also been recognised that Mark's Gospel was in 'poor' Greek compared with the others and that Mark had not been an Apostle.

200 years ago some Deists (who claimed to believe in God, but not in Christ) said that borrowers would have improved the Greek, not have made it worse. So Mark must therefore have written prior to the others. This became known as 'The Markan Priority theory'. They then said that if Matthew, an eyewitness Apostle, wrote the Gospel named after him he would not have borrow second-hand material from Mark. As the Church had never claimed that Mark was an eyewitness of Christ's life, this meant that Matthew's Gospel was written by an anonymous, non-eyewitness in the late first century.

According to this theory the ancient historians, all of whom recorded that Matthew wrote first, must have made an error and were therefore unreliable. As the Church's teaching relied on these early historians, she was also in error. It also meant that what these historians recorded regarding Luke and John must also be unreliable. By further apparent logical steps the whole traditional teaching of the Church was undermined.

At the Second Vatican Council attempts had been made to promulgate ambiguous statements, which would have permitted Catholics to deny the historicity of the Gospels. On 18th October 1965, Pope Paul had refused to sign a wording that would have left doubt about the historicity of the Gospels. So the phrase: “whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms”, [Or: “Whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts”], was added.

But scripture scholars in the English-speaking world, in leading positions, continued to promote the theory that the Gospels were not historical. Flannery's ambiguous translation assisted them to achieve considerable success.

REASON AND FAITH

The Church claims the authority to decide which writings were inspired by the Holy Spirit, and to decide their meaning. She also claims her authority can be shown from the New Testament.

At first sight it may appear that Catholics are arguing in a circle ~ The Church authenticates the New Testament and the New Testament authenticates the Church. But this is not so. Catholics claim that the information in the Gospels, treated as normal history, shows that Christ founded the Church as an infallible witness to His teachings. Once this point has been established, the Church is able to claim that She has the authority to proclaim that the Gospels are not merely historical records but the inspired word of God. [Some of the evidence that Christ founded a Church is provided in our publication: Christ, His Church and Peter – See the Home Page of this website].

When section 19 of Dei Verbum was being drafted at the 2nd. Vatican Council, it was suggested that the phrase: “believed and continues to believe” should be used, as it was a truth always accepted in the Church through an act of faith. But: “held and continues to hold”, was adopted because the historicity of the gospels was a truth which could be accessed by both faith and reason, not by faith alone.

Other leaflets on our Home Page are:

Why, How and When the Gospels?

The Gospels are Historical

Christ, His Church and Peter

Also available concerning this subject:

Eastern Liturgies. (See our Documentation Section).

‘The Authors of the Gospels’, a booklet of 118 pages, provides more information and references.

A free download of the booklet is available from www.churchinhistory.org

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