

Impact of dei verbum in roman catholic church religion essay



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Throughout the history of Christianity, the church has convened a number of councils in order to clarify teachings, address problems, or enact reforms. In many instances, these councils have resulted in momentous turning point in the course of Christian church history. These councils also attempt to respond to the urgent needs of the emerging generation during this modern era. The general councils began in Nicaea in 325, convened at intervals throughout the first millennium and the medieval period, struggled with the age of reformations to the modern world, with a total of 21 councils convened in the span of more than 1600 years. Unlike other councils before the modern era, the opening of Vatican councils seemed to create new perspectives for the Roman Catholics especially in more specific areas on their beliefs and practices.

Vatican II was reopened in 1962 by John XXIII which it stunned many by his actions. Shortly after ordination as the pope in 1949, John XXIII believed the church ought to look at the state of the world in order to meet the impending needs of the people. With that, preparation lasted for almost four years and the entire council stretched across four autumns until the 16 documents were completed. In the process, there are two majors camp of people, one who were called the ' conservatives' disputing the fact that the church needed no change at all and the convening of Vatican II was not necessary. The church is self-sufficient and to avoid that happened during the Enlightenment period, the ideal way is to insulate itself behind a powerful structure that would claim to have all the answers. While others were keen to see a new millennium coming forth through Vatican II and Christians from other denominations such as the Lutherans, Episcopalians, Anglicans,

Methodists, Presbyterians, and Quakers were cordially invited. This was a revolutionary move by the Pope John XXII. Although, John XXII did not manage to see through the council, his post-decessor Pope Paul VI continued this council and brought it to completion.[2]

Among all the various key documents of Vatican II, Dei Verbum (DV) (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) could be considered one of most well received and a foundational component on Catholic's thinking on revelation, exegesis and the use of the bible in the Roman Catholic Church. Hence, to what extent does the DV theological idea applied in the 21st century context? Therefore, it would be attempted to present the impact of DV in the current and local context.[3]

Looking at the rear mirror of church history, there were tremendous issues surrounding the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) especially during the medieval period. Probably the first threat to the divine revelation came from Marcion's denial of the Scripture and the nature of God appeared in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Shortly after this, the Gnostics came into the scene whereby they typically claimed to have secret revelations from Jesus, incorporated new systems of beliefs which are inconsistent with the Church. Consequently, the Catholics became more restrictive in the availability of the scripture to the people. RCC believed that God revealed Himself to the people through Jesus Christ. On the other hand, RCC viewed these divine revelations as being originally transmitted primarily by oral means (Sacred Tradition) and later by written means (Sacred Scripture).

These Sacred Tradition & Sacred Scripture were additional to the bible. With this emphasis, the bible is not considered to be the exhaustive,
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comprehensive teaching of the Christian Faith. Rather, Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture together are considered the integral source of divine revelation, as explained in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church:

“ Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out of the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal. Each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ, who promised to remain with his own ‘ always, to the close of the age.’[4]

With this notion, RCC tend to weigh more heavily on the catechisms as compared to the bible. For this reason, translation and transmission of the bible was not placed on emphasis. Besides this reason, extensive manpower and efforts required to recopy the text. RCC was fearful that the bible could be stolen and abused by individuals. Hence, the reproduction of this decreased during the middle ages and people generally do not have access to the bible.[5]The bible basically played a subordinate role in the lives of the believers. Ecclesiastical authorities restricted people to access scriptures and normally reserved for certain level of bishops.[6]

With the introduction in DV through Vatican II, Sacred Tradition was stated as not being static and unchanging but constantly developing through the guidance of the Holy Spirit to a fuller and deeper understanding of the truth. This ongoing of development does not mean the truth but rather the grasping of the truth by the believers.[7]Thus, DV call the RCC to return to the main source which is the bible. Like most of the sixteen documents, Dei

Verbum was carefully, even passionately considered, but in many ways the subject of Revelation was exceptional, being fundamental to Vatican II in several respects.[8] Joseph Ratzinger mentioned that “ it is important to note that only Scripture is defined in terms of what it is: it is stated that Scripture is the word of God consigned to writing. Tradition, however, is described only functionally, in terms of what it does: it hands on the word of God, but it is not the word of God”[9]

As such a new movement brought forth many renewed faith within the Catholics and their access to proper understanding of the Scriptures.[10] The Council then laid down new direction which promoted the reading and studying of biblical texts in a new way. The manner through which Catholics gained new access to the Scriptures was at least the five following ways. Firstly, the Catholics are able to hear the preaching of the word in the community’s vernacular. Before Vatican II, the priest celebrated Mass in Latin with his back facing the people, making the action of the Mass seem far away. It was easy for the faithful to fall into the role of spectators. Now the assembly is more actively engaged, helping us to experience “ all of us” celebrating the Eucharist with the priest. Vatican II liturgy mentioned that the members should be “ full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations” (#14).[11] This phenomenon occurred during the 4th century when St Jerome was commissioned by Pope Damasus I to translate to the Latin language and by 13th century, it became the commonly used translation in the Roman Empire.[12] With that, most of the masses were conducted in Latin where the indigenous languages were ignored in this situation. Consequently, the nominal people would have minimum

understanding of the passage. By and large, the language Latin was not well received in most part of the community and shortly after, the language seemed to be lost. Also, since this is not their native language, the believers would find it difficult to understand and make sense of it. With DV's proposal of using indigenous languages, the believers were able to understand the message preached. According to the Catholic leader, he mentioned similar phenomenon in the RCC in Singapore and how this new dimension added life within the Church and more people are eager to hear the message.[13] It appeared that in the past, most people attended the mass because of a form of obligation and doze off during the proceeding. The many reasons given were that they do not understand the meaning of the message. With this new initiative, the preaching became more relevant at least the native language to the local context.

Secondly, there was a change in the form of sermons from just a regurgitation of the bible to homiletical preaching: From a liturgical format to a homiletically manner. DV recognized that biblical exegetical plays an essential and positive role in the understanding of the bible. Moreover, it would add substance to the delivery of the message and allow " the revelation to fill human hearts more and more"[14] The efficacy of the word of God depends on the careful preparation and delivery of the message on the pulpit; this requires good training. Efforts were placed in making the sermon digestible and applicable. Therefore, the use of preaching has been increasing to bring a biblical message into the hearts of believers, but sadly, it is not yet universal. In the local context, there seemed to be more of such homiletical preaching occurring among the RCC.[15]

Next is the liberty for personal bible study by the individual Catholic. This is something uncommon before the Vatican II as the bible is known as the authoritative and scared text, where only the bishops, the academics or scholars were able to read and make interpretations of it. The effects of releasing the Holy Scripture to all were seen from the Protestants movement whereby numerous interpretations arise within the short span of time.

[16] Besides, it might appear that the bible is not scared enough that only the bishop has the access to it. Thus, the availability of the bible to Catholics became restricted due to the theological, social and also various heretical religious movements. Looking in retrospection, Vatican II created some impact in this area whereby Catholics are able to access to the bible in their native language allowing the Logos and Rehma word of God to be spoken during their devotional time. From a unidirectional reception to a bidirectional, believers are able to directly communion with God through the bible. The Church today encourages its members to make use of new methods of Scripture study and to cherish the Scriptures. Catholics are growing in their understanding of the Bible through the benefits of historical research, literary analysis and archaeological findings. Church documents wisely steer Catholics away from literal-minded approaches and from reading the Bible as if it were a science or history textbook.

Since Vatican II, there is fairly widespread of the RCC participation in bible study groups, often advance by ' Ecclesial movements' such as the Neo-catechumenate and the monastic tradition of Lectio divina. It is sometimes ecumenical in nature whereby the study with Protestants or the Jews and they almost always find both enlightening and enriching. This action was

illustrated in the DV 6 (no. 22) “ if these translations are produced in cooperation with the separated brethren as well, all Christians will be able to use them”[17]that encouraged the RCC to make peace with the Protestant Bible Societies and work with them. Although there have been a longstanding hostility, full collaboration between the Catholic Biblical Federation and the United Bible Societies was soon established, bringing a notable increase in production of vernacular versions all over the world.[18]

“ Similar collaboration has developed with publishers of daily bible reading aids such as the Bible Reading Fellowship, though in this country, at least, nothing seems to check a lamentable decline in general knowledge of the Bible.”[19]

As such, bible study became a central activity of the reformer groups which sprang up especially among the poor. More often than not, it was their daily reading of the bible that brought light into their own situation which was the main cradle of liberation theology.[20]In the local context, similar trends were observed in Singapore as well where such practices mushroomed. Many RCCs instituted bible study within the congregations on a regular basis where the believers examine the scripture. Such phenomenon was not evident before Vatican II. With this, Catholics became more familiar with the bible and equipped to defend their faith.[21]

Finally, the last trajectory, posed a more complex issue to be addressed. It is the formal and scholarly pursuit of biblical study in the academy. Although the goal of academic study is to enable the deepening understanding of the Scripture, the methodologies employed might be deliberately bracketed

faith. Since, most Catholic biblical scholar adopted certain methodologies from the Protestants colleagues, they might realized some incompatibility of the certain traditions practiced in the Catholic Church to deviate from the original intention of the Scripture. However, such rigorous academic study facilitated the understanding of the bible from a more holistic manner (theological, cultural, social and context). Consequently, some Catholics started to realize that certain doctrines seemed to be inconsistent with the Holy Scripture and some abandoned certain practices in the Catholic faith. Conversely, some others turned away from the Catholic faith and embraced the Protestant beliefs.[22]Also, many lay leaders are able to learn the bible from a theological angle, able to defend their faith. In Singapore, there are many such theological training evolving within the different Roman Catholic Churches and programme were developed to educate and trained lay ministers.[23]Growing numbers of lay women and men are attending theology schools, leading and/or joining Bible study groups and reading an array of solid articles or books on the subject. Priests and religious are no longer the only Scripture experts. Therefore, it is evident in RCC that such changes are happening now and hopefully will be ongoing.

Since Vatican II, many speculations about the impact were raised, and it seemed there is an effect of change in the RCC circle as being more biblical, and personal faith; returning back to the original intent of God. Although, many of us were too young to think of Vatican II except as history, this phenomenon caused an effect in the universal church especially in the Catholic circle. According to the RCC in Singapore, many of the believers started getting more involved and serious in studying the bible. In this sense,

it also means that wave from Vatican II remain active in both the academic and among the people of the RCC. Although some changes were seen in the RCC, it is heartbreaking to see the overwhelming cases of sex abuse scandals within the RCC, which caused a stir among congregations.

Questions were raised regarding the credibility of these priests and the role of the scripture in their lives and casted doubts on the transformation in the RCC due to Vatican II. In conclusion, with the inception of Vatican II, there has been a vast enrichment of the lectionary for Mass and the readings for daily prayer of the Church and made a tremendous impact in the RCC.

Hopefully this will continue to fulfill its original intention by Pope Paul XXIII when he convened the pastoral council.