The 50th anniversary of the “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” (“Dei Verbum”) is coming up on Nov. 18, 2015. This document is one of the four great constitutions produced by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). This year, Dec. 4 marks the 50th anniversary of the first of the four, the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” and there has already been a flood of articles on the liturgy. But so far there has been surprisingly little discussion of the document on revelation, though arguably it is the most seminal of all the conciliar documents. To contribute to the discussion, I would like to point out three major achievements of “Dei Verbum,” and three challenges these achievements pose to the Catholic Church.

Three Achievements

“Dei Verbum” sees itself in continuity with two earlier councils that dealt with the Bible: Trent (1545-63) and the First Vatican Council (1869-70), and like them devotes considerable space to the broad context of the Bible—God’s initiative in relating to humanity. God’s desire for a personal relationship with human beings on earth accounts for the self-revelation of God recorded in the Bible. That self-revelation invites a human response (“the obedience of faith”) and results in the formation of an elect people bound to God and to each other. We read in “Dei Verbum” (No. 2): “The invisible God (cf. Col 1:15, 1 Tm 1:17), out of the abundance of his love, addresses men and women as friends (cf. Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14-15) and moves among them (cf. Bar 3:38), in order to invite and receive them into fellowship with himself” (translations and citations are from The Scripture Documents, edited by Dean P. Bechard, S.J.). The Bible tells of that relationship in concrete detail and with an intense interest in its historical movement (“the economy of revelation”). “Dei Verbum” goes beyond previous councils, however, in underscoring the relational aspect of revelation. Revelation is more than the communication of correct propositions, for biblical deeds as well as words tell of God, with word and deed illuminating each other. Other characteristics of “Dei Verbum” are its emphasis on the assistance...
of the Holy Spirit to believers reading the Scriptures, and its extraordinary stress on revelation in Christ.

“Dei Verbum” insists that God’s word not only addresses individuals, but also brings into being a community, the church. Clarifying the communal or ecclesial nature of Scripture is the second achievement of “Dei Verbum.” The nature of the relationship of Bible to church became a disputed question in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. The Council of Trent responded to Martin Luther’s *Sola scriptura*! (“Scripture alone!”), which he proclaimed from the conviction that the Catholic Church had let human traditions dilute the Gospel. Trent’s clarification of the respective roles of Bible and church was subsequently misunderstood as two distinct sources of revelation (Scripture and Tradition), whereas, according to the historian John W. O’Malley, S.J., in *Trent: What Happened at the Council*. Trent actually spoke only of traditions (in the plural) of apostolic origin (not disciplinary or ecclesiastical).

The council postulated two channels of communication by which the message of Christ and the apostles was transmitted, without specifying the relationship between them. Building on Trent, “Dei Verbum” emphasizes the unity of Scripture and Tradition, though the council appears to understand tradition in two different senses: as static tradition and as process. Rather than seeing them in opposition, however, the constitution takes a “both/and” approach: “Both [Scripture and Tradition], flowing out from the divine wellspring, in a certain way come together in a single current and tend toward the same end” (No. 9). It then introduces a further element without explaining it in detail: the teaching office (magisterium) of the church, entrusted with “the task of authentically interpreting the Word of God,” is “not above the Word of God but serves it by teaching only what has been handed on” (No. 10). “Dei Verbum” thus interprets Tradition as process as well as “traditions.”

Trent also dealt with translations of the Bible, for the age of printing had dawned, flooding Europe with translations. Trent forbade only anonymous translations, passing over in silence other translations, including Protestant ones. It declared the Latin Vulgate “authentic,” a declaration that was later widely misunderstood as making the Vulgate the official version of the Bible for the Catholic Church. As Pope Pius XII’s encyclical “Divino Afflante Spiritu” (1943) taught, and John W. O’Malley, S.J., explains in more detail in *Trent*, the word *authentic* at the Council of Trent meant only that among the welter of Bible translations of that era, the Vulgate was a reliable text for preaching and teaching, to be revered because of its long usage in the Latin church. The council fathers were well aware of the errors that had accrued to the Vulgate over the centuries, and decreed that the Vulgate not be printed again until it was thoroughly corrected. Like Trent, “Dei Verbum” acknowledges the venerable nature of the Vulgate, but reaffirms the teaching of “Divino Afflante Spiritu,” which urged biblical scholars to use the original Hebrew and Greek texts for translations. In recent years, there have been attempts to impose the Vulgate as a standard for translation, but such attempts run counter to the directives of “Dei Verbum.”

A third achievement of “Dei Verbum” is its balanced upholding of both traditional and modern interpretive approaches and methods. On the one hand, it vigorously affirms the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, redefining them, adding the qualification “the truth that God wished to be recorded in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation” (No. 11). With these words, “Dei
“Dei Verbum” makes explicit what is implied in the famous definition of inspiration in 2 Tm 3:16-17. The constitution likewise affirms the traditional Christian focus on the literal sense, “what the sacred writers really intended to express and what God thought well to manifest by their words,” and urges appreciation of the literary forms used by the sacred writers (No. 12). It further exhorts modern interpreters to take account of how a text fits within the entire Christian Bible (the biblical context) and to be aware of the history of Christian reception. “Dei Verbum” is thus a model of respect for traditional approaches and for openness to new methods.

Three Challenges

“Dei Verbum” encouraged Bible reading among Catholics and has been a major factor in unseating the neo-scholastic theology that dominated Catholic and even Protestant thought up to the mid-20th century. But if we look at the final practical chapter of “Dei Verbum,” which enthusiastically encourages Bible reading among all Catholics, we are reminded all too clearly of the task that lies ahead.

First, it challenges Catholics to read the Bible regularly and hear it attentively when proclaimed in the liturgy. As expected, “Dei Verbum” urges priests, deacons and catechists to “diligent spiritual reading and careful study” of the Bible (No. 25). But in a significant departure from the anti-Protestant attitudes of the mid-20th century, it “strongly” (“vehementer,” in Latin) exhorts all the faithful to read and study the Bible prayerfully, confident in the Spirit’s guidance. There is a Latin phrase for such reflective reading: lectio divina, which means “divinely guided reading.”

To be sure, Catholics practice it more than ever before, but the majority do not nourish themselves daily with the word of God, missing out on the treasures contained in the Psalms, Gospels, Pauline letters, Wisdom literature and other books of the Bible.

An unsettling reminder of how important Bible reading is to the flourishing of the Catholic Church comes from the Pew Research Religious Landscape Survey of 2008, which points out the Catholic Church in recent years has lost a third of its membership. Half of those leaving the Catholic Church have become unaffiliated, and half have joined Protestant churches. Of the half that joined Protestant churches, the most cited reason (71 percent) for leaving the Catholic Church was their “spiritual needs were not being met,” in particular their need for meaningful worship and nourishing Bible reading. After studying the data, Thomas J. Reese, S.J., arrived at strongly stated conclusions. “The church needs a massive Bible education program,” he wrote in The National Catholic Reporter (4/18/2011). “The church needs to acknowledge that understanding the Bible is more important than memorizing the catechism. If we could get Catholics to read the Sunday scripture readings each week before they come to Mass, it would be revolutionary. If you do not read and pray the scriptures, you are not an adult Christian. Catholics who become evangelicals understand this.”

To be fair, today there are excellent Catholic Bible resources like the Little Rock Scripture Study, the Paulist Bible Study Program, the Collegeville Bible Commentary Series, Now You Know Media, Bible-oriented homily services and the lectures and digital resources of many Catholic colleges and universities. And there are good study Bibles, including The Catholic Study Bible (Oxford University Press). There were hardly any resources like these before
Vatican II. The problem, therefore, may not be a lack of resources, but a lack of resolve, planning and imagination.

The faith and commitment of Catholics can be deepened through regular, prayerful reading of the Bible. It is important to devise a practical strategy for bringing about changed attitudes and practices among Catholics. Perhaps a national conference can plan its first stages. One immediate step is to put even more emphasis on personal Bible reading in the new evangelization programs around the country.

A second challenge of “Dei Verbum” is to develop a theology that allows the Old Testament greater importance in the Bible. Scholars generally agree that chapter four, titled “The Old Testament,” is the weakest chapter in the constitution. Obviously, one cannot expect a conciliar document to go much beyond the scholarly consensus of the time of its composition. But the Christological perspective of “Dei Verbum,” while legitimate and important, overshadows non-messianic parts of the Old Testament, and to some extent restricts the Old Testament to its predictive function. It is important, however, to understand the entire Old Testament both on its own terms and as a constituent part of the Christian Bible.

A third challenge to the constitution’s exhortation that all Catholics read the Bible in the context of the church comes from fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is a relatively modern phenomenon, originating in 19th- and 20th-century Britain and America in reaction to what its adherents viewed as the erosion of traditional Christianity from the findings of science (especially evolution), historical-critical interpretation of the Bible, and (in the United States) immigrants diluting the hitherto dominant Protestant culture. George Marsden describes fundamentalism as “a loose, diverse, and changing federation of co-belligerents united by the fierce opposition to modernist attempts to bring Christianity into line with modern thought” (Fundamentalism and American Culture, 2006). Though there are differences in fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible, the following positions are characteristic: the Bible is the sole source God’s word; it is self-explanatory and inerrant; the prophets wrote for our time, not their own, and thus their judgments are directly applicable to contemporary life without taking into account historical context or the Bible’s literary genres. The apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation are favorite texts, authorizing major fundamentalist assumptions: the world is marked by a dualism of good versus evil with no middle ground; evil is increasing in the world; history is predetermined; and a future cosmic battle between God and Satan will usher in the kingdom of God.

“Dei Verbum” stands in sharp opposition with its insistence on the historical character of biblical revelation, ecclesial tradition and historically sensitive scholarship. The most authoritative Catholic critique is the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (1993). By refusing “to take into account the historical character of biblical revelation, [fundamentalism] makes itself incapable of accepting the full truth of the incarnation itself,” and “in its attachment to the principle ‘Scripture alone,’ fundamentalism separates the interpretation of the Bible from the tradition.... It fails to realize that the New Testament took form within the Christian church and that it is the Holy Scripture of this church, the existence of which preceded the composition of the texts.” Finally, it warns: “The fundamentalist approach is dangerous, for it is attractive to people who look to the Bible for
ready answers to the problems of life. It can deceive these people, offering them interpretations that are pious but illusory, instead of telling them that the Bible does not necessarily contain an immediate answer to each and every problem.”

Many Catholics, apparently unaware of anti-Catholic fundamentalist writing, regard fundamentalist approaches to the Bible as the only correct and traditional way of reading the Bible. How can we persuade such Catholics to adopt the truly traditional and correct way of “Dei Verbum”? Some do’s: read the Bible yourself and be willing to say simply what you have found nourishing in the Bible; witness rather than argue. Encourage your pastor to preach on the Bible and your fellow parishioners to engage in Bible study. Some don’ts: don’t argue with fundamentalists or use ridicule, but take fundamentalism seriously. It is an important part of American culture.

Despite these challenges and others that lie ahead, Catholics can only rejoice in the 50th anniversary of the “Constitution on Divine Revelation.” The council fathers recognized the excellence of the document by approving it by a vote of 2,344 to 6. Serious readers today will similarly appreciate its positive tone, balanced approach and reverence for the word of God.

Further study of it can only enrich the church in the next 50 years. May the discussion increase.

Richard J. Clifford, S.J., is a professor of Old Testament at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry in Brighton, Mass. A former editor of the Catholic Biblical Quarterly and president of the Catholic Biblical Association, he also served as a translator and commentator for The New American Bible, Revised Edition. This article is part of America’s new series, “The Living Word: Scripture in the Life of the Church,” co-sponsored by the American Bible Society.