

COMMUNAL OR SOCIAL INSPIRATION A Catholic Critique

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In analyzing the mystery of the divine inspiration of the Bible, it is important to distinguish the fact of this inspiration from the manner in which it was done. With respect to the fact of divine inspiration, the Church's teaching is well summarized by three statements from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

God is the author of Sacred Scripture. ...

God inspired the human authors of the sacred books. ...

The inspired books teach the truth.¹

The fact of divine inspiration is a dogma of the Catholic faith. The Council of Trent (1546) spoke of God as the author of both the Old and New Testament because these writings have come down to us "by the dictation of the Holy Spirit" (*a Spiritu Sancto dictatus*).² The First Vatican Council (1870), taught that the books of the Old and New Testaments, "having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, have God as their author."³ The Second Vatican Council, in its document on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965), repeats this teaching and adds: "all that the inspired authors or sacred writers assert must be held as asserted by the Holy Spirit."⁴

While the *fact* of divine inspiration is Catholic dogma, the manner by which the Holy Spirit inspired the human authors of the sacred books remains open to theological discussion. This is due, in part, to the mysterious nature of God's

1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 105–107.

2 Council of Trent, *Decretum Primum: Recipiuntur Libri Sacri et Traditiones Apostolorum* [First Decree: Acceptance of the Sacred Books and Apostolic Traditions], (April 8, 1546), in Heinrich Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitonum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum* [Handbook of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations concerning Matters of Faith and Morals], 32nd ed. (Freiberg: Herder, 1963), 1501. Hereafter abbreviated DS. Translations from Denzinger are my own.

3 First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius* [The Son of God], Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, (April 24, 1870), Chap. 2 (DS 3006; Latin: "quod Spiritu Sancto inspirante conscripti Deum habent auctorem").

4 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (November 18, 1965), 11 (Lat.: "omne id, quod auctores inspirati seu hagiographi asserunt, retineri debeat assertum a Spiritu Sancto").

inspiration. How exactly the Holy Spirit moved and guided the human authors is not something that can be observed empirically. We have only the results of this divine inspiration—the sacred writings of the Old and New Testaments.

One traditional Catholic explanation of divine inspiration views the human authors as instruments of the Holy Spirit. St. Thomas Aquinas develops this explanation by looking upon God as the principal cause of the composition of the Bible, and the human authors as “instrumental causes.”⁵ Thomas also highlights the notion of instrumental causality in his discussion of prophecy, describing the prophet’s mind as “an instrument moved by the Holy Spirit.”⁶ Pope Leo XIII, a key modern proponent of Thomism, draws upon the language of “instrument” in his encyclical letter, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893):

Because the Holy Spirit employed men as his instruments in writing [*tamquam instrumenta ad scribendum*], we cannot therefore say that perhaps it was these inspired instruments who fell into error and not the primary author. For, by supernatural power, he so stimulated and moved them to write [*supernaturali ipse virtute ita eos ad scribendum*], and assisted them while they were writing that they conceived correctly with their minds and wished to write down faithfully all those things and only those things he ordered, and [these] they expressed in an apt manner with infallible truth: otherwise he himself would not be the author of all of sacred Scripture.⁷

Here we find a clear expression of the Catholic doctrine of divine inspiration. This teaching is repeated by Vatican II, though with greater emphasis on “the faculties and powers” of the human authors and their status as “true authors” (*veri auctores*) of the sacred texts.⁸ In emphasizing the mysterious interplay of the divine and the human in the composition of the Bible, Vatican II invokes an analogy with the eternal Word’s “assumption of human infirmity.”⁹ Just as the incarnation of Christ reveals God’s loving-kindness and condescension, so does the composition

5 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. 3, Chap. 70, in *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith (Summa Contra Gentiles)*, 5 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1955–1957).

6 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [Summa of Theology], pt. 2a-2ae, q. 173, art. 4, in *Summa Theologica*, 3 vols. (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947).

7 Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* [The God of All Providence], Encyclical Letter on the Study of Scripture (November 18, 1893), 20 (*DS* 3293). It should also be mentioned that Leo XIII’s understanding of inspiration manifests the influence of Johannes B. Franzelin (1816–1886), a *peritus* at Vatican I. See Raymond F. Collins, “Inspiration,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1030.

8 *Dei Verbum*, 11.

9 *Dei Verbum*, 13.

of Scripture. God, making use of inspired human authors, adapts his Word to human language.

The theory of communal or social inspiration of Scripture developed in light of various aspects of higher biblical criticism, especially form criticism and redaction criticism. According to Raymond Collins, social theories of inspiration judge that “to a large extent, biblical books cannot simply be considered the literary production of an isolated individual, as modern books are.” Instead, these theories presume that “the individual writers were members of faith communities which had more than a passing influence on the formation of the biblical literature itself.”¹⁰

The principal Catholic proponents of “social inspiration” were three Jesuit scholars: Karl Rahner, John McKenzie, and Dennis McCarthy, who developed their theories in the late 1950s and early 1960s—prior to Vatican II’s promulgation of *Dei Verbum* in 1965.¹¹

McCarthy was focused chiefly on the Old Testament. His key insight is that “the ancient author was in all instances the spokesman of society, and society was the author of his book.”¹² Inspiration for him is ultimately reduced to God’s guidance of a “divinely chosen society,” and “it is within this divinely guided community, through a complex process in which the community itself is deeply involved, that the inspired books come to be.”¹³

McCarthy refers to both Rahner and McKenzie as the sources for his understanding of the social nature of inspiration and authorship.¹⁴ Therefore, it seems fitting that we focus our attention on these two authors. After presenting the basic points of their analysis, we will critically examine their positions in light of the Catholic understanding of inspiration, especially that of *Dei Verbum*. I will argue that the social theory of inspiration fails to distinguish properly between the Holy Spirit’s inspiration of the Bible and the Holy Spirit’s guidance and protection of the Church’s magisterium, or teaching authority.

10 Collins, “Inspiration,” 1032.

11 See Collins, “Inspiration,” 1032. See Karl Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, trans. Charles H. Henkey (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961); compare Rahner, “Über die Schriftinspiration” [Concerning Scriptural Inspiration], *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 78 (1956): 137–168; John L. McKenzie, “The Social Character of Inspiration,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 24 (1962): 115–124; D. J. McCarthy, “Personality, Society and Inspiration,” *Theological Studies* 13 (1963): 185–192. In Protestant circles, communal inspiration has been mostly associated with canonical criticism and names such as J. S. Semler and Brevard Childs. See Stephen B. Chapman, “Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible,” in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Craig G. Bartholomew, et al. (Gloucestershire: University of Gloucestershire and the British Foreign Bible Society, 2006), 168–174.

12 McCarthy, “Personality, Society and Inspiration,” 554.

13 McCarthy, “Personality, Society and Inspiration,” 574–575.

14 McCarthy, “Personality, Society and Inspiration,” 553–554, n. 2.

The Influence of Rahner's "Inspiration in the Bible"

A prodigious author and *peritus* (expert) at Vatican II, Karl Rahner is widely recognized as one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the 20th century. His speculations on the nature of inspiration were articulated in his book, *Inspiration in the Bible* (1961),¹⁵ one in a series of studies on "disputed questions," that Rahner conceived and promoted in conjunction with Heinrich Schlier.¹⁶

Rahner accepts as binding the traditional Catholic doctrine that "the Scriptures have God as their author...because he inspired the Scriptures."¹⁷ He finds, however, "a certain formal abstractness" in the "material and factual description" of the process of inspiration.¹⁸ He proceeds to analyze four problems surrounding this process that he believes must be faced.

The first problem involves the fact that we must acknowledge two authors: God and the human writers. As Rahner sees it, the human authors of Scripture "are not secretaries merely taking down divine dictations."¹⁹ Instead, "they are real originators and authors."²⁰ Thus, the traditional concept of "instrumentality" must not be compared to that of a secretary. Rather, "human authorship...remains completely and absolutely unimpaired," for Rahner.²¹ It is "permeated, embraced, but not diminished by the divine authorship."²²

The second problem Rahner sees flows from the first: how does God inspire or illumine the consciousness of the author of Scripture? How does God affect the human author's intellect and will? Rahner believes that divine inspiration can be reconciled with a view of the divine working on the human author "by means of impulses, which are within the realm of the author's experience."²³ He cautions against reducing this process to something merely psychological. Nevertheless, he believes that divine inspiration not only tolerates human authorship, but it also requires it as something "formally different" from divine authorship.²⁴

The third problem emerges from the question of how the Church can know which books are inspired. Rahner believes this question requires that the Church

15 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 4. It should be noted that the English edition of this book bears an *imprimatur* from the Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Westminster, England, presumably designating that nothing offensive to Roman Catholic teaching on faith and morals has been found in it.

16 Leo J. O'Donovan, "Rahner, Karl," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., 14 vols. (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2003), 11:894.

17 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 9.

18 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 9.

19 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 9.

20 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 9.

21 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 14.

22 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 14.

23 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 23.

24 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 24.

have “a material content for the concept of inspiration,” in order to determine which writings are inspired and, therefore, admitted into the *canon* of sacred Scripture. Recognizing canonicity “in fact means knowing inspiredness,”²⁵ even though there might not be any formal concept of inspiredness.

The fourth problem highlighted by Rahner is “the relationship between inspired and canonical writing on the one hand, and the teaching authority and tradition on the other.”²⁶ Rahner sees a tension between the authority of the Bible and the authority of the Church needed to testify to the canonicity and inspiration of the individual texts that make up the Bible. For him, it seems that either the Church “weakens her own binding, ‘infallible’ teaching authority, which she needs in support of the Scriptures, or she weakens the Bible in favor of the teaching authority at the moment when she testifies to this authority.”²⁷ Rahner sums up the problem this way:

What is the point of an infallible teaching authority if there is an infallible Bible? What is the point of an infallible Bible if there is an infallible authority? If there is an infallible teaching authority, then it is certainly in a position, quite independently from a Bible, infallibly to select from the stream of opinions and of human tradition (at the beginning of which we have the oral tradition of the Christian events), what has been revealed by God, and to proclaim it to the world. What would be the point of an infallible Bible in the hands of an authority, which, in the Catholic Church did not always, even in her infallible decisions, rely upon the Scriptures, if it could also testify to divine revelation unerringly without the Bible?²⁸

In response to these questions, Rahner admits that we could simply affirm that God has decided to provide two infallible authorities, the Bible and the Church. But he says this solution seems to involve “a rather dangerous theological positivism.”²⁹ For him, a better solution to this problem—and to the others he has presented—is to recognize “that the Scripture is, from the beginning, the book of the Church who can testify to its inspiration because it is her book.”³⁰ His thesis, therefore, is that the Scriptures are “are essentially books of the Church to be recognized only through her as Scripture given to her, to be interpreted through her and thus to

25 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 30.

26 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 30.

27 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 31.

28 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 31–32.

29 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 34.

30 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 37–38.

be actualized in their own nature through the Church."³¹ This holds true for both the Old and the New Testament Scriptures, because "the Old Testament belongs *a priori* to the formation of the Church and not only of the synagogue, as part of her pre-history and as such remains actual forever; it can claim the same vitality as the New Testament."³²

Ultimately, for Rahner, the Church affirms a particular writing as inspired because "the relevant writing emerges as a genuine self-expression of the primitive Church."³³ This means that we need not necessarily limit revelation or inspiration to the period up to the death of the last apostle. For one thing, Rahner believes that the idea of Church's "first generation is somewhat vague."³⁴ Furthermore, "the Scriptures are the canonical exposition of this teaching of the early Church."³⁵ Rahner's understanding thus removes the alleged tension between the two infallible authorities, the Bible and the Church. These two sources of authority "have reference to each other from the beginning like two instances of the same process."³⁶ For the later Church, this means that infallibility is expressed by "the inerrant interpretation of the Scripture because it includes by definition the link with the early Church."³⁷

How does this thesis affect the traditional conception of the inspiration of the human authors? For Rahner, "the circle of personalities of the inspired authors" includes both apostles and others "inasmuch as their work at that time was representative of the Church, a means of her self-possession."³⁸ The authors of the Scriptures write as members of the Church. As such, what they write in the Scriptures is subject to the interpretation of the Church they represent.

Is God still the author of the Sacred Scriptures according to this thesis? Rahner would answer in the affirmative because "God wills and produces the Scriptures by a formal predefinition of a redemptive-historical and eschatological kind as a constitutive element of the foundation of the primitive Church."³⁹ God is the author of these Scriptures because "to effect such a book is to be its author in an actual sense," though, of course, authorship here is used only as "an analogous concept."⁴⁰ Rahner, therefore, locates inspiration in a type of "divine impulse, joined to God's will to establish the Church." This impulse "must always reach

31 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 48.

32 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 54.

33 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 65.

34 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 69.

35 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 71.

36 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 72.

37 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 72.

38 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 78.

39 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 55.

40 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 56.

down into the intellectual and volitive, spiritual sphere of man.”⁴¹ Ultimately for Rahner, the divine inspiration of Scripture is part and parcel of God’s guidance and protection of the Church, which possesses the Bible as a “constitutive element”⁴² of her “genuine self-expression.”⁴³

McKenzie and the Social Character of Inspiration

John McKenzie was one of the first American Catholic biblical scholars to embrace and promote the methods of higher biblical criticism. Yet his religious superiors were initially rather cautious about his methods. Jesuit censors held up publication of his first book, *The Power and the Wisdom: An Interpretation of the Old Testament* (1956) for three years before permission was granted for publication.⁴⁴ Eventually, his publications gained notice. He served as president of the Catholic Biblical Association and in 1966 became the first Catholic president of the Society of Biblical Literature.⁴⁵ His work continued to lead to conflicts with his superiors and, in 1970, he left the Jesuits while remaining a Catholic priest.⁴⁶

McKenzie’s view of inspiration shows the influence of Rahner, who had originally presented his position in a 1956 lecture at the University of Würzburg that was later published.⁴⁷ McKenzie cites this published lecture in his 1962 article, and approves of Rahner’s thesis that “the charisma of inspiration in the New Testament is best understood as a charisma possessed by the Church herself and not by individual writers.”⁴⁸ Rahner ultimately argues that, “the inspiration of the Scriptures...is but simply the causality of God in regard to the Church, inasmuch as it refers to that constitutive element of the apostolic Church, which is the Bible.”⁴⁹

McKenzie develops his description of the social character of inspiration around four major points. First, he notes that most of the books of the Bible have multiple authors or multiple layers of authorship. A theory of inspiration that works well with the idea of a single individual author does not work as easily “when it is applied to the compilation of the Pentateuch from scattered sources or to the ‘school’ of St. Matthew.”⁵⁰

McKenzie’s second point is that the biblical texts are mostly “compilations” rather than “books” in the conventional sense, and “even compilation is an inexact

41 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 57.

42 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 51.

43 Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 65.

44 Francis T. Gignac, “McKenzie, John Lawrence,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 9:402.

45 Gignac, “McKenzie,” 9:402.

46 Gignac, “McKenzie,” 9:402.

47 Rahner, “Über die Schriftinspiration.”

48 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 119.

49 Rahner, *Inspiration of the Bible*, 50–51.

50 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 115–116.

term for the complex process of growth and development of which these books are the product."⁵¹ Moreover, many books of the Bible are actually edited "re-readings" of earlier traditions. This reality of these multiple layers of history makes the search for inspired authors very difficult. As McKenzie writes: "unless we can answer such simple questions as who did what under the inspiring influence, there is much we do not know about inspiration."⁵²

A third factor brought to bear by McKenzie is that of oral tradition. Regarding the Old Testament, he notes that most biblical scholars "postulate the survival of the traditions of the patriarchs, the exodus, the settlement, and pre-monarchic Israel by word of mouth"; he adds that "most of these traditions acquired not one but several variant oral forms."⁵³ A similar process he believes occurred with respect to the formation of the Gospels, though over a shorter interval of time. For McKenzie, the reality of multiple strands of oral tradition again makes tracing inspiration very difficult. Moreover, if ancient authors allowed a certain freedom in the revision and expansion of prior written traditions, they allowed even more flexibility with regard to oral traditions.

McKenzie's final point is actually the subtext of the preceding three: the reality of scriptural redaction and the question of where the gift of inspiration begins and ends. McKenzie writes:

Who then, is the inspired author, and what does the inspired author produce? We find it difficult to believe that the final redactors of the Pentateuch, for instance, were the inspired authors who compiled quite uninspired material, and no one thinks that the final and terminal editor is the only inspired author, whoever he may have been. Therefore, we feel the need of distributing the charisma, so to speak, among the various men who contributed to the book—meaning the book we have. To me, at least, this has always seemed somewhat mechanical and contrived.⁵⁴

Having made these four points, McKenzie believes he has provided sufficient evidence of the need to reformulate our understanding of biblical inspiration. What then, does he suggest as an alternate theory? Here, he is quite open in proposing the idea of the social character of inspiration, an idea he attributes not only to Rahner but also to Pierre Benoit, the French biblical scholar.⁵⁵ McKenzie believes that the social character of inspiration is "the most constructive theory of inspira-

51 McKenzie, "Social Character of Inspiration," 116.

52 McKenzie, "Social Character of Inspiration," 116.

53 McKenzie, "Social Character of Inspiration," 117.

54 McKenzie, "Social Character of Inspiration," 117-118.

55 See Pierre Benoit, O.P. *Prophecy and Revelation*, trans. Avery Dulles, and Thomas Sheridan (New York: Desclee, 1961). A more complete list of Benoit's publications can be found in James

tion in the last fifty to sixty years.”⁵⁶ For McKenzie, inspiration is “a charisma possessed by the Church herself and not by individual writers.”⁵⁷ Similar to the apostolic office, “inspiration is given to the Church only in her infancy, and yields to other charismata and functions in the more fully organized and established Church.”⁵⁸ Finally, “those who write the inspired books of the New Testament write them as officers and representatives of the Church, which is the real author of the New Testament.”⁵⁹

McKenzie admits that this theory does not seem as applicable to the Old Testament as to the New. Yet he believes it can apply because the notion of “corporate personality” is operative in ancient Israel as well as in the Church. For both Israel and the Church, the sacred literature is not so much the work of individuals as it is the corporate voice of the people. Ultimately, inspiration is an expression of the Word of God, which McKenzie identifies as “a direct mystical insight and awareness of the divine reality.”⁶⁰ Those who recite or record this experience do so as spokesmen for the community. McKenzie writes:

The spokesman of God speaks for his society; when he speaks, he speaks not in virtue of his own personal experience and knowledge of God, but in virtue of the faith and traditions in which his experience occurs and without which his experience would not have meaning.⁶¹

This new formulation of inspiration raises important questions, as McKenzie himself acknowledges. For example, he is aware that this theory seems to obscure the differences between biblical inspiration and divine revelation. However, he believes that the traditional distinction between inspiration and revelation “is based on an inadequate conception of both.”⁶² He suggests that the experience of God and the expression given to that experience are intimately connected. The expression, though, is given form within a community of faith.

McKenzie also recognizes that his theory results in positing varying degrees of inspiration; that is, some books of the Bible might seem “more inspired” by others. He does not find this to be a major difficulty, for he believes it is already acknowledged that some biblical texts express revelation and inspiration with greater clarity and vigor than others.

T. Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories of Inspiration Since 1810: A Review and Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1969), 308.

56 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 118–119.

57 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 119.

58 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 119.

59 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 119.

60 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 121.

61 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 121.

62 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 122.

Finally, McKenzie speculates about where the Word of God is now and why the charisma of inspiration has passed away. His answer is that this charisma has *not* passed away because “the Spirit which seized the prophets has come to dwell in the Church.”⁶³ For McKenzie:

The Church does not write the Word of God because she is the Word of God; the charisma of her infancy has grown into her adult maturity. She does not write the Word of God because she is the living Word, which needs no written record.⁶⁴

“Social Inspiration”: A Catholic Critique

In evaluating any new theory, it is important to ask whether it has accurately and fairly assessed the inadequacies of an existing theory; to put this another way: have problems been raised that cannot be addressed by the existing theory? The new theory of inspiration must also be evaluated as to whether it introduces new problems and challenges to traditional Catholic teachings on biblical inspiration. There are, I believe, a number of problems created by the theory of the social character of biblical inspiration. Some are more evident in McKenzie, but others are also found in Rahner. I will have to divide these problems under four major headings.

The social concept of inspiration undermines inspiration as a charism of the Holy Spirit received by the biblical authors.

In the Nicene Creed (325), Christians affirm as a matter of faith that the Holy Spirit has “spoken through the prophets.”⁶⁵ Likewise, the Letter to the Hebrews testifies that “God spoke...to our ancestors through the prophets.”⁶⁶ The inspiration of the Scriptures, as well as of the biblical authors, is the work of the Holy Spirit. All Scripture is “God-breathed” or “inspired by God.”⁶⁷ Writing in the theological encyclopedia, *Sacramentum Mundi*, edited by Rahner himself, Luis Alonso-Schökel offers this vivid description of how the Church understands inspiration:

The very term “inspiration” refers us to the “Spirit.” The inspiration of Scripture, then, must be something living, active, piercing. The “breath” of God that was breathed at creation, that gives man life, that raises up heroes of salvation, also inspires the prophet, the “man of the Spirit”; and since this Spirit is a

63 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 123.

64 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 123.

65 DS 150.

66 Heb. 1:1. All Scripture translations are from the New American Bible (NAB).

67 2 Tim. 3:17 (Greek: *Theópneustos*).

living, life-giving one, the inspired word too is something living and active (Heb. 4:12). Charisma is the name usually given to the action of the Spirit in the economy of salvation. Inspiration must be seen in the variegated setting of the charisms, as part of the total experience of Israel and the Church.⁶⁸

Inspiration, therefore, is a charism, a special gift or anointing, given to the biblical authors. Rahner and McKenzie do not deny this “charism” of inspiration, but their social concept ultimately reduces it to some type of basic guidance of the faith community by God. Scripture itself, however, witnesses to the power of inspiration as something received by chosen individuals and not merely a type of charism given generically to the community. Jeremiah laments the derision and reproach his preaching of the Word of the Lord has brought him, and so he convinces himself, “I will speak in his name no more.” But then he says the Word “becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.”⁶⁹ Along these lines, 2 Peter 1:21 tells us that “no prophecy ever came through human will; but rather human beings moved by the Holy Spirit spoke under the influence of God.”

McKenzie believes the idea of a “charism” of inspiration given to certain individuals is difficult to sustain because of the need to distribute it, so to speak, among those who participated in the complex history of the biblical text as it was handed down from oral tradition to its final redactors.⁷⁰ This leads him to embrace Rahner’s thesis that the charisma of inspiration is one “possessed by the Church herself and not by individual writers.”⁷¹ This position fails to do justice to inspiration as a true charism or gift of the Holy Spirit. Albert Vanhoye notes that Rahner’s treatment of inspiration fails to mention the biblical authors “at all,” and this omission “favors the position of those who attribute the production of texts to the community rather than to persons.”⁷² In contrast to this idea of “communal inspiration,” Vanhoye observes:

Exegetical studies lead one to believe, however, that in the production of a given text, the charism can be stretched out over several persons, if they have all contributed to this production. It would be strange to limit inspiration to the final redactor,

68 Luis Alonso-Schökel, “Inspiration,” in *Sacramentum Mundi, An Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner, et al., 6 vols. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968–1970), 3:145–146.

69 Jer. 20:9.

70 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 117–118.

71 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 119.

72 Albert Cardinal Vanhoye, “The Reception in the Church of the Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei Verbum*,” in *Opening Up the Scriptures: Joseph Ratzinger and the Foundations of Biblical Inspiration* edited by José Granados, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 2008), 117.

especially if his role were not so important, and to refuse it to the previous authors, whose contributions were much more substantial. One can speak of a “current” of inspiration, in a way, the action of which is stretched out over different stages in the formation of a text.⁷³

Vanhoye’s point is significant. The fact that a given biblical text might be the product of redaction does not, in itself, challenge the traditional notion that the charism of inspiration is given to individuals. As we have seen, McKenzie’s four arguments are variations on a single theme—that modern biblical criticism’s identification of multiple authors and traditions in biblical texts means we must reformulate our concept of divine inspiration.

McKenzie has not proven his point in this regard. Apart from the issue of whether his claims of multiple authorship for particular biblical books are always accurate, he offers no substantial argument against the idea that inspiration can be distributed to all who contributed to the production of the text; he simply states that this has always seemed to him “somewhat mechanical and contrived.”⁷⁴

The Church has long recognized modern scholarship’s finding of multiple layers of oral tradition, writing, and redaction. For example, *Dei Verbum*, affirms the three stages in the formation of the Gospels, but it does not see this as any reason to reformulate the traditional concept of inspiration.⁷⁵ Earlier, Pope Pius XII acknowledged that the ancient sacred writers (*hagiographi antiqui*) might have drawn from popular narratives of non-biblical sources, but they did so “under the influx of divine inspiration (*divinae inspirationis afflatus*), which preserved them from all error in the choice and evaluation of these documents.”⁷⁶ Thus, Pius recognized the divine inspiration of the redactors who put the Pentateuch into its final form; but this does not lead him to obscure inspiration as a charism given to individual biblical authors.

McKenzie notwithstanding, the fact of redaction in the biblical texts does not require that we abandon the traditional concept of inspiration as a charism given to certain individuals. Communal inspiration, ultimately, obscures inspiration as a charism given to the biblical authors themselves, so that, “moved by the Holy Spirit,” they may speak “under the influence of God.”⁷⁷

73 Vanhoye, “Reception,” 117.

74 McKenzie, “Social Character of Inspiration,” 118.

75 *Dei Verbum*, 19; compare *Dei Verbum*, 11.

76 Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis* [The Human Race], Encyclical Letter on Certain False Opinions Threatening to Undermine the Foundations of Catholic Doctrine (August 12, 1950), 38 (DS 3898).

77 2 Pet. 1:21.

The social concept of inspiration undermines the normative character of the written Word of God for the Church.

The social concept of inspiration makes it very difficult to accept what Vatican II teaches about the Church's magisterium being the servant of the Word of God.⁷⁸ If, as McKenzie claims, the Church "is the Word of God,"⁷⁹ then the Church would be servant to herself rather than servant to the Word of God. Moreover, while *Dei Verbum* specifically teaches that the Church is not superior to the Word of God, McKenzie's theory instead suggests an equivalence of the Church with the Word.

McKenzie's expression of social inspiration likewise lacks any appreciation of the importance of the written Word of God in the Church's sacred liturgy and in its theology. How can the Scriptures be the "soul" of sacred theology if inspiration is simply a function of the Church's early experience and expression of the Word of God?

The Fathers of the Church clearly distinguish between the written Word of God and the apostolic Tradition that preserves and interprets God's Word. St. Irenaeus, for example, teaches that, according to the will of God, the gospel that was preached by the apostles was "handed down to us in writings, to be the foundation and the pillar of our faith."⁸⁰ Speaking of the heretics, Irenaeus notes that what they teach "will not agree with either Scripture or Tradition."⁸¹ Thus, he articulates the distinction that the Church recognizes to this day, between the inspired Scriptures and "the Tradition of the apostles."⁸²

There is, of course, an intimate connection between Scripture and Tradition. Vatican II teaches that they both flow from "the same well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal."⁸³ Nevertheless, the Council recognizes the distinction between Scripture, which is "the speech of God as it is put into writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit,"⁸⁴ and Tradition, which "transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit."⁸⁵ Nowhere does the Council teach that the transmission of the Word of God by Tradition is the same as divine inspiration. Yet both Rahner and McKenzie would seem to reduce divine inspiration to the Holy Spirit's guidance of the early Church.

78 *Dei Verbum*, 10.

79 McKenzie, "Social Character of Inspiration," 123.

80 St. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, Bk. 3, Chap. 1, 1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004 [reprint]), 1:414. Hereafter abbreviated ANF.

81 Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, Bk. 3, Chap. 2 (ANF 1:415).

82 Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, Bk. 3, Chap. 2 (ANF 1:415).

83 *Dei Verbum*, 9; see also *Catechism*, no. 80.

84 *Dei Verbum*, 9 (Lat.: "locutio Dei quatenus divino afflante Spiritu scripto consignatur").

85 *Dei Verbum*, 9.

The social concept of inspiration undermines the concept of divine revelation as well as the “deposit of faith,” the Word of God, written and handed down in Tradition.

As we have seen, McKenzie himself acknowledged that his theory called into question traditional distinctions made between revelation and inspiration. This was not a problem in his opinion, because these distinction were not altogether significant. It is, however, a major problem because the social theory of inspiration undermines important distinctions that the Church has always made concerning revelation, inspiration, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the infallibility of the Church.⁸⁶

These distinctions are important again, in the Church’s “service” to the Word of God. They enable the Church to clearly differentiate between the Word of God contained in Scripture and Tradition and the efforts of the Church’s teaching magisterium to preserve and explain this Word.⁸⁷

The social concept of inspiration confuses the biblical authors’s inspiration by the Holy Spirit with the magisterium’s protection and guidance by the Holy Spirit.

The role of the magisterium as the servant of the Word of God is, as already noted, obscured by the social theory of inspiration. Further, McKenzie’s theory cannot be reconciled with what Vatican I teaches about the two-fold order of knowledge: the natural and the supernatural.⁸⁸ It is precisely because divine revelation discloses truths that we could not otherwise know, that the human authors require divine inspiration in the composition of the sacred Scripture.

Of course, McKenzie does not deny divine inspiration, but by reducing it to a charism of the Church rather than one given to certain individuals, the Church is no longer understood as the guardian, protector and teacher of divinely revealed truths. Rather, the Church becomes the source of these divinely revealed truths through this diffused communal inspiration.

Rahner likewise seems to reduce inspiration to the action of the Holy Spirit in guiding the early Church. Because of this, it is not clear how, in his position, an inspired author is really different than an apostolic Father preaching and teaching the faith. Either the biblical authors are reduced to the same status as the apostolic Fathers or the apostolic Fathers are elevated to the status of inspired authors. The

86 See, for example, Michaele Nicolau and Joachim Salavaerri, *Sacrae Theologiae Summa* [Summa of Sacred Theology], vol. 1 (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1950), where a clear distinction is made between revelation as the speech or Word of God (*locutio Dei*) and inspiration as the influence of the Holy Spirit on the authors of sacred Scripture (at 96). In the same manual, further distinctions are made between the action of the Holy Spirit inspiring the authors of the sacred Scriptures and the assistance of infallibility (*assistencia infallibilitatis*) given to the magisterium under certain circumstances, an assistance that is not the same as divine inspiration (at 638).

87 It must be remembered that both Rahner and McKenzie were writing a few years before *Dei Verbum* (1965).

88 DS 3015.

Church, however, has never understood her magisterium or the writings of her saints to be divinely inspired in the way the authors of the Bible were divinely inspired. Infallibility is not the same as revelation, and the magisterium's guidance and protection by the Holy Spirit is not the equivalent of "divine inspiration."

Jared Wicks has noted that *Dei Verbum* does not offer "an explanation of just how inspiration has its impact on the biblical writers."⁸⁹ Instead, he says, it "respects the mystery of interaction between the Spirit's charism and the activities of these human authors of the text."⁹⁰

The crucial point, however, is that the Holy Spirit operates differently in *inspiring* the authors of Scripture than he does in *protecting* and *guiding* the magisterium of the Church. Even when the magisterium interprets the Word of God handed down in Tradition, it is not doing so under divine inspiration. The Word of God handed down in Tradition does not come from inspired human authors but from Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit.⁹¹

Theologians have explained these different influences of the Holy Spirit in different ways. One way is to understand inspiration as "principally the action of God moving man in an interior way [*actio principaliter Dei intrinsece hominem movens*], by means of whose power, man, as the instrument of God, expresses the truth that God wills, either orally (prophetical inspiration) or in writing (biblical inspiration)."⁹² The "assistance of infallibility or the preservation from error is, in itself, the action of God assisting man in an exterior way [*est actio Dei per se ab extrinseco hominem adiuvens*] so that man, as the principal cause, may, without error, set forth the Word of God, whether revealed or inspired."⁹³

The Word of God, written or handed down in Tradition, is divine revelation and the deposit of faith. When the Church teaches that a doctrine is "revealed by God" she is affirming that such a teaching is *contained* in the deposit of faith. Some doctrines or judgments of the Church, however, *pertain* to the deposit of faith. In the case of these secondary objects of infallibility, the assent given by the faithful is not specifically an assent to the authority of God's Word (*de fide credenda*) but an assent to a definitive decision or teaching of the Church. The assent to such a definitive judgment (which is not proposed as revealed by God) is an irrevocable assent "based on faith in the Holy Spirit's *assistance* to the magisterium and on the Catholic doctrine of the infallibility of the magisterium," doctrines that are "held as of the faith" (*de fide tenenda*).⁹⁴

89 Jared Wicks, *Doing Theology* (New York: Paulist, 2009), 53.

90 Wicks, *Doing Theology*, 53.

91 *Dei Verbum*, 9; *Catechism*, no. 81.

92 Nicolau and Salavaerri, *Sacrae Theologiae Summa*, 638.

93 Nicolau and Salavaerri, *Sacrae Theologiae Summa*, 638.

94 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the

All of this underscores the distinction that the Church makes between the inspiration of the Bible and the biblical authors by the Holy Spirit and the protection and assistance given by the Holy Spirit to the Church's magisterium. By their reduction of inspiration to the guidance of the Church under the "impulse" of the Holy Spirit, both Rahner and McKenzie seem to obscure this distinction

The social concept of inspiration ultimately allows for continuous alteration of the deposit of faith.

This last and most serious consequence is a logical extension of McKenzie's claim that the Church "is the Word of God."⁹⁵ If this is the case, the Church is not ruled or instructed by the inspired Word of God. Instead, the Word of God becomes a reality controlled by the Church which, according to McKenzie, has "the spirit of the prophets" dwelling within her.⁹⁶ Thus, the notion that God has "said everything" in speaking to us by his Son,⁹⁷ gives way to the possibility of a never-ending stream of "new revelations" given through the prophetic spirit of the Church. The social theory of inspiration, then, results in the relativizing of the inspired Word itself.⁹⁸

Vatican II and the "Condescension" of Scripture

From what has been shown above, the social concept of inspiration is based on a false assertion that the traditional concept of divine inspiration is deficient in accounting for the findings of modern textual criticism. In many ways, Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* can be understood as a response to the various theories of social inspiration being proposed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is precisely because God, in his loving condescension, chose and inspired human authors to be instruments of his written Word that we have the precious gift of the sacred Scripture, which, together with sacred Tradition, forms the single deposit of the Word of God.

The Holy Spirit inspired the authors of the sacred Scripture and made use of them to reveal God's Word. There is a true communal aspect to the reception, proclamation, and interpretation of the divine Word under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But this communal dimension is not the same as divine inspiration. According to God's most wise design:

Sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture, and the magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them can-

Professio Fidei," (June 29, 1998), 8; text in Avery Cardinal Dulles, *The Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of the Faith* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia, 2007), 163–173.

95 McKenzie, "Social Character of Inspiration," 123.

96 McKenzie, "Social Character of Inspiration," 123.

97 See *Catechism*, nos. 65–66.

98 This final consequence of "the social theory of inspiration" is more apparent in McKenzie than in Rahner, but we must recall that McKenzie understands himself as drawing upon the basic insights of Rahner and Benoit.

not stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way, under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.⁹⁹

It was God's will that certain men be inspired by the Holy Spirit to disclose truths that we would never know "unless they are revealed by God."¹⁰⁰ The communal notion of inspiration obscures the mysterious and awesome truth of divine inspiration, a truth that keeps us humble before God, who, out of his great love for us, has chosen "to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will."¹⁰¹

99 *Dei Verbum*, 10; *Catechism*, no. 95.

100 *Dei Filius* (DS 3015).

101 *Dei Verbum*, 2; *Catechism*, no. 51.