

among the ordained - this does not guarantee that a given work or opinion is reliably Catholic in its doctrinal content. In the present case, based upon the Church's constant witness as reiterated in Dei Verbum, anyone who blatantly undermines the historical character of the Gospel narratives is speaking outside of the Spirit-protected judgment of the Church and has therefore departed the confines of reliability in the matter.

Does this mean that such a person can never produce meaningful work? Of course not, in fact, in the case of Fr. Brown; he certainly made valuable contributions during his lifetime and it would be a mistake to dismiss everything he ever had to say in one fell swoop.

What it does indicate is Caveat Emptor! Those who wish to remain in the light of Truth regarding Catholic teaching must scrutinize the religious works they encounter regardless of the author's apparent reliability. The burden as always is upon each and every one of us as individuals in deciding whether or not we are willing to make the effort to measure the ideas we encounter against the teachings of the Church.

We are truly blessed to have recourse to reliable sources of Catholic teaching; examples include the documents of a council, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the exhortations of the popes, etc.

As Dei Verbum read in total makes clear, reliance upon Holy Mother Church in matters of faith is actually reliance upon the Spirit of Truth who leads Her into all Truth;

Jesus, who promised to remain with us even to the close of the age.

[1] Raymond E. Brown, S.S. - New Jerome Biblical Commentary, Prentice Hall Publishers, 1989, pgs. 1339 – 1340.

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Louie Verrecchio is the author of Harvesting the Fruit of Vatican II; a highly acclaimed adult faith formation tool - endorsed by George Cardinal Pell - that has been helping parish based study groups and individuals worldwide to faithfully explore the documents of the Second Vatican Council since 2004. For more information please visit: www.harvestingthefruit.com

The Evangelization Station

P.O. Box 267

Angels Camp, California, 95222 USA

Telephone: 209-728-5598

E-mail: evangelization@earthlink.net

www.evangelizationstation.com

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In Search of the Historical Jesus

Louie Verrecchio

Conduct a search for “Historical Jesus” on Amazon.com and you will find literally thousands of books, many of which employ various methods of research in an effort to establish whether or not Jesus really walked on water, if the multiplication of the loaves and fishes was truly a miracle and in some cases if Jesus of Nazareth even existed!

One of the most widely known and oft-quoted academic initiatives undertaken to divide fact from fiction among the Scriptural references to the life of Christ is a scholarly effort called the Jesus Seminar. The Seminar, which is comprised of some 150 individual bible scholars, biblical archaeologists and the like, was co-founded by a former Catholic priest, John Dominic Crossan.

The group produces Bible translations, publishes position papers, and tours the world giving lectures, all of which outline their collective findings concerning the relative accuracy of those acts and sayings that are attributed to Jesus in Sacred Scripture. For instance, according to the Seminar, claims that Jesus walked on water and raised Lazarus from the dead are categorized as wholly unsustainable.

The secular media often behaves like a kid in a candy store when it comes to such “findings;” eagerly portraying those who believe that these miracles really took place as fanatical and naïve. I am sorry to say,

however, the media are not the only ones who eat this stuff up.

“Scholarly” endeavors such as those undertaken by the Jesus Seminar are not limited to the confines of non-Catholic and secular institutions as even some professors teaching in our Catholic universities and seminaries have entered into the “historical Jesus” debate as well, sewing the seeds of doubt and division in their classrooms along the way.

Fr. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., for example, a well-known and widely celebrated priest-Bible scholar (RIP) even went so far as to argue that Jesus didn’t actually intend to found the Church.

"The older blueprint supposition by which Jesus had the Church clearly in mind and had already planned its structure, sacraments, etc., has little or no textual support," he said. [1]

As for the narrative recorded in Matthew 16:17-18 in which Jesus names St. Peter the rock upon which He would build His Church, Fr. Brown says, “no parallel [exists] in the other Gospels and probably represent post-resurrectional understandings specifying Jesus' intentions." [ibid.]

In other words, according to Fr. Brown, it’s unlikely that Jesus actually said the things attributed to Him in Matthew 16; they were only invented after the fact and don’t necessarily represent His intentions.

The ghost of this particular brand of bible scholarship continues to haunt parishes worldwide thanks to its continued albeit diminishing influence on Catholic seminary curriculum. Anyone who has suffered through a homily about how the

multiplication of the loaves and fishes was really about the “miracle” of people sharing the food they already possessed with strangers knows exactly what I mean.

The justification often used for calling into question the historicity of such biblical accounts is not surprisingly the “spirit of Vatican II.”

In the Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, the Council Fathers encourage bible scholars to place Scripture passages in their proper historical context, so that by taking into account the conditions of time and place, the literal sense of what the human author wished to convey to his intended audience may be determined.

As useful, and indeed indispensable, as this method of bible scholarship is, some practitioners of what is known as the “historical-critical method” have all but ignored those other parts of *Dei Verbum* that should clearly preclude them from treating the “spirit” of the Council’s encouragement as a license to reject the truths of the faith in Jesus Seminar fashion.

While some elitists do so anyway in the name of academic freedom and a quest for a “mature faith,” (caution: run when you hear that phrase!) those who are truly interested in discovering the historical Jesus, according to *Dei Verbum*, need look no further than the four books that make up the Gospels.

“Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, [Matthew, Mark, Luke and John] 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 until the day He was taken up into heaven.” (DV 19)

The wording of *Dei Verbum* - 19 is deliberately strong concerning the historicity of the Gospels; unhesitatingly, faithfully, really.

In the tumultuous years following the Council’s closing, some Catholics find it all too easy to treat Vatican II as the scapegoat for every sign of faithlessness found in the Church today, like the aforementioned scholars who cast doubt on the historicity of the Gospels. Those who examine the conciliar documents in their fullness and humbly allow the Council Fathers to speak for themselves, however, usually find that they neither endorsed nor invited the sort of theological recklessness we’re discussing here.

So what is one to make of conflicting statements of faith like those that contradict the historical character of the Gospel narratives, especially when they come from seemingly reliable Catholic sources like the aforementioned Fr. Brown?

This is an important question for those of us living in an age of instant communications; from hundreds of cable television outlets, to satellite radio, to internet sources too numerous to number, so-called “Catholic” information is all around us and knowing how to treat it is crucial.

The first thing we need to keep in mind is that just because a theologian, scholar, author or teacher marches under a “Catholic” banner - even if he is numbered