

Benjamin Wambacq O.Praem. at Vatican II

The year 2012 marks the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, a milestone which rightfully gives rise to retrospection on and analysis of this momentous event in the modern history of the Church. A heretofore overlooked part of the history of Vatican II is the small but important role played by the Norbertine, Benjamin Wambacq, who was Secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission at the time. In that capacity, Wambacq was involved in deliberations surrounding two of the most contentious debates at Vatican II: the validity of historical-critical exegesis and the question of episcopal collegiality¹. Drawing upon documents now in the Vatican Archives and the archives of Tongerlo Abbey², this article recounts Wambacq's involvement at Vatican II in the composition of the Biblical Commission's 1964 Instruction, *Sancta mater ecclesia* and in the debates surrounding the Council's document on the Church, *Lumen gentium*.

Benjamin Wambacq: A Brief Biographical Sketch³

Nestor Benedict Wambacq was born on 16 July 1906 in Boom, Belgium to Jan Baptist Wambacq and Clementina Amelia Vergauwen. Baptized at Our Lady's Church in Boom, he entered the Premonstratensian Order at Tongerlo on 15 September 1924, and professed his solemn final vows on 15 August, 1929. From 1925-1928 Wambacq studied Philosophy and

¹ At best, Wambacq has only merited brief mention in histories of the Council, e.g., R. BURIGANA, *La Bibbia nel Concilio: La redazione della costituzione "Dei verbum" del Vaticano II* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998).

² Archief Abdij van Tongerlo (AAT), Archivum Pontificii Instituti Biblici Romae (APIBR) and the Archivio Secreto Vaticano (ASV). Thanks are due to Abbot General Thomas Handgrättinger O.Praem. and Rector Stephen Mark Boyle O.Praem. of the Norbertine Generalate in Rome, Abbot Jeroen de Cuyper O.Praem. and Archivist Rev. Emiel Lauwers O.Praem. of Tongerlo Abbey, the Most Rev. Mons. Sergio Pagano, Prefect of the Vatican Secret Archives, Rev. Maurice Gilbert S.J., former rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, Connie Hackl Meulemans of the Miriam B. and James J. Mulva Library at St. Norbert College and Michelle Poncelet.

³ This information is taken from the *Bio Sodales Canoniae Tongerloënsis* (AAT, 19.148).

Theology at Tongerlo, and was ordained to the priesthood on 20 September 1930⁴.

Chosen to teach biblical studies at Tongerlo, it was necessary for Wambacq to go to Rome to study at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, because of the 1924 *motu proprio* of Pius XI requiring anyone teaching to obtain a degree in Rome⁵. Wambacq studied theology and Biblical Hebrew at the Gregorian (1928-32) earning a laureate degree *cum laude* on 12 November 1932, and that same year commenced studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in the three-year doctoral course⁶. He was appointed professor of biblical studies at Tongerlo in October 1935 and taught in Tongerlo from 1935-1954, being absent only in 1937-38 when he returned to Rome to write his doctoral thesis. In addition to his teaching duties, he was also the abbey librarian and served as Saturday pastor for a parish in the nearby town of Heultje. Wambacq left Tongerlo for Rome once again in 1954 when he was appointed professor of Biblical Studies, Greek, Hebrew and Methodology at the newly founded Pontifical Institute Regina Mundi, whose mission was to provide solid theological and biblical training to sisters, who at that time were forbidden to study at the Pontifical universities in Rome⁷. Wambacq spent the next three decades teaching at Regina Mundi, and served almost this entire time as a consultor on the Pontifical Biblical Commission (1955-1983), for which he was also Under-secretary (1959-62) and Secretary (1962-71). He also held papal appointments on the commission for the implementation of the conciliar decree on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*⁸, and

⁴ Wambacq's diaconate ordination in September 1929 was at Averbode because the fire at Tongerlo on 28 April 1929 destroyed most of the abbey.

⁵ PIUS XI, *Bibliorum scientiam: Motu proprio de disciplinae biblicae magistris* (*Enchiridion Biblicum*, Bologna 1927, 1993⁵ henceforth, *EB*⁵, nn. 505-12). The Pope also encouraged superiors of religious congregations to identify talented members as candidates for biblical studies in Rome.

⁶ Students were not admitted to the Biblicum without having first earned a degree in Theology and studied biblical languages, hence Wambacq's coursework at the Gregorian. For details on the entrance requirements and curriculum at the Biblicum, see the history of M. GILBERT, *The Pontifical Biblical Institute: A Century of History (1909-2009)* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2009) 68-81.

⁷ L. MUIR, "The Institute 'Regina Mundi'", *The Furrow* 6/8 (Aug. 1955) 501-503. The institute closed in 2005, since the rules barring women from studying at Pontifical universities in Rome were no longer in effect.

⁸ See AAT 19.148.4 for his letter of appointment from the Cardinal Secretary of State dated 3 March 1963. For a description of the work of the commission on the implementation of *Sacrosanctum concilium*, see R. KACZYNSKI, "Toward the Reform of the Liturgy", in *History of Vatican II: 3. The Mature Council, Second Period and Intercession*,

on the Pontifical Commission for the New Vulgate⁹. Wambacq returned to Tongerlo in 1982¹⁰, where he died on 12 December 1986¹¹.

Coram SS. Pontifice: Wambacq's Thesis Defense

Wambacq's presence at Vatican II was not his first time as a participant in high-level ecclesial debates. His November 1938 thesis defense for the Pontifical Biblical Institute was held in the presence of Pope Pius XI in the Vatican. The defense was arranged by Augustin Bea, S.J., the Biblical Institute rector and Wambacq's thesis advisor, and intended to be an opportunity to have the Pope publically affirm the Institute's orthodoxy in the face of increasing attacks from the Italian clergy¹². The Vatican's largest hall, the Sala di Benedizioni was chosen for the defense¹³, printed invitations were sent, and over 1200 people were present, including faculty from every Roman college and numerous prelates. A photograph of the defense (reproduced for this article) shows Wambacq standing at a lectern. Before him are the members of his committee, ranged at a long table. To his right sits Pius XI on a dais.

The defense was a great success. Wambacq was unanimously passed by his examiners, and Pius XI offered fulsome praise of the Biblical Institute¹⁴. More than a thesis defense for a doctoral candidate, the entire scene was clearly aimed at sending a larger message to the Italian church

September 1963 – September 1964 (eds. G. ALBERIGO and J. KOMONCHAK; Leuven: Peeters, 2000) 241-48.

⁹ For mention of Wambacq's work on the *Nova Vulgata*, see Stephan SCHMIDT, *Augustin Bea: The Cardinal of Unity* (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1992) 665-66.

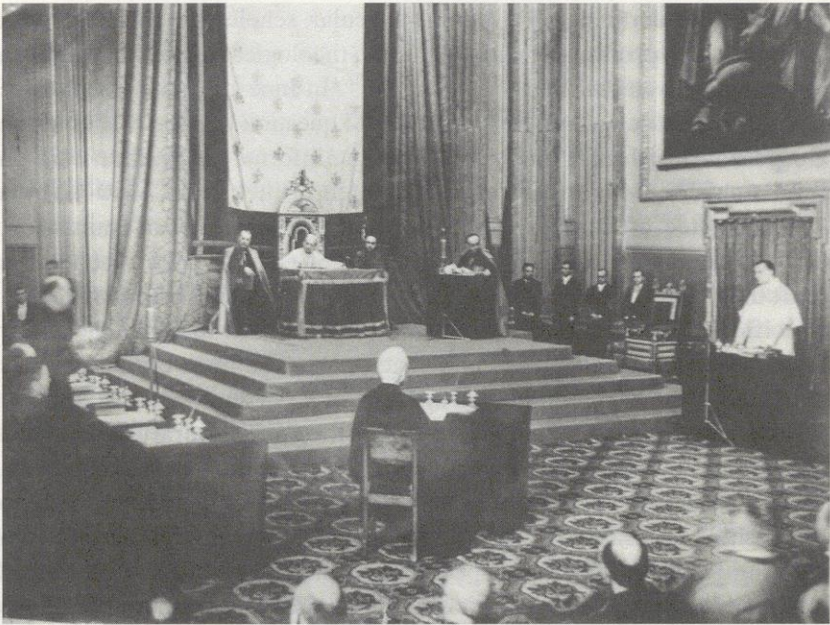
¹⁰ In Tongerlo is a receipt, dated 23 December 1982, for 523 kilos of personal items shipped from Rome (AAT 19.148.2).

¹¹ In light of his many years of service in Rome, especially on the Biblical Commission, a death notice for Wambacq was published in the 14 December 1986 edition of *L'Osservatore Romano*.

¹² Already in May, 1938, Pius XI had presided over the thesis defense of another Biblical Institute student, the Salesian Giorgio Castellino (GILBERT, *Pontifical Biblical Institute* [as note 6], 118-20). Castellino would go on to be a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission with Wambacq and sit on the subcommission that drafted *Dei verbum*.

¹³ Wambacq sent the Pope a detailed summary of the dissertation along with a letter in which he singles out Bea's role in the choice of topic: "factum est ut instigante Reverendissimo Patre Bea Pontificii Instituti Biblici Rectore, studium nostrum converteretur ad quaestionem solvendam" (AAT 19.148.15).

¹⁴ For the Pope's remarks, see *L'Osservatore Romano* 274 (25 November 1938); *Acta pontificii instituti biblici anni academici 1938-1939*, 178. For Bea's account of the Pope's



Benjamin Wambacq at his thesis defense in the presence of Pope Pius XI
24 November 1938 (AAT).

about the Pope's attitude toward modern biblical studies. The event was given extensive coverage in both the Biblical Institute's *Acta* and the Vatican's paper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, where the story appeared on the top of the front page, with a large copy of the photograph described above¹⁵.

Vatican II: Wambacq on the Biblical Commission

In 1959, after four years as a consultant on the Biblical Commission, Wambacq was appointed Under-secretary. During this time, debate in Rome surrounding the orthodoxy of historical-critical biblical studies became rather acrimonious, and many saw modern exegesis as nothing

presence at the defense, see A. BEA, "Pius PP. XI, quantopere de studiis biblicis meruerit. In memoriam", *Biblica* 20 (1939) 121-30.

¹⁵ See also the notice in *Analecta Praemonstratensia* 14 (1938) 258.

other than Modernism *redivivus*. In particular, scholarship that dealt with the Gospels as products of early Christian theological reflection was seen to be an attack on their historical veracity¹⁶. In June 1961, the Holy Office issued a *monitum* against those who would question this historicity of the Gospels¹⁷. This intense intellectual struggle informs the draft *schema* on revelation, *De fontibus revelationis*, written in the period 1960-62 by a subcommittee of the Council's Preparatory Theological Commission. This subcommittee, headed by the Jesuit Sebastien Tromp, composed a draft that was decidedly negative in its outlook toward modern exegesis¹⁸. Specifically, it condemned any attempt to impugn the historical accuracy of the Gospels for any reason whatsoever ("damnat errores quibus denegatur vel extenuatur, quovis modo et quavis causa")¹⁹.

Wambacq did not take part in the writing of the draft and indeed appears not to have known much about it until it was almost complete. Instead, on 14 March 1962, Wambacq wrote to Tromp and, referring to his position as Under-secretary of the Biblical Commission, requested a meeting to discuss how the upcoming council would deal with Sacred Scripture²⁰. Tromp notes in his diary on 9 April that the head of the Preparatory Theological Commission, Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, had received permission from John XXIII for Tromp and Wambacq to meet

¹⁶ For our purposes, it is not necessary to delve too deeply into the vast and fascinating history of the Council's preparatory stage; cf. J. FOGARTY S.J., *American Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A History from the Early Republic to Vatican II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989); BURIGANA, *La Bibbia nel Concilio* (as note 1); G. ALBERIGO and J. KOMONCHAK (eds.), *History of Vatican II* (5 vols.; Leuven: Peeters, 1995-2006); T. BOLIN, "The Biblical Commission's Instruction, *On the Historical Truth of the Gospels* (*Sancta Mater Ecclesia*), and Present Magisterial Attitudes Toward Biblical Exegesis", *Gregorianum* 93 (2012) 765-84.

¹⁷ *Sancti Officii Monitum de germana veritate historica et obiectiva s. Scripturae* (EB⁵ [as note 5] n. 634).

¹⁸ Detailed discussion of *De fontibus* in H. SAUER, *Erfahrung und Glaube: Die Begründung des pastoralen Prinzips durch die Offenbarungskonstitution des II. Vatikanischen Konzils* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993) and K. SCHELKENS, *Catholic Theology of Revelation on the Eve of Vatican II: A Redaction History of the Schema De fontibus revelationis (1960-1962)* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

¹⁹ Text of the draft reproduced in SAUER, *Erfahrung und Glaube* (as note 18), 649-51.

²⁰ "Infrascriptus sub-secretarius Pontificae Commissionis Biblicae a Paternitas tua humiliter petit, ut ei colloquium concedat [...] eum certiore reddat de doctrinis Sacram Scripturam spectantibus a Commissionis theologia intuitu Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II statutis." Stapled to this letter is one of Tromp's pre-printed calling cards, on which Tromp has written: "pro audientia, Venia loquendi de Constitutione de Fontibus cum Rev. mo Patre B. Wambacq, O.Praem., Subsecret. Comm. Bibli." Across this, Ottaviani has written: "Affirmative 6-10-62 AO." On the back of the card is written Wambacq's address at the Norbertine Generalate in Rome (ASV Conc. Vat. II 757.8).

and go over the draft. Tromp must have immediately contacted Wambacq, because the very next day, 10 April, Wambacq again wrote to Tromp, apologizing for not having been in his office the day before and offering another day to meet. Appended to this letter is an undated, hand-written note by Tromp stating that Wambacq is the Under-secretary of the Biblical Commission and that he has seen the draft of *De fontibus revelationis*²¹. This is confirmed by Tromp's diary for 24 April 1962, which notes that he met for two hours that morning with Wambacq to go over the draft of the *schema*, and that Wambacq found nothing objectionable in it²². Tromp's diary entry also reveals his defensiveness regarding the polemical tone of the *schema*. After noting that Wambacq found nothing wrong with the draft, Tromp notes parenthetically that the draft's reputation had led Wambacq to expect something reactionary ("quod adspectaverat ob famam crescentem eundo!")²³.

One question about this 24 April meeting deserves further attention: was Wambacq acting in an official capacity on behalf of the Biblical Commission? Conventional wisdom on this matter argues that Wambacq's approval of the *schema* did not constitute an official judgment of

²¹ ASV Conc. Vat. II 744.174.

²² "Mane hora 10-12 colloquium cum Rev. Domno Benjam. Wambacq Ord.Praem. Subsecr. Commissionis Biblicae. Perlegimus totam Constitutionem revisam. Concordat Subsecr. cum omnibus et nil invenit quod sit offensivum exegetis et scientiae catholicae" (A. VON TEUFFENBACH (ed.), *Konzilstagebuch mit Erläuterungen und Akten aus der Arbeit der Theologischen Kommission* [2 vols; Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2006] vol. 1, 421). Herbert Schauf, another consultant on the Theological Commission, notes in his diary on 16 June 1962: "P. Tromp sagte mir dieser Tage, dass man die Constitutio de Fontibus auf Wunsch des Papstes auch dem Sekretär der Bibelkommission gegeben habe. Dieser habe gesagt, es sei so viel über diese Konstitution geredet worden, nun aber müsse er sagen, dass die Sache sehr gut sei und gerade das gesagt werde, was gesagt werden müsse" (quoted in VON TEUFFENBACH, *Konzilstagebuch*, vol. 1, 567, n. 771).

²³ VON TEUFFENBACH, *Konzilstagebuch*, vol. 1, 421. Tromp repeated this in his minutes from the meetings of the draft subcommission, noting there that Wambacq was expecting a text in the spirit of the Inquisition, and that the Norbertine was pleasantly surprised by the *schema*'s moderate tone: "Vir doctus [Wambacq], qui ob rumores sparsos exspectaverat nescio quod documentum Sacrae Inquisitionis, stupefactus erat de doctrina tam moderata, quam libenter approbavit" (ASV Conc. Vat. II 788). He would make a similar statement the following November during the Doctrinal Commission's meeting held the day before the *schema* was to be introduced on the Council floor: "Illud forsan quoque addendum est, Constitutionem de Fontibus, post revisionem factam ab E.mis Card.libus Revisoribus, ex venia Summi Pontificis, monstratam fuisse Rev.mo Domino Beniamino Wambacq O.Praem, nunc Secretario P. Commissionis Biblicae. Miratus est vir doctus (exspectabat contrarium) aequilibrium et moderationem documenti" (ASV Conc. Vat. II 327.3).

the Biblical Commission²⁴. While it is true that the consultants did not meet to formally approve the draft, Tromp's remarks make clear that it was common knowledge in Roman circles that the Commission was preparing a draft *schema* on the Bible. Indeed, among those consultants on the Theological Commission most involved in writing that draft were three members of the Biblical Commission: Lucien Cerfaux, Alexander Kerrigan, and Salvatore Garofalo. It is also known that John XXIII wanted more involvement from the Biblical Commission in the often acrimonious atmosphere in Rome concerning the validity of modern exegesis in Catholic theology. So intent was the Pope's desire for the Biblical Commission to act that on 21 May 1962, he wrote to his Cardinal Secretary of State demanding that the Commission either begin to play a role in the debate or he would dismiss all its members and form another one²⁵. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the Secretary of the Biblical Commission would make an inquiry into this draft *schema*.

²⁴ So, e.g. BURIGANA: "Tromp riceveva un giudizio positivo sul contenuto dello schema da parte del premostratense B. Wambacq, sottosegretario della commissione biblica; nonostante il giudizio fosse espresso a titolo personale era il segno di un'apparente solidità del *De fontibus*, una volta passato indenne dalla revisione nella commissione centrale e ottenuto un *placet*, del tutto informale, dalla commissione biblica" (*La Bibbia nel Concilio* [as note 1], 84). Wambacq's positive assessment of the draft leads Burigana to describe the Norbertine as representative of "l'esegesi romana" (*ibid.*, 102-3). This position also coheres with the already generally negative picture painted of Cardinal Ottaviani in the history of the Council as secretive and scheming. So, e.g., in his discussion of Ottaviani's *relatio* of *De fontibus* in a general congregation of the Council on 9 November 1962 – in which Ottaviani introduces the *schema* as having the approval of the Biblical Commission – SAUER maintains that Ottaviani's "Bibelkommission" was really nothing more than "eine Untergliederung der Theologische Kommission" (*Erfahrung und Glaube* [as note 18], 69).

²⁵ L. CAPOVILLA (ed.), *Giovanni XXIII Lettere 1958-1963* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1978) 536-37: "E' ora di concludere su questo punto. O la Commissione Biblica intende muoversi, lavorare, e provvedere suggerendo al Santo Padre apprestamenti opportuni alle esigenze dell'ora attuale, o val la pena che si sciogla e l'Autorità Superiore provveda in *Domino* ad una ricostituzione di questo organismo. Ma occorre assolutamente togliere la impressione circa le incertezze che circolano qua e là, e non fanno onore a nessuno, di timori circa posizioni nette che conviene prendere circa indirizzi di persone, o di scuole, e circa una oculata distribuzione di compiti e di impegni. Intanto occorre dare l'impressione che chi ha la responsabilità sopra l'onore e circa il rispetto del Libro divino, come tesoro più sacro, accanto e dopo la Tradizione apostolica, su cui si riposa la santa Chiesa di Cristo, non manca alla sua vocazione. All'umile Servo dei servi del Signore sarebbe motivo di grande consolazione, se, colla preparazione del Concilio ecumenico, si potesse riuscire ad una Commissione Biblica, di tale rinomanza e dignità, da divenire punto di richiamo e di rispetto per tutti i nostri fratelli separati, che, abbandonando la Chiesa cattolica, si rifugiarono come a scampo ed a salvezza sotto le ombre del Libro sacro, variamente letto ed interpretato."

However, by March 1962, when Wambacq wrote Tromp for the first time, the Biblical Commission Secretary, Athanasius Miller, was ill and would be replaced by Wambacq in just four months. Consequently, I believe it a feasible reconstruction of events to see Wambacq's letter to Tromp regarding the draft *schema* on the Bible to be undertaken on behalf of the Biblical Commission as spurred on by the Pope's impatience²⁶, with its ailing Secretary represented in the person of the Under-secretary Wambacq.

John XXIII's desire for greater involvement by the Biblical Commission in the debates going on in the weeks before the Council can be seen in a series of steps he took in the first half of 1962. In May, as we have seen, the Pope expressed frustration at the Biblical Commission's lack of activity. By July, several new consultors were appointed and Wambacq was promoted from Under-secretary to Secretary, replacing the elderly Miller. Sometime also that spring, although sources do not allow us a great deal of historical precision, John XXIII set the Biblical Commission the task of preparing an instruction dealing with the critical point of contention regarding biblical exegesis and Catholic doctrine, namely whether historical-critical studies of the Gospels impugn their validity²⁷. Two years later, the Biblical Commission produced its Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels, *Sancta mater ecclesia*²⁸.

The historical record is equally unclear concerning the exact compositional and redactional history of the Instruction²⁹. In March 1963, Beda Rigaux, a Belgian exegete on the Commission, had mentioned to

²⁶ Although written after Wambacq's meeting with Tromp, John XXIII's letter cited above denotes a "last straw" that would most likely have been preceded by a period of more pastoral prodding on the Pope's part. It is also to be remembered that the Tromp-Wambacq meeting took place with the Pope's permission.

²⁷ According to PBI rector Ernst Vogt, in May 1962, "the [Biblical] Commission had to produce a decree on the whole biblical situation in the Church, and in a very short time" (quoted in GILBERT, *Pontifical Biblical Institute* [as note 6], 228). In the private papers of Cardinal Lercaro is a letter from Wambacq stating that the Biblical Commission will meet on June 16, 1962. The agenda includes not only discussion of the candidacies of new members, but "anche la discussione di una istruzione, ma allo stato attuale della ricerca non è possibile stabilire se si trattasse di un' bozza dell'istruzione sulla storicità dei vangeli, pubblicata solo nel maggio 1964" (BURIGANA, *La Bibbia nel Concilio* [as note 1] 103, n. 151).

²⁸ *EB*⁵ (as note 5) nn. 644-59.

²⁹ Cf. L. RANDELLINI, "Riflessioni Marginali alla Istruzione della PCB del 12 Aprile 1964", *Rivista Biblica* 13 (1965) 263. Cf. "Les origines de son *Instruction sur les Évangiles* sont mal connues" (François LAPLANCHE, *La crise de l'origine: La science catholique des Évangiles et l'histoire au XXe siècle* [Paris: Albin Michel, 2006] 476).

a fellow countryman that the Biblical Commission was working on a document dealing with the historicity of the Gospels. The Commission's work on the Instruction appears to have been suspended with the death of John XXIII on 3 June 1963 and the historical record goes silent until the following February, when Wambacq sent a draft of the instruction to Giacomo Lercaro, one of the cardinal members of the Biblical Commission. On 11 March, Bea presented a draft to all of the cardinal members of the Biblical Commission³⁰, and on 21 April Pope Paul VI received Wambacq in private audience to approve the document, which was published on 14 May. The Instruction was met with great enthusiasm by those scholars and bishops who wished the Church to be more open to critical biblical exegesis³¹. It is a remarkable document, openly embracing the exegetical method of form-criticism, and affirming that the teaching of Jesus written in the Gospels was edited by the evangelists for theological purposes. Consequently, while the Gospels preserve the authentic teachings of Jesus, they are not eyewitness accounts, nor are all the dominical sayings *ipsissima verba*. As such, the Gospels are as much the product of the early Church as they are of Jesus.

In the meantime, the draft *schema* on revelation which Wambacq had read two years earlier had experienced a tumultuous history, being debated, rejected, and ultimately withdrawn in November 1962 during the Council's first session³². By the time Wambacq had his audience with Pope Paul to approve *Sancta mater ecclesia*, work on a revised *schema* on revelation was underway. The Biblical Commission's Instruction would play a significant role in the final shape of the *schema*, and the majority of debates surrounding the draft of what would eventually become *Dei verbum* would involve exactly how to incorporate the viewpoint of *Sancta mater ecclesia* concerning the Gospels into the conciliar document³³. Indeed, in the voting on the

³⁰ BURIGANA, *La bibbia nel concilio* (as note 1), 276-77.

³¹ For bibliography, see D.P. BÉCHARD (ed.), *The Scripture Documents. An Anthology of Catholic Teachings* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002) 234-35.

³² Detailed discussion of this in BURIGANA, *La bibbia nel concilio* (as note 1), 105-70 and G. RUGGIERI, "The First Doctrinal Clash", in *History of Vatican II: 2. The Formation of the Council's Identity*, (eds. G. ALBERIGO and J. KOMONCHAK; Leuven: Peeters, 1998) 233-67.

³³ Regarding the incorporation of *Sancta mater ecclesia* into the *schema* on revelation, BURIGANA notes: "[N]on era un semplice gesto d'omaggio nei confronti di un documento appena pubblicato, ma la ricezione di un tema centrale nel dibattito esegetico,

individual sections of the *schema* during the Council's final session in 1965, the overwhelming majority of *non placet* votes were cast for paragraph 19, the section that dealt specifically with the historicity of the Gospels and which drew explicitly on *Sancta mater ecclesia*. Many bishops, and at least two of the cardinals who sat on the Biblical Commission—Michael Browne and Ernesto Ruffini—were clearly dismayed at the optimistic stance taken toward modern exegesis in the Instruction. As part of the subcommission helping to revise paragraph 19 of the draft, Browne expressed his frustration at the Biblical Commission for not affirming the historicity of the Gospels forcefully and explicitly³⁴. Ruffini, in his *votum* on paragraph 19, would make a wry observation on the Biblical Commission's work and his own membership³⁵. Pope Paul VI himself would intervene and direct that a phrase be inserted into paragraph 19 which unambiguously affirmed the historicity of the Gospels³⁶.

Wambacq on Collegiality at Vatican II

Rather soon after the release of *Sancta mater ecclesia* in the late spring of 1964, Wambacq and the Biblical Commission were asked to weigh in on the issue of episcopal collegiality, another of the most contentious issues at the Council. Included in the draft *schema* on the Church, affirmation of episcopal collegiality was seen by many Council fathers as both a revival of conciliarism and a repudiation of Vatican I. So potentially divisive was the issue, that Pope Paul VI intervened twice,

che mostrava la distanza tra il *De divina revelatione* e il *De fontibus*" (*La Bibbia nel Concilio* [as note 1], 295). For discussion of the debates surrounding *Sancta mater ecclesia* and its incorporation into *Dei verbum*, see BOLIN, "The Biblical Commission's Instruction, *On the Historical Truth of the Gospels*" (as note 16).

³⁴ *Acta Synodalia*, V/2, BURIGANA, *La Bibbia nel Concilio* (as note 1), 408-9; C. THÉOBALD, "The Church Under the Word of God", in *History of Vatican II: 5. The Council and the Transition. The Fourth Period and the End of the Council. September 1965 – December 1965*, (eds. G. ALBERIGO and J. KOMONCHAK; Leuven: Peeters, 2005) 314-16.

³⁵ "Propterea, salva Pont. Commissionis biblicae auctoritate, cuius indignum membrum sum, opinor de explanatione silendum esse omnino" (ASV Conc. Vat. II 217.3).

³⁶ In his note to the subcommission, Pope Paul wrote, "Sembra infatti – si leggeva nella lettera suddetta – che la prima non garantisca la storicità reale dei Vangeli; e su questo punto com'è ovvio, il Santo Padre non potrebbe approvare una formula che lasciasse dubitare della storicità di questi santissimi Libri" (quoted in G. CAPRILE, "Tre Emendamenti allo Schema sulla Rivelazione", *Civiltà Cattolica* 117/1 [1966] 229).

delaying a straw vote on the issue during the Council's Second Session in October 1963 and issuing the *Nota explicativa praevia*, affirming Petrine supremacy during the Third Session in November 1964³⁷.

The issue continued to stymie the subcommission working on *schema* in the spring of 1964. On May 19, Pope Paul sent them thirteen suggested topics concerning collegiality, requesting that they discuss them and report back. Two of those thirteen items dealt with the question of whether there were specific biblical justifications for collegiality³⁸. Cardinal Michael Browne, a Biblical Commission member and staunch opponent of episcopal collegiality, suggested in an audience with Paul VI on 24 May that the Biblical Commission be asked to examine whether there were any scriptural warrants for collegiality. Pope Paul agreed, and in a handwritten note to Pericle Felici, secretary of the Council, requested that the Biblical Commission address the question as soon as possible³⁹. Three days later Felici wrote to Wambacq reiterating Paul's wish to hear back as soon as possible⁴⁰, and asking the Commission to take up two tasks. The first was to provide scriptural evidence which either supported or challenged the claim that Christ "established" ("statuente") Peter and the apostles as a college⁴¹. Second, was to determine whether the commission of Christ to the Twelve in Matt 18:18 justifies extending the powers given to Peter in Matt 16:19 to all of the Apostles⁴². On 31 May, Wambacq convened nine other Commission members then in Rome to discuss the matter⁴³, and replied to Felici on 2 June⁴⁴.

³⁷ J. PROVOST and K. WOLF (eds.), *Collegiality Put to the Test* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990); A. MELLONI, "The Beginning of the Second Period: The Great Debate on the Church", in *History of Vatican II: 3. The Mature Council, Second Period and Intersession* (as note 8), 64-91.

³⁸ *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Vaticani II*, V/2, 507-9.

³⁹ "[S]arebbe urgente conoscere dello avviso [...] preme mandare lo schema 'de Ecclesia' ai Padri Conciliari" (ASV Conc. Vat. II 504.2).

⁴⁰ "[C]he il SANTO PADRE [sic] desidera che cotesta Commissione esamini sotto l'aspetto esegetico due punti del n. 22 nel test dello schema *De Ecclesia*... al più presto possibile" (ASV Conc. Vat. II 489.5).

⁴¹ "Sicut (A) statuente Domino sanctus Petri et ceteri (B) Apostoli unum Collegium apostolicum constituunt, eadem ratione Romanus Pontifex, successor Petri, et Episcopi, successores Apostolorum, inter se coniunguntur" (*ibid.*).

⁴² "[I]llud autem ligandi ac solvendi munus quod uni Petro datum est (Mt 16:19), collegio quoque Apostolorum suo Capiti coniuncto, tributum esse constat (Mt 18:18)" (*ibid.*).

⁴³ Ten (including Wambacq) out of 31 consultants.

⁴⁴ The Commission's response printed as, *Votum Pontificiae Commissionis de Re Biblica Circa No. 22 Schematis Constitutionis de Ecclesia* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglotis Vaticanis, 1964); cf. the discussion of Biblical Commission member Alexander KERRIGAN

Regarding the first issue, while the Biblical Commission agreed that the biblical text supports the claim that Christ established Peter and the Eleven as a college, they also agreed that it cannot be conclusively established on the basis of Scripture alone how exactly papal authority is related to or shared with (“inter se conjunguntur”) the bishops, although the Magisterium, guided by the Holy Spirit, could validly arrive at this position⁴⁵. Regarding the second matter, the Biblical Commission stated that the Petrine authority to bind and loose conferred to Peter in Matthew 16 was also part of the apostolic commission of Matthew 19, but that the exact meaning of what the powers to bind and to loose encompassed was not clear on the basis of Scripture alone⁴⁶.

Felici forwarded the Commission’s response to Ottaviani on 3 June. Two days later, the subcommission working on the *schema* had a long discussion about the Biblical Commission’s response. Browne, whose idea it was to consult the Biblical Commission, claimed that any episcopal collegiality remained subordinate to the Petrine primacy. In exasperation, perhaps at the Biblical Commission’s lack of consensus, the Belgian bishop, André-Marie Charue, baldly inquired what value their consultation had at all. Biblical Commission member Browne responded, perhaps rather testily, that it was the job of the subcommission working on the draft to settle the matter, and not the Biblical Commission⁴⁷. In the end, the final language of *Lumen gentium* on episcopal collegiality was very similar to that which the Biblical Commission was asked to examine⁴⁸.

in “The Biblical Commission on Episcopal Collegiality”, in *Miscellanea in Honorem Petri Cardinale Parente* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana, 1967) 15-28.

⁴⁵ “[E]ruendum est a doctrina Ecclesiae, quae Spiritu Sancto duce, hanc voluntates interpreta est” (ASV Conc. Vat. II 489.5).

⁴⁶ “Potestas ligandi et solvendi de qua Mt. 18:18 videtur esse eadem in Mt 16:19. Quod autem sit ‘suprema ac plena in universam Ecclesiam’ ad mentem schematis, non constat. Interpretes unanimes non sunt in explanandis verbis ‘ligare et solvere’” (*ibid.*).

⁴⁷ “[R]ogat Exc.mum Charue, quinam sit valor responsionis Commissionis Biblicae. Replicat Em.us. Browne et observat Secretarius examinationem quaestionis prius commissam fuisse Commissionis doctrinali, deinde subtractam et concreditam Commissionis biblicae;” from Tromp’s handwritten minutes of the meeting (ASV Conc. Vat. II 758.245.22).

⁴⁸ “Sicut, statuente Domino, sanctus Petrus et ceteri Apostoli unum Collegium apostolicum constituunt, pari ratione Romanus Pontifex, successor Petri, et Episcopi, successores Apostolorum, inter se coniunguntur” (*Lumen gentium*, para. 22).

Conclusion

In his role as Secretary to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Benjamin Wambacq was granted a privileged vantage point from which to view the theological deliberations which would result in some of the most profound developments in the history of modern Catholicism. Unlike the *periti*, who were chosen by Council fathers and given places on subcommissions revising and drafting documents, Wambacq was neither a prolific scholar (although his published works are quite respectable) nor was he part of one of the major Catholic theological faculties in Rome or elsewhere in Europe. Indeed, for someone who lived and taught in Rome for as many years as he did, Wambacq appears to have been content to have had a quiet career teaching and writing. Nevertheless, in the history of the Second Vatican Council, he stands as the Norbertine most involved, and his role, albeit a small one, was crucial in two issues which themselves were not resolved at the Council but have continued to exercise theologians and the Magisterium ever since.

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