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Editorial

"No need to remember past events, no need to think about what was done before. Look, I am doing something new, now it emerges; can you not see it?" (Is 43:18-19) – with these words the disciple of the prophet Isaiah instilled hope in Israel during the exile in Babylon. While many remembered the glories of the past, lamenting their loss and blaming the perpetrators of the tragedy of the exile, he looked beyond this tragedy and saw in it the hope of a new beginning. A similar conviction and hope moved me when I offered myself at the end of 2013 for the post of General Secretary of the Catholic Biblical Federation. I did not do so because I was the "only one with sight in a land of the blind," but because I perceived in many colleagues along the way the same desire to give our Federation a new beginning.

Having been involved in the Catholic Biblical Federation from 2000 while in Latin America, and experienced the Plenary Assemblies in Lebanon (2002) and Dar-Es-Salaam (2008), I also more recently had the opportunity to encounter the Federation "from the inside", having been invited to join the new Administrative Board in April 2012. An important motivating moment for me was the First Latin American and Caribbean Congress of Biblical Animation of all Pastoral Life (ABP), held in August 2013 in Lima, in which I participated representing the Acting General Secretary, Professor Thomas Osborne. At this event, in spite of some bickering and scheming I encountered many people – tired of "power struggles" or simply not interested in them – full of eagerness to chart new paths. I was also able to experience and relive the excitement of making way for the Word of God in the midst of our everyday reality and through it the inspiring of the life and mission of our Roman Catholic Church.

The year 2014 was a year of renewal and new beginnings. The most significant was undoubtedly the revitalization of the General Secretariat of the Catholic Biblical Federation with a full-time General Secretary. This means the beginning of a new stage in the history of the Federation. As part of this renewal, mention should be made of significant initiatives in various (sub)regions – in May the Rome sub-region had its meeting; in June, within the framework of a national meeting in Buenos

Aires for the first time in nearly a decade there took place a meeting of the Southern Cone region of the Latin American subregion; in August, coinciding with a CEBIPAL seminar on Biblical Animation of all Pastoral Life (ABP), the Executive Committee of CBF-LAC met; in October the members of the South-Western Europe subregion met in Fatima and the Central European subregion met in Passau (Germany); in early December the meeting of the South Asia subregion took place in Mumbai (India). The importance of these meetings stems from the fact that all of them, except those of Fatima and Passau in Europe, occurred after several years of inactivity in the regions. That is also why these meetings are a sure sign of a process of revival. All of them, in each of the regions, were also the beginning of the process of preparation for the Plenary Assembly convened by the Executive Committee in June 2015.

The most important initiative of the year, and perhaps the whole of this new stage in the Catholic Biblical Federation, was the first meeting which took place in February at the John XXIII Centre in Luxembourg, of the Preparatory Committee of the Master's Program in Biblical Animation of all Pastoral Life – a new service that the Federation is preparing to offer to its members and to our whole Church. With the support of donor agencies, whose trust we have been regaining through hard work over the last two years, we can finally look ahead and begin to respond to the challenges that God and the ecclesial reality in which we live are presenting to our Federation.

Articles by Gianfranco Ravasi, Jean Bosco Matand, Thomas P. Osborne and Chino Biscontin published in this issue of our newsletter will help us restore the vital link between the Word of God and the pastoral action of the Church in our day to day context. Meanwhile, Thomas Manjaly prepares us for the 50th anniversary of the Constitution "Dei Verbum" to be celebrated in 2015, highlighting its impact in Asia.

May this material for joint reflection, along with news about Federation activities, help to strengthen the bonds that unite us and contribute to the renewal process of our Federation.

Jan J. Stefanów SVD
CBF General Secretary
Translated by Michael James

Forum

The Bible, “Great Code” of Western Culture

GIANFRANCO RAVASI *

To confront a landscape as vast and complex as that evoked by the title of this particular “biblical reading” requires a simplification that we will seek to compress within the compass of a conceptual diptych. In the first tablet we would evoke a particular dimension of the Bible which is often the object of consideration in our day, even as it was disregarded in the past: we refer to the aesthetic quality of Holy Scripture. There are so many ways one could illustrate this aspect of beauty. We will be content to explore only the theme of the grandure of the word. In the second tablet of this diptych the focus will be rather on the influence the Bible has had within the cultural history of the West, in the form of multifaceted and complex typologies.

Power of the divine word

We know that for the Hebrew-Christian revelation the word is at the root of creation, where it performs an “ontological” function. In fact, one could almost say that both Testaments open with the divine Word that ruptures the silence of the void. *Bereshît... wajjômer ‘elohîm: jehî ‘ôr. Wajjehî ‘ôr* – “In the beginning... God said: Let there be light! And there was light” (Gen 1:1,3). Thus opens the first page of the Old Testament. In the New Testament the ideal opening could be that of the famous hymn that serves as a prologue to the Gospel of John: *En archè en ho Logos* – “In the beginning was the Word” (1:1). So, created being is born, not out of a theogonic struggle, as Babylonian mythology taught (we have in mind the *Enuma Elish*), but out of a powerful sonorous event, a Word that triumphs over the void and creates that which is. The Psalmist sings: “By the LORD’s word the heavens were made; by the breath of his mouth all their host. For he spoke, and it came to be, commanded, and it stood in place” (Ps 33:6,9).

The divine Word is, however, also at the root of history, as source of life and of death: “[he] sent forth the word to heal them, snatched them from the grave... He sends his word and they melt... When peaceful stillness compassed everything and the night in its swift course was half spent, your all-powerful word from heaven’s royal throne bounded, a fierce warrior, into the doomed land, bearing the sharp sword of your inexorable decree” (Ps 107:20; 147:18; Wisdom 18:14-16a). So, the divine Word sustains and judges also the course of history, with its web of occurrences and events, because “the LORD’s word is true; all his works are trustworthy” (Ps 33:4). But this same word interprets the ultimate meaning of history: it is, therefore, the root of Revelation.

Significant in this regard is the aniconic option of Israel, which has its greatest and most solemn (as well as dramatic) expression in the first precept of the Decalogue: “You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth” (Exod 20:4). So then, eyes off the golden calf! A choice, we were saying, that is dramatic not only for a people so hungry for realism and symbolism as were the He-

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brew people, with their semitic matrix that is at once both realistic and symbolic in orientation, but also for the very history of art which is supposed to be our topic. Deuteronomy places in the mouth of Moses a striking statement that illustrates the Sinai experience: "...the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words (*qôl debarîm*), but saw no form (*temûnah*); there was only a voice (*qôl*)" (Deut 4:12).



Stained glass window in St. Stephansmünster (Saint Stephen's Cathedral) at Breisach, Germany, by Valentin Peter Feuerstein (1917-1999), taking up biblical history. All photos by T. Osborne.

In this line which gives priority to the Word, the Bible is called by Jewish tradition *miqra'* – that is "reading" – where an allusion is made to the word *qara'* of the "proclamation", as in the case of the Koran, a word that contains the same verbal root. In this light, the highly-profiled "sonority" of the biblical text is not only a literary issue but a theological one as well. It would be suggestive at this point to highlight the "phonetic" aesthetic dimension of the sacred Word: recall, among other things, that Hebrew meter is not quantitative but qualitative, that is, it relies on the chromatic-harmonic, and even descriptive-denotative mix of its sounds. For example, the profession of love expressed by the woman of the Song of Songs is entrusted to the musical strain of the sound -î-, which indicates the personality of the "I", and the sound -ô- which points to the "him" of the lover: *dodî lî wa'anî lô... 'anî ledôdî wedôdî lî*, (2:16; 6:3). The Word is thus vocalized sound that speaks the language of God.

But the Word becomes crystalized also in the Book par excellence, the Bible. This is why the New Testament is fond of using the expression *graphè/*

graphai to indicate the Word of God. We have here in more precise definition the complex relationship between the infinite and the contingent, between *logos* and *sarx*. The Word, in fact, must compress itself into the cold and limited imprint of words on a page, of grammatical and syntactical rules; it must adapt itself to the editorial achievement of human authors. This is the experience of all poets, with both its drama and its tensions. Goethe in the *Faust* confesses that "das Wort erstirbt schon in der Feder"; indeed, the word does die already under the pen. And in his *Flauto di vertebre* Majakowski confirms the idea: "On paper I am crucified with the nails of words", while Borges more generally acknowledges that "el universo es fluido y cambiante, el lenguaje rigido" (the real world is fluid and changing, whereas language is rigid).

But yet this rigidity is not able to freeze or to extinguish the incandescence of the Word. One need only recall the case of the prophet Jeremiah, who "takes a scroll to write and writes" on it the oracles of the Lord, on divine orders (Jer 36:2). But after King Jehoiakim, as each column of the scroll was read in his presence, "would cut off the piece with a scribe's knife and cast it into the fire" (Jer 36:23), the prophet will not hesitate, under the divine command, to restore the same oracles in writing, showing in this way that – as Isaiah declared (40:8) – "though the grass withers and the flower wilts, the word of our God stands forever". This too is an experience that is lived by the poets in an analogous way, convinced as they are that, once uttered, the authentic word does not die but only then begins to live: "A word is dead/ when it is said,/ some say./ I say

it just/ begins to live/ that day" (so the American poet Emily Dickinson). We are speaking of the "performative" and not merely "informative" power of the Word that obviously celebrates its triumph in poetry and that reaches its highest level of performance in Holy Scripture.

Kenosis and splendour of the divine word

As happens in the Incarnation, the Word too reveals two faces, that of the "flesh", of limitation, of finitude, and that of the divine, of creative efficacy, of theophany. To these two faces, which in practice continue the discourse sketched above, we will now devote our attention. The Word of God – like poetry – avails itself of a "kenotic" means, that of a language, of a lexicon, of rules and phonemes. This is the necessary imprisonment of the ineffable Word when it wishes to make itself effable. It is something analogous to the *kenosis* of the Word of God as this is described in the Pauline hymn of Phil 2:6-11: "Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God ... emptied himself, taking the form a slave...". The weakness of the human word is magnificently illustrated by the prophet Isaiah who, in a personification of conquered Jerusalem, sings as follows: "Prostrate you shall speak from the earth, and from the base dust your words shall come. Your voice shall be like a ghost's from the earth, and your words like chirping from the dust" (29:4).

The Bible entrusts itself to the expressive poverty of a language that is rocky like the desert, gaunt and rough: the classical Hebrew language, which among other things has access to a limited lexical arsenal which consists of only 5,750 words. Or the poverty of a language based on *koinè* Greek, far more modest than that of the Greek classical period; and the New Testament Greek lexicon provides access to a patrimony of no more than 5,433 words. Indeed, this *kénôsis* goes so far that the most important name, the divine name, must be pressed into four consonants, JHWH, which remain mute, unpronounceable. At the summit of this thinning of the Word to the scale of human poverty we have the extraordinary experience of the prophet Elijah on Mount Horeb-Sinai. God does not appear in the "strong and heavy wind [that] was rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the LORD", nor does he take form in the earthquake or in the fulminations of a thundering storm. Rather, as the original Hebrew puts it, the Lord hides himself in a *qôl demamah daqqah*, that is, in a "tiny whispering sound" (1 Kings 19:11-12). We have here, as it were, the point zero of the self annihilation of the Word; and yet, that silence is "white", that is to say, it contains within itself all sounds, letters, syllables, words. It is the "mystery", a term which in its Greek root (*myein*) presupposes silence, the closing of the lips, not for an absence of meaning, but for a presence of life and of a person.

It is thus that the divine Word – as also, by analogy, the poetic word – reveals its potency. It reveals itself as a sumptuous medium and, to use an expression of Teilhard de Chardin, it makes itself "diaphanic", that is, diaphanous and transparent to the divine revelation. Such is the power attributed to the *Logos* of the prologue of John, mentioned above, according to the semantic force of the semitic term that underlies it. In Hebrew, in fact, *dabar*, "word", also means "action, event". Saying and doing are intimately linked. And for this reason, they are to be taken cumulatively and not disjunctively; or alternatively, as the poet supposes, one could speak of the four meanings that Goethe in the *Faust* ascribes to the Johannine *Logos*: "das Wort", Word, "der Sinn", the meaning, "die Kraft", Power, "die Tat", Act.

This efficacy that makes the (frail and feeble) word capable of transparently manifesting the Word that "is firm as the heavens" (Ps 119:89) is actuated above all through symbol, in the genuine sense of the term (*syn-ballein*, "put together"), and not in the popular understanding according to which it amounts to purely allusive metaphor. Symbolic language allows us to bind together finite and infinite, contingent and absolute, temporal and eternal, human and divine. Christ is the great and perfect symbol because he combines in himself *Logos* and flesh, as we say, divinity and humanity, fullness and weakness. And just as there is in theology the "dia-bolical" ("throw away", "scatter") temptation to shatter the Incarnation through gnostic spiritualism or through historical phenomenism, so too in the exegesis of the word there is the danger of breaking the symbolic character of the Word or reducing it to mere spiritual larva, to a quarry from which to extract theological theorems, or to a collection of historiographical or literary texts.

Emblematic of this tendency was the traditional hermeneutic of the Song of Songs. On the one side, the love of two protagonists was made to evaporate into an allegorical mysticism (God-Israel, Christ-Church, Christ-Mary, Christ-the soul): detached from reality, every link with the concreteness of existence would be broken to chase after rarefied relationships, metaphorical and spiritual. On the other side, the so-called “*école voluptueuse*”, that is the literalist interpretive school, viewed the poem as nothing more than a collection of erotic lyrics, patterned on analogous models of the ancient Near East, and as such texts loaded with torrid sensuality, or at times simply assigned to the *topoi* of discourse between lovers. In reality the Song of Songs is at once eros and true love, it is celebration of the full human embrace of love that reflects and reveals the love and embrace of God in his relation to his creature. And it is only the symbolic reading that can keep together the two values without penalizing the one in order to safeguard the other. As René Char (1907–1988), a surrealist and symbolist French poet wrote: “the gods inhabit symbol;/ seized by a violent leap, / poetry grows / out of an unprotected beyond”. It is here that theology and poetry are found to move in the same way, both taking root in the present and in the real to ascend to Another and to a transcendent Beyond.

The Bible, “great code” of culture

At this point, let us attempt to illustrate, in an entirely emblematic way, the second tablet of the conceptual diptych we introduced in the opening paragraph. In this panel our purpose is to bring out the generative function which the Bible has performed for western culture through a presence such as could provide a kind of iconographic “lexicon”, a kind of ideological matrix on which to draw. Not for nothing did Chagall affirm that the biblical pages are “the multi-coloured alphabet of hope into which for centuries painters have dipped their paintbrushes”.

“The Holy Scriptures are the universe within which western literature and art operated up until the 18th century, and to a large extent they continue to function in this way”. This statement from the famous essay *The Great Code* of Northrop Frye (1981) on the relationship between Bi-



bble and literature registers a matter of fact that is readily accessible to anyone who scours the cultural history of the West: it is simply a fact that for centuries the Bible has been the immense lexicon or iconographic, ideological and literary repertoire which has been drawn on constantly for inspiration, both at the learned and at the popular levels. And if Erich Auerbach in his famous *Mimesis* (1946) recognized the Bible and the Odyssey as the two crucial matrices for our culture, Nietzsche in the preparatory materials to the work *Aurora* (1881) likewise confessed that “for us, Abraham means more than any other person of Greek or German history. Between the feeling we have when we read the Psalms and that which comes from reading Pindar or Petrarch the difference is the same as that between the fatherland and a foreign country”.

To attempt to delineate this presence with the multiplicity of its forms, sometimes ideal, sometimes degenerate, is an encyclopedic, not to say desperate enterprise so endless would be any kind of cataloguing effort. However, in the wake of stimuli coming from philosophy (Gadamer, for example) and from theology (e.g., von Balthasar), the scholarly world has begun to appreciate the crucial im-

portance for the understanding of the Bible not only of the Author but also of the Reader, that is, the theological, spiritual and artistic Tradition that has been generated by Scripture. This has brought into being an area of research referred to in German as *Wirkungsgeschichte* or “the history of influence” (or also *Rezeptionsgeschichte*: the “history of the reception” of a text) whose purpose is to illustrate the extraordinary influence and radiational force that has been exercised by the Bible on the imagination and on events both at the level of high culture and at the popular level. Only by way of example we could cite a study of Jacob Kremer on the resurrection of Lazarus which, after having probed in depth the theological significance of the Johannine passage (Jn 11), analyses the history of the reception of this miracle, with testimonies taken from both religious and profane literature, from the liturgy and above all from art (the catacombs, sarcophagi, diptychs, mined codes, Giotto, Cranach, Rubens, Rembrandt, Redon, van Gogh...).

Still moving simply on a trajectory of examples, we will content ourselves with citing a few models whose purpose would be to represent in emblematic fashion this immense influence of the Bible. A first model could be defined as *reinterpretive or actualizing*: the biblical text or symbol is taken up, and then re-read and incarnated within new and diverse historical-cultural coordinates. We think of the figure of Job which, after having become for centuries an image of the suffering Christ in sacred art (for example, the *Meditazione sulla Passione* or the *Compianto sul Cristo morto* of Carpaccio), is transformed into a personal symbol in the *Recovery* of Kierkegaard: in Job the Danish philosopher reads his own broken experience of love and the attempt to recover it from the past with the help of God. Kierkegaard wrote: “I do not read Job with my eyes as I would read another book, but I take it to heart... Its every word is food, clothing and balm for my poor soul”.

And, to remain with the same philosopher, we think of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22) as it is read by him in *Fear and Trembling*: the terrible and silent three-day journey Abraham had to face on his way to the mountain of the trial becomes a paradigm of every journey of faith, marked by light as well as darkness, in which the believer must come to the point of full divestment from any human support, including the affections and the most fundamental human relationships. An exegete, Gerhard von Rad, in one of his works entitled *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, assembles around the biblical text this interpretation of Kierkegaard as well as the applied re-interpretation of Luther, of Rembrandt and of Kołakowski. But already Jewish tradition had seen in the ‘*aqedah*’, that is, the sacrificial “binding” of Isaac on the altar of Mount Moriah, the mystery of the suffering of the Jewish People and had questioned the silence of God (particularly in connection with the tragic event of the *shoah* at the time of the Nazi persecution).

We could go on at length in documenting this type of re-reading which dominates in sacred art which is keen on bringing the events of the Gospel into the “today” of the Church: we could think of popular portrayals, folklore, traditional rites that seek to revive the Passion of Christ or other moments of Christ’s life in a down to earth way, in architecture and in representations that populate everyday life. But there is another model that can be identified: one that elaborates the biblical data in a disturbing way, and that we could thus describe as *degenerate*. In the history of theology itself, as well as in exegesis, one often finds interpretive deviations and distortions. The sacred text becomes a pretext to speak of something else (“allegoria”), or even to subvert the original sense. This happens also in the history of culture. Let us take the Book of Job once again as emblematic of this model. There has in fact been a tradition that virtually ignores the consummate poem that constitutes the substance of the work and seizes almost exclusively on the prologue and the epilogue (Job 1-2 and 42). Here Job appears only as the man of patience who overcomes the trial and at the end is rewarded by God. In reality, the central body of the work offers, instead, the drama of a faith confronted with the mystery of God and of evil. The point of arrival of a tortured and bitter search for answers resides in that profession of faith that really seals the entire writing: “I had heard of you by word of mouth, but now my eye has seen you” (Job 42:5).

Christian art, however, along the lines of a reductive interpretation that is already present in the New Testament (James 5:11) and in the Fathers of the Church, will be content with a Job who resides on a dunghill, prepared to endure the most atrocious sufferings, the sarcasm of a wife and the protests of friends, in expectation of a final liberation. But the “degeneration” of the au-

thentic signification of the biblical book can be further illustrated from within the enormous stock of literary borrowings that the story of Job has been subject to (from Goethe to Dostoevskij, from Roth to Singer, from Bloch to Camus, from Morselli to Pomilio, etc.). An example of this afterlife in literature is the *Response to Job* of Carl G. Jung (1952) in which the famous biblical sufferer is erected into a symbol of morality and responsibility before a God who is totally devoid of ethics in his omnipotence and omniscience. Christ will be the one who, coming forth from God and entering into the human sphere, will succeed in learning the moral lesson of Job and in rising up against the “immoral” harshness and the unfathomability of the heavenly Father. As is evident, the biblical text is now merely a point of departure on which to weave new plots and construct new meanings, and this happens for many of the biblical figures: to remain within the sphere of the psycho-analytical, one could recall the elaboration of the figure of Moses and of the origins of the Hebrew religion conducted by Sigmund Freud in the three essays on *Moses the Man and the Monotheistic Religion* (1913).

Art as transfigurative hermeneutic of the biblical text

However, we must acknowledge that, if even deviant literature is already indicative of the fecundity and power of the Bible original, the Bible offers a magnificent witness of spiritual and cultural power when it is made to shine in all of its symbolic and theological richness. This is why we would like to speak of a third model that we would describe as *transfigurative*. Art often succeeds in making visible secret resonances of the sacred text, in re-transcribing the text in all of its purity, in making potentialities sprout to life that scientific exegesis masters only with great effort and often misses altogether. This is what Paul Klee affirms in a general sense when he writes, in his *Writings on Form and Design Theory*, that “art does not repeat visible things but makes visible what often is not”. Gaston Bachelard said of Chagall that in his pictures “he reads the Bible and suddenly the biblical texts become light”.

In this sense I find particularly significant the great music that from the 16th to the 18th century often surpassed the figurative arts in becoming effective interpretation of the Bible (Carissimi, Monteverdi, Schütz, Pachelbel, Bach, Vivaldi, Buxtehude, Telemann, Couperin, Charpentier, Haendel, Haydn, Mozart, Bruckner, etc.). One need only think of the evocative power of an oratorio like the *Jephthe* of Carissimi or the *Vespro della Beata Vergine* of Monteverdi or a *Passion according to Saint Matthew* of Bach or, to come down to our own times, the *Passion according to Luke* of Penderecki or the *Chichester Psalms* of Bernstein. To have a specific and essential example, it would suffice to follow the consummate re-reading which Mozart does of a literarily modest Psalm, the briefest in the Psalter, Ps 117 (116), dear however to Israel because it proclaimed the two fundamental covenant virtues that bind God to his people, that is *veritas et misericordia*, as rendered in the Latin Vulgate used by the musician, or “love and fidelity”, in a translation that is closer to the original Hebrew (*hesed we’emet*). So, the *Laudate Dominum* in F minor of the *Solemn Vespers of a Confessor* (K 339) by Mozart succeeds in recreating the theological and spiritual charge, both Jewish and Christian, of the psalm in a way that no direct textual exegesis could ever accomplish.

The “transfigurative” result is characteristic, however, of every great work of art and of literature. It would be impossible to give a comprehensive demonstration of this because the repertoire one would need to consult is vast. A symbol will suffice, that of the powerful finger of God, often celebrated in the Bible. Well, the entire history, mission, character and greatness of the Baptist are contained in that powerful index finger pointed toward the Crucified Christ which Matthias Grünewald painted on the *Altar of Isenheim* of the museum of Colmar. All the mystery of the act of creation described in the book of Genesis is in the “commanding” finger of the Creator of Michelangelo calling into life the dormant index finger of Adam. And the whole re-creative redemption that comes about in the life of the tax-collector Levi resides in the “citation” which Caravaggio makes of Michelangelo in that finger that Christ points to the future apostle Matthew, in the famous painting in the church of S. Luigi dei Francesi in Rome.

Art and the various cultural expressions can, then, repeatedly prove to be animated by the imaginative and conceptual world of the Bible. At the same time cultural tradition becomes an

interpretive key – sometimes free, sometimes correct, sometimes distorted – of the same Scripture. This is so true that a theologian such as Marie-Dominique Chenu in his volume *Theology in the XII Century* confessed: "If I were to re-do this work I would give far greater attention to the history of the arts, both literary and plastic, because these are not only aesthetic illustrations but genuine theological *topoi*". All of this is justified also by the fact that the Bible, while being a theological text in its ultimate finality, is also a literary work, endowed with extraordinary expressive force. This reveals itself in a great variety of forms but above all has a privileged expressive mode – as we have already had occasion to underline – precisely in symbol. Thomas S. Eliot spoke of the Psalms as of a "garden of symbols", but this definition could be extended to many biblical writings (Job, Song of Songs and Revelation, to name but a few).

Through the history of the high as well as the popular culture of the West those narrated symbols that are the parables of Jesus have been fundamental. The seed, the fields, the wedding banquets, the rebellious sons, the nocturnal doorkeepers, the boorish and egoistical rich, the victims of assault and the first responders, the vines and the peasant workers, the lilies of the fields, the fig tree, the stray dogs, the sparrows, the worms and the rust, the vultures, the fish, the sun and the rain, etc. all become unforgettable emblems of a message that will be constantly revived, transcribed, highlighted and even distorted, but always by way of that extraordinary apparatus that is the human imagination. For the Bible it is possible to utter God in a figurative way, in beautiful literary form, and in appropriate language. Through the use of symbol we reject a total ineffability and an aniconistic rigor that has plagued some religions, at least in certain spheres: one thinks of the prohibition of images in the Hebrew religion and in Islam. An attitude that brushed even the Christianity of the period of iconoclasm or that is present in some phases of the Protestant reform. The symbol, however, also allows us to reject the idolatrous representation condemned in the Bible and which occasionally surfaced even in the subsequent history. Symbolic language and what it generates at the artistic level allows us to maintain a balance between the mystery, the Other and the Beyond of God on the one hand, and his revelation, his affability, and his historical self-communication to humanity on the other.

With all of its symbolic richness, the Bible has been, therefore, "the great code" of culture and of popular imagination; but it has also been the presentation of a faith that unites in itself transcendence and immanence. Art has sought to capture the "carnality", that is the historicity of that revelation, sometimes exalting it, sometimes transforming it, but it has also almost always managed to safeguard the dimension of sign, of mystery, of the infinite and of the eternal. This is something that can be illustrated, in conclusion, through a particular kind of Oriental Christian art, that of the icon, as presented to us by Pavel Florenskij: "The barbarous and heavy gold of the icon, in itself futile in the light of day, comes to life with the trembling light of a lamp or a candle in a church, giving us a glimpse of other, non-terrestrial lights that fill the heavenly space". Art and faith in this sense meet. The icon images with their gilded backgrounds are earthly realities but they reverberate with the divine and launch us into a paradisiac experience.

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The Bible, a Performative Book Fundamental Elements of the Relation between Word of God and Pastoral Activity

JEAN BOSCO MATAND BULEMBAT *

1. I thank the organizers of this Plenary Meeting of the *Centre Biblique pour l'Afrique et Madagascar*, whose theme is *Biblica animatio totius actionis pastoralis*, for having invited me and, above all, for having asked me to contribute a paper on *The Bible, a Performative Book. Fundamental Elements of the Relation between Word of God and Pastoral Activity*. I was invited as Secretary General of the Pan-African Association of Catholic Exegetes (Association Panafricaine des Exégètes Catholiques: APECA)¹. I was delighted to come here, even if last week APECA appointed another Secretary General in the person of Fr. Moïse Adekambi who has been the Director of CEBAM for nine years².

If I have correctly understood what is expected of me, the task will be to speak to the animators of the Biblical Apostolate in Africa, who constitute the present assembly, about the ways and means for implementing the pastoral directive given by Pope emeritus Benedict XVI in n. 73 of his post-synodal exhortation *Verbum Domini*, namely, to promote “a greater ‘biblical apostolate’, not alongside other forms of pastoral work, but as *a means of letting the Bible inspire all pastoral work*”. And since the subject I am supposed to discuss lends itself well to this, I would like to progress through three stages in fulfilling this expectation: first, I will say a few words

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¹ This association was created a little more than 25 years ago (on 20 July, 1987) at Yaoundé (Camaroun) by African biblical scholars to continue the objectives pursued by the *Journées Bibliques Africaines* which were held in 1978 at Kinshasa (at the time Zaïre; today Democratic Congo), and in 1984 at Ibadan (Nigeria). It was created with two distinct, but inseparable objectives in mind, as article 3, paragraph I of the *Statuts de l'Association* stipulates: on the one hand “to promote biblical research of high scientific quality in an African perspective”, and, on the other, “to be at the service of the biblical apostolate in Africa” (*Statuts de l'APECA*, article 3, §1). “To accomplish this, the association will work in close collaboration with the Comité Biblique of SCEAM, and the higher institutes of Theology, in order to respond to the expectations of the African Episcopate in the realm of the biblical apostolate” (*Statuts de l'APECA*, article 3, §2). It is because of this second objective that for several years now the Director of CEBAM has been the Secretary of APECA. This is also the reason why since these two functions were separated in 1999 the Secretary General of APECA is, *ex officio*, a member of the Advisory Board of CEBAM. Biannually, APEA organizes a study congress where African or Africanist biblical scholars come to present the results of their research on a particular theme, showing above all how the Word of God, scientifically analysed thanks to rigorous methods, is performative for transforming the spheres of life of Africans who listen to it and who pose existential questions regarding the application of this Word in their lives. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary, African biblical scholars spoke of *the Bible and Pastoral Subjects* at the 16th congress which took place from 3 – 11 September, 2013, in Abidjan. Given the pertinence of this theme for the biblical apostolate, APECA had invited the Director of CEBAM, who for reasons of health had not been able to attend the congress, but who sent a timely message.

² With him, the links that exist between the objectives pursued by the two institutions in the service of the Bible in Africa will be reinforced to the benefit of the appropriation and the inculturation of the Word of God in Africa.

about the Bible as a book, highlighting its literary characteristics; next, I will bring to light aspects of the performative dimension of the Bible, suggesting ways in which it is the word of God which when heard and put into practice leads to eternal life with God; finally, I will point out the basic elements of the bond that ought to exist between the Bible, understood as word of God, and activities undertaken by pastors of God's flock with the aim of leading it to fresh green pastures for the sake of holiness.

The Bible as book

2. That the Bible is a book no one can doubt. It is in fact a large volume, which in reality is comprised of multiple ancient texts, remote both temporally and geographically, already sometimes with respect to each other, but above all remote with respect to our era and our African culture. At least twenty centuries (and in some cases nearly three millennia) separate our world of today from that of the Bible. Moreover, the period during which the texts of the Bible were written extends through at least eight centuries. The books one finds in this "library" were in principle composed by specific authors, according to a precise layout and in conformity with the rules or techniques of writing *en vogue* at their time and in their milieu, even if today, because of the third-party position occupied by the contemporary reader, the precise data of these compositional efforts are not always evident. So the Bible contains texts for which questions relative to their authors, their audiences, their places and dates of composition become pertinent if we wish to understand them in a balanced way.

In fact, it is evident that the Bible (particularly the Old Testament) is by right a *collection of several literary layers which were gradually given form*. It is even practically impossible to speak of an author of some documents of the Old Testament, especially since we do not really know who actually put the document in question into final written form. It is certain that *the majority of the texts are the fruit of a growth process that took place through a more or less extended period of time, so that their final form involved the likely contribution of more than one person*. Hence the diversity of materials in some of these books, which makes it impossible to assign them to a specific author. Hence also the changes in content and theological orientation, or the differences in historical situations presupposed in their different parts.



3. The literary units of these texts, both small and large, were written according to the literary genres in use in the spheres of life in which their authors lived. In certain units, the literary genres are so jumbled that it requires intelligence to ferret out the one which is the most comprehensive. The Bible does in fact contain a number of literary genres through which the divine message was communicated to humanity. Developing an awareness of each literary genre allows us to see how and to what degree the different authors have spoken the same truth about God and man. If one book is written in the form of a fable or tale, another might be patterned on the mythical model. If one macro-unity is expressed in the form of the narrative model, another might be in the formal category of a genuine argumentation, in the genre of ancient rhetoric. Another part might be in the genre of apocalyptic, and another in that of rabbinic Midrash. A Gospel text assumes sometimes the form of a miracle story, sometimes that of parable; other texts adopt the form of an annunciation, still others that of the controversy, or the homily, etc. Whatever the case may be, as written texts, the *gospels* constitute within the New Testament a specific literary genre, different from the letters of Paul or John or from the Catholic epistles, different from apocalyptic or prophetic or wisdom texts, different from any other profane or hagiographic narrative.

The Second Vatican Council stated authoritatively: "To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to 'literary forms.' For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another"³. In each case, therefore, it is important to see the schema of each of these forms of language, but above all the theological function each has in the process of communicating the word of God.

This makes it much easier to understand the variations that can surface even within the same story reported in two, three or four Gospels (example: the multiplication of the loaves in Matt 14:13-20; 15:29-39; Mk 6:34-44; 8:1-10; Lk 9:10-17; Jn 6:1-15). These variations which concern content, disposition, placement of material in the document, do indeed result from the life situation of the different ecclesial communities. To this one must add another life situation, that in which the author or compiler was working. In many cases, the life situation of the author is different from that in which the story was *spoken*, or *told* for the first time. So, even if the Bible is not a book of history, it contains material that alludes to historical events, not to mention the fact that a good part of the Bible story is presented in the form of *historical narrative*. The task, then, is to *situate each writing in its period*, and even to *pin down the different successive traditions within which each text was written*. An historical awareness is thus required on the part of the reader.

4. Another literary element of the biblical texts that needs to be highlighted is that of *language*. Not a single text of the Bible was written in a modern language. Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, a few parts in Aramaic, and a few others in Greek. The New Testament is an ensemble of texts written in the commonly spoken Greek language of the Hellenistic period (the *koinē*), in conformity with the grammatical and syntactical rules in vogue in the society and respecting the meaning of words and expressions as they would have been understood by the original audience – this, in spite of the creative ability of each author⁴. Even those who

³ Cf. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, n° 12. Originally cited in French from Concile œcuménique Vatican II, *Constitutions, décrets, déclarations, messages*. Textes français et latin, tables biblique et analytique et index des sources (Paris 1967) 135.

⁴ In two publications, Pierre Perrier maintains rather that the Gospels were written in Aramaic by eye witnesses of the life and teaching of Jesus, that is the apostles, and that they were later translated into Greek. This translation, marked by the Greco-Roman culture, does not always respect the originals which

today speak Modern Hebrew or Greek do not understand these ancient languages, unless they have studied them specially. The *linguistic barrier* is a genuine obstacle to a correct understanding of the Bible.

And what is there to say about translations? At least three things: 1° already very early the Bible was translated into other languages, such as Greek (the LXX), Syriac, Latin, and Coptic. The Old Testament had already been translated into Greek, into Aramaic and into Samaritan before the birth of Jesus Christ, and the Greek translation of the OT (the LXX) was used by all the first Christians. 2° These ancient versions, like all translations anywhere, bear in their turn the marks of the translators' competency, that of the expectation of the readers of the text and that of the spheres of life in which the translations were produced⁵. 3° This passion for translations already anticipates the second point of our exposé. This, because a performative value was very early attributed to these texts by the faith communities (Jewish or Christian) which were bound to transmit these texts from community to community and from generation to generation. We will return to this at the appropriate time. It remains to say that this transmission was followed by the multiplicity of known copies, both of the original and of the translations. And in this process of transmission, the effort to conserve the biblical texts was unfortunately marred by many corruptions, sometimes unintended by the copyist, and sometimes resulting from their deliberate intervention. So the biblical texts have come down to us through the mediation of manuscripts which witness to numerous variant readings. *The oldest manuscripts we have of the Old and New Testaments are all copies made long after the time when the original documents were written.* None of these is identical to the others. So, a *problem of the text* is thus raised: which manuscript conveys to us the text form that would be closest to the original?

5. To conclude this point, let us say that the reading of the biblical texts today requires a minimum of information, and even training regarding the literary nature of the Bible and regarding the requirements that must be respected if one wishes to arrive at an interpretation consistent with this nature. It thus becomes clear why the Bible has always been the object of exegetical and hermeneutical studies. But these studies would lack relevance if they limited themselves to the literary aspects of the biblical texts and to its historical dimension and failed to bring out the second aspect of the nature of these texts, namely the faith message which they convey. This is the point Benedict XVI underscored in his intervention at the 2008 Synod, and what was very articulately reaffirmed in *Verbum Domini* (cf. nn. 35-36). I will be emphasizing this aspect – which is, after all, the most fundamental – in the second point of my exposé.

The performative dimension of the Bible

6. Let us begin this point by stating what could be meant by performative. It is in Benedict XVI's encyclical *Spe salvi* ⁶ that I find what the term *performative* means, when he says there in n. 2: "... Christianity was not only 'good news' – the communication of a hitherto unknown content. In our language we would say: the Christian message was not only 'informative' but 'performative'. That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known – it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing". In n. 4, while expressing his thought in the form of a question, the Pope in fact maintains that the encounter with God which, in Christ, has shown us his Face and which has opened his Heart can be for us also not only informative in type but also performative, when it "can change our lives, so that we know we are redeemed through the hope that it expresses"⁷. The performative dimension of the Bible thus derives from

were in contrast marked by a Jewish mentality. Cf. P. Perrier, *De l'oral à l'écrit* (Paris, 2000); Idem, *Les évangiles et les colliers* (Paris 2001).

⁵ Cf. C. Mondésert (éd.), *Le monde grec ancien et la Bible* (Bible de tous les temps 1; Paris 1984); J. Fontaine – Ch. Pietri (éds.), *Le monde latin antique et la Bible* (Bible de tous les temps 2; Paris 1985).

⁶ Encyclical Letter *Spe salvi* of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Men and Women Religious and all the lay faithful on Christian Hope, n. 2.

⁷ *Ibidem*, n. 4.

the fact that it offers an encounter with the God who gives life and that it assures a hope for a life of unending communion with God in Christ.

7. What is fundamental for the Bible is the fact that we, the believers, receive its texts and read it as word of God. The Bible is not just any text; it is not to be read and understood the way we would read a letter of a friend, a contemporary magazine article, a story in a newspaper about one or another event, or a modern romance. It *falls into the category of Sacred Scripture* for the communities of faith that have received it (Israel and the Church) as an ensemble of texts inspired by God himself for the salvation of those who believe in him. In *Verbum Domini*, Benedict XVI expresses this idea through the use of an analogy: “A key concept for understanding the sacred text as the word of God in human words is certainly that of *inspiration*. Here too we can suggest an analogy: as the word of God became flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, so sacred Scripture is born from the womb of the Church by the power of the same Spirit. Sacred Scripture is ‘the word of God set down in writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit’. In this way one recognizes the full importance of the human author who wrote the inspired texts and, at the same time, God himself as the true author”⁸.

For the New Testament, in particular, each sacred writer, or better each final redactor, had to take into account the faith exigencies of the community he was addressing and so chose to *speak the truth of the gospel* the way he did and while adapting, even if not in a servile way, to the mould imposed on him by the form of the language he had chosen. The study of the life situation of the author should thus take into account not only his historical, geographical and social situation, but also and above all his theological interests and his pastoral aims.

8. To be sure, the New Testament is an ensemble of texts that have to do with someone named Jesus; not just any Jesus, however, but only the one who is recognized as the Christ. It is true, some New Testament texts had a pre-history in which a number of different stages can be distinguished, all the way from the oral stage to that of the final text, through a stage of smaller, well-structured literary units. But in every case this was done for catechetical reasons, the telling of well-ordered stories whose aim was to strengthen what the audience had already heard in the faith proclamation about the messianic character of Jesus of Nazareth. To be sure, in this textual prehistory of the New Testament writings, OT texts played a major role, whether as explicit citations or by way of mere allusion. But every writing event, whether intermediary or final – and even every citation (way of citing a text) of the OT – was consistent with theological perspectives triggered by pastoral concerns that marked the community that believed in Jesus Christ, the community to which the text was being addressed. Each of the texts about Jesus Christ and his disciples, in spite of its possible prehistory and reception, was written by a definite author who had the faith and who was addressing his writing to a particular community of faith, at a particular historical moment (space and time) and for particular catechetical and pastoral reasons. And when I say a particular author, I am speaking of a human being who existed historically, that is to say, one who lived at a particular period and in a particular place, had been educated and instructed in accordance with the educational exigencies of his time, and who allowed himself to be influenced or motivated by the pastoral concerns of the community he was addressing. Whether or not this person is known, whether or not he is the person to whom the writing is ascribed, this author left detectable traces in his work (style, vocabulary, orientation, theological particularities)⁹.

⁸ *Verbum Domini*, n. 19.

⁹ There are biblical texts which indicate clearly of themselves that the final – and present – state of the works of which they form a part is a result of a literary evolution. Others indicate explicitly that their author had recourse to more than one source of information (oral, or already written) in composing his text in a definite order and with a precise purpose. This is notably the case with 2 Mac 2:9-32; 15:37-39; Lk 1:1-4; I Cor 11:23-29. But all the writings are in a sense faith confessions.

In short, the New Testament is an ensemble of texts which tell about the life and deeds (words and actions) of the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who died and rose again, as well as of the events that took place that pertain to the individuals and the communities who lived at that time and who believed in him. These texts relate these facts in accordance with the particular perspective of people of faith who, motivated by pastoral concerns, have remained marked by the historical conditions of their act of writing.



9. One must then take into account the faith and the life of the Church that is reflected in the writings of the New Testament, and *mutatis mutandis* of the faith and the life of the people of Israel reflected in the writings of the Old Testament. The New Testament appears today as a collection of literary productions in which the reader can hear the first Christians celebrating a cult, praying and chanting, preaching, teaching, confessing and defending their Faith. In analysing all of this from the perspective of form criticism, one can view the narrative writings as typical forms of a faith expression rather than as stories or reporting on an event in the life of Jesus, and one strives to see how these narratives were used in the life of the Church and fashioned to meet its own objectives. The literary genres employed are, to be sure, those of the period and the milieu of the writers, but in the Bible, they are literary genres, which appeal to the authenticity of our relationship with the true God and the neighbour. These texts are truly born from the Church's womb through the action of the Holy Spirit. Anyone who questions this conviction is on the wrong track; he will get little of what the Bible is saying.

With an inspiration of their own, the members of the faith community receive these writings as the *norma normans* of their life in this world¹⁰. It goes without saying that this applies only to the person of faith. It is, after all, only for such a person that the Bible is *in fine* the Word by which God calls human beings to a life of communion with him; that it is the act of engagement that has God's stamp of approval for showing us the way that leads to eternal life. It is in this context that the reading of the Word of God within the Church has for its parameters the *Tradi-*

¹⁰ Cf. J. -B. Matand Bulembat, "The 'World in Front of the Text' and the Use of the Bible as Norma Normans in Ethics" in P. C. Chummar (ed.), *Natural Law..., In Search of a Common Denominator*. Proceedings of the 1st International Symposium, Catholic University of Eastern Africa (Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi 2010), pp. 110-122.

tion and traditional interpretations of all sorts. It is likewise in this context that the Magisterium has the right to act as authoritative interpreter of the Church's fundamental texts and to take a stand on the 'correct' interpretation of these texts.

10. This is why, also by way of concluding this point, we would say that the reading of the biblical texts today requires a minimum of information, indeed of formation regarding the divine nature of the Bible and regarding the need for respect if one wishes to arrive at an interpretation that is conformed to and consistent with this nature. This also makes clear why the Bible has always been the object of theological, spiritual and pastoral studies. This comment propels me forward to the third point of my remarks.

Fundamental elements of the relation between Word of God and pastoral activity

11. It would have been interesting to begin this point by situating paragraph 73 of *Verbum Domini* – the paragraph which constitutes the theme of our plenary meeting – in the context of the entire work; but we cannot elaborate here, given the limits of this presentation. Such an analysis would however have allowed us to point out that par. 73 is centrally situated in the exhortation, that it occupies the position of spinal cord in the skeletal structure of this masterpiece. It is here, in fact, that Benedict XVI insists that “the Synod of Bishops frequently spoke of the importance of pastoral care in the Christian communities as the proper setting where a personal and communal journey based on the word of God can occur and truly serve as the basis for our spiritual life. With the Synod Fathers I express my heartfelt hope for the flowering of ‘a new season of greater love for sacred Scripture on the part of every member of the People of God, so that their prayerful and faith-filled reading of the Bible will, with time, deepen their personal relationship with Jesus’”¹¹.

12. It is here too, in fact, that Benedict XVI also gives a very succinct definition of the Pastoral Ministry within the Church understood as “the house of the word of God”. It consists, he says, in preparing for the hearing and celebration of the word of God in the hearts of the faithful and in seeing to it that this word is above all absorbed and assimilated by them. For “the Christian life is essentially marked by an encounter with Jesus Christ, who calls us to follow him”¹². If we transpose this into the terms of the subject which we are developing, we would say that all the agents of pastoral ministry, those who plan and execute pastoral activities, whether they be Pastors or members of the faithful, ought to be inhabited by an intense desire to see flourish “a new era of greater love for Sacred Scripture on the part of all the members of the People of God”. This already is one of the fundamental elements we are looking for: *to have our hearts set on the personal encounter with Christ who communicates himself to us in his Word*.

13. This element is clarified by the Pope himself: “This is not a matter of adding a meeting here or there in parishes or dioceses, but rather of examining *the ordinary activities of Christian communities, in parishes, associations and movements, to see if they are truly concerned with fostering a personal encounter with Christ, who gives himself to us in his word*”¹³. In a way, he constructs a hedge around this statement. In fact, it is not a question of becoming an activist; here there would be the risk of superficiality. It is a question of going to the essential, to the very root of the Christian life which is sowed, cultivated, watered and weeded thanks to the personal encounter with Christ, thanks to the true knowledge of what he is in his word. This is why, citing St. Jerome, the Pope affirms: “Since ‘ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ’, making the Bible the inspiration of every ordinary and extraordinary pastoral outreach will lead to a greater awareness of the person of Christ, who reveals the Father and is the fullness of divine revelation”¹⁴.

¹¹ *Verbum Domini*, 72.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Verbum Domini*, 73. The italics are mine.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

14. It is true that the Pope is exhorting both pastors and the faithful; but it is very clear that his emphasis here is on the responsibility of pastors. From this point of view, I can state without danger of error, that for *Verbum Domini*, every activity undertaken by a pastor in view of guiding the brothers and sisters of Christ toward the eternal meeting with their elder brother ought to be animated by the word of God itself. Pastoral ministry consists in the effective animation of the lives of the faithful with the aim of leading them to sanctity, helping them become saints through what they do and in what they do, *actis et verbis*. The pastor's concern is that the faithful entrusted to his care grow each day in Christ until they reach the fullness of the perfect man. In order to do this they need to be listening each day to the word of God. This word comforts, consoles, sustains and fortifies. It helps us enter into the mind of God, contemplate his will, meditate on his plan for humanity. It transforms hearts by pouring the Spirit of God into them¹⁵. It is clear, then, why in n. 48 of *Verbum Domini*, the Pope speaks of the Saints as of individuals who have "truly lived the word of God"; he speaks of them as men and women "who let themselves be shaped by the word of God, through listening, reading and assiduous meditation". A pastor could undertake many activities, but if these are not guided and nourished by listening to the word of God, they run the risk of being like all the other activities done by entrepreneurs, politicians, tradesmen, etc., like the many good-will activities that are done even by people who do not have faith or hope for eternal life. From this point of view, it seems to me that the relationship between the word of God and pastoral activity depends on the way in which the baptized is living his or her relationship with the word of God. This is the decisive relationship that assures that pastoral activities will bear their distinctive mark, the Christian mark, the mark of the disciple of Christ.

15. By way of example, we could take the works of charity, which in the Church fall under the *munus gubernandi* of pastors, i.e. of bishops. It is through our hearing of the word of God and our profound knowledge of Christ that activities related to human development, which Christians do and should perform, will be different from others. In *Caritas in veritate*, Benedict XVI says this in other words: "*Development needs Christians with their arms raised towards God* in prayer, Christians moved by the knowledge that truth-filled love, *caritas in veritate*, from which authentic development proceeds, is not produced by us, but given to us (...). Development requires attention to the spiritual life, a serious consideration of the experiences of trust in God, spiritual fellowship in Christ, reliance upon God's providence and mercy, love and forgiveness, self-denial, acceptance of others, justice and peace. All this is essential if 'hearts of stone' are to be transformed into 'hearts of flesh' (Ezek 36:26), rendering life on earth 'divine' and thus more worthy of humanity"¹⁶. This is where my commentary and my conviction come from: all of this is possible only if our lives are being nourished each day because we are listening to the word of God, engaging in *prayerful reading of Holy Scripture* and in the *lectio divina* which is described in paragraphs 86-87 of *Verbum Domini*.

16. But all of this needs to be built on other foundations as well. To better know Christ in the Scriptures, one must be a *person of faith in Christ* and a *person of prayer*. It is not sufficient to merely affect religious attitudes, because even pagans are religious. They are religious, except that they believe in false gods. A way of faith requires an openness to God, to his Spirit and to the Spirit's illumination. It is this pneumatological dimension of our engagement in the following of Christ which enables us to better understand the Scriptures inspired by the Spirit himself and, in this sense, to resemble Mary. "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Lk 1:45). When I am lacking in faith even while being a pastor of the flock, there can be no doubt that the faithful see this; I can even be a very good preacher, a scholar, even very pious in performing liturgical celebrations; nevertheless, my be-

¹⁵ "The reading of the word of God sustains us on our journey of penance and conversion, enables us to deepen our sense of belonging to the Church, and helps us to grow in familiarity with God. As Saint Ambrose puts it, 'When we take up the sacred Scriptures in faith and read them with the Church, we walk once more with God in the Garden'". *Verbum Domini*, n. 87.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 79.

haviour in daily life will not conceal my lack of faith and of conversion to Christ. *Verbum Domini* reminds us priests in particular – and insists on the fact – that our pastoral engagement has – and must have – as its source the awareness of having been called to participate in the *munus docendi*, in the prophetic role of ordained ministry. For this, the priest must dwell in the word of God, be thoroughly immersed in it. Hence the need for us to apply ourselves to prayerful reading, beyond the in-depth scholarly study, of the word of God, the need for us to be men of *lectio divina* who are jealously devoted to the Liturgy of the Hours, docile lovers of the Eucharistic celebration. In any case, no one can know God unless God reveals himself to him. No one can claim to be a knower of the Bible as word of God if he has not first been instructed, formed, even transformed and converted by God himself.

17. As far as the faithful are concerned, an initiation to an understanding of the literary character of the Bible is important, because there is a notable cultural distance between the modern reader and the original audience of the biblical texts. Such an initiation will certainly make them aware of the great challenge of contextualization of the word of God that is heard, but above all it will summon them to the inescapable task of re-contextualization, appropriation, reprise of the word of God in their context as modern audience. For in order for the text to be performative, its reader ought never to avoid the question: what is this word saying to me today? But this indispensable formation-initiation requires that the one who is mediating this understanding of the divine-human nature of the Bible have the mind of the Church.

To be sure, scientific exegesis is important and necessary in order to better arrive today at an understanding of texts that are millennia old; but this approach has no sense unless it too is lived as an ecclesial *diakonia* in the service of the Church. Within APECA there is a watchword for all members: to do scientific exegesis *in Ecclesia, cum Ecclesia et pro Ecclesia*. On the other hand, the scientific reading is not the only valid reading method for the Bible, even if it is true that not all methods are equal. There are readings that are authentic and those, which are erroneous. In any case, whether a reading is individual or communal, whether it is that of an ordinary person or a scholar, it will not be authentic unless it is taking into account the divine-human nature of the sacred texts which were conceived in the bosom of the Church¹⁷. Whether this formation is of a popular type (*common/popular readers*) or whether it is scientific and cultivated (*trained readers*), what counts is that it should be “according to the faith of the Church”. To take only a single dimension leads to fatal or catastrophic errors for the faithful, notably the distortion, the manipulation or the annihilation of Holy Scripture, as is the case e.g. with a certain feminist reading, or with the reading through the lens of a theology of prosperity. This is why *Verbum Domini* is absolutely correct in saying that the biblical animation of the whole of Christian life will help us to confront certain pastoral problems such as “the proliferation of the sects which propagate a distorted and manipulative reading of Holy Scripture”¹⁸.

18. Another fundamental element that the animator of the whole of pastoral ministry through the Bible will discover for making the Bible a performative book is that of having the true sense of man and his call to salvation. Indeed, if – to put in another way what St. Jerome said – to know the Scriptures is to know Christ, him who is the Redeemer of man, who came into the world so that men and women might have life and have it in abundance, then all explanations of Scripture that favour a good reading of the Bible should serve the liberation of man from the slavery of sin and from anything that degrades or disfigures his divine sonship.

The bible is really a book of actions which transform the life of humanity, for it calls out to the dignity of the child of God that is every human being: slaves, deported people, refugees, migrants, foreigners, women, children, orphans, widows, the poor, the marginalized. It addresses the conditions of the lives of men and women in this world: idolatry, ecology, polygamy, homo-

¹⁷ Cf. P. Decock, “The Bible in the Life of the Church in the South African Context” in *Sagesse humaine et sagesse divine dans la Bible. Lectures bibliques dans le contexte de l’Église comme Famille de Dieu en Afrique*. Mélanges S.E. Mgr Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya. Actes du 12^e congrès de ‘Association Panafricaine des Exégètes Catholiques, tenu à Kinshasa, du 04 au 10 septembre 2005 (Nairobi 2007), pp. 27-37.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

sexuality, etc. These are not texts that extol egoism, theft, murder, etc., but texts that denounce these things to proclaim the Gospel, the good news of true liberation from sin and from submission to Satan and to idols. When a biblical interpretation leads to discrimination, to division, to the exploitation of man by man, it becomes death dealing and in no way life-giving; it becomes diabolical and not at all performative. Access to the truth of the biblical texts ought rather to procure the light and energy of the word of God to transform our own hearts and to put us at the service of the Church and of humanity. The desired formation should not then be merely by way of information, informative, but rather performative. In short, the Bible is a book about actions, but actions to be undertaken as a response to the call that God addresses to us as we listen to his word of life, to be undertaken therefore in the perspective of God.

19. In the light of everything we have said, we wish finally to point out – and indeed emphasize – the fact that the reading of the word of God requires that the faithful have access to it in the languages they “naturally” understand. Here is where we see the importance of translating the Bible into all the languages of our communities, as *Verbum Domini*, n. 115 (and already n. 46), encourages us to do. It is true that to translate is not an easy task; but if we want the word of God to really speak to everyone, we must assume the responsibility of making translations of the biblical texts in the languages spoken by the faithful entrusted to our care and which they really understand. This is an indispensable task so that each and every people can hear God speaking to them in their own language. With the death and resurrection of the Word Incarnate of God, there are no languages that are superior to other ways of speaking, nor dialects that are inferior to other idioms. Before God, such language inequality has in fact never been the case. God has ransomed men and women of every tribe, language, people and nation.

Conclusion

20. As I said above, it is impossible to be exhaustive when one treats a subject like that which I was asked to speak on before this august assembly. The reading of the word of God which has come to us, by divine condescension, in writing in the Holy Scriptures is demanding – this, because of the purpose of these writings, which is to help us to know and love Christ, so that we can have a share in eternal life with him before God. This is why whatever the type of reading (be it popular or scientific, personal or communal) the Bible should be read with method and understanding; but given the catechetical and pastoral purposes which inspired its being put into writing, it must first of all be desired and loved as word of God, light for our paths, and it should be read in a spirit of listening and filial obedience. And the light of the Gospel cannot enlighten us and make the fruits of the Spirit grow in all our activities, in particular our pastoral activities, unless we are persons, men and women, of faith in Christ, having the mind of the Church and the true understanding of man and of his call to salvation. If all the other pastoral activities are carried out thanks to this biblical animation, they will bear the fruit that God expects of them. The Bible will remain forever what it is of its very nature: a performative book. *Verbum Domini manet in æternum.*

The Dialogue between Pastors, Theologians and Exegetes

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1. “... magis assiduum necessitatem inter pastores, exegetas et theologos” (VD 45)

In the context of his reflection on biblical hermeneutics, Pope Benedict XVI recalls the recommendation made by the Fathers of the Synod regarding a “closer relationship between pastors, exegetes and theologians” (in Latin: *Ideo Patres synodales hanc ad rem commendaverunt exempli gratia magis assiduum necessitudinem inter pastores, exegetas et theologos*). Here is the entire text of paragraph 45 of *Verbum Domini*:

An authentic hermeneutic of faith [*authentica fidei hermeneutica*] has several important consequences for the Church’s pastoral activity. The Synod Fathers themselves recommended, for example, a closer working relationship between pastors, exegetes and theologians. Episcopal Conferences might foster such encounters with the “aim of promoting greater communion in the service of the word of God” [Propositio 28]. Cooperation of this sort will help all to carry out their work more effectively for the benefit of the whole Church. For scholars too, this pastoral orientation involves approaching the sacred text with the realization that it is a message which the Lord addresses to us for our salvation. In the words of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, “Catholic exegetes and other workers in the field of sacred theology should work diligently with one another and under the watchful eye of the sacred magisterium. Using appropriate techniques, they should together set about examining and explaining the sacred texts in such a way that as many as possible of those who are ministers of God’s word may be able to dispense fruitfully the nourishment of the Scriptures to the people of God. This nourishment enlightens the mind, strengthens the will and fires the hearts of men and women with the love of God” [*Dei Verbum* 23].

The Latin words “magis assiduum necessitudinem” are translated officially in English as: “a closer working relationship between pastors, exegetes and theologians”; in German: “regelmäßigere Kontakte zwischen Seelsorgern, Exegeten und Theologen”; in Italian: “un rapporto più assiduo tra Pastori, esegeti e teologi”.

As an exegete, I feel obligated to pose a number of questions that could further clarify the meaning of the text:

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(1) "theologians and exegetes". It is more or less clear who is meant here, even if one might question why a distinction is made between theologians and exegetes, but "pastors" seems less clear: does this mean persons engaged in pastoral ministry generally, i.e., priests and laypersons, pastoral ministers, or does the term mean Pastors, with capital P (see the French and Italian translations, for example), which could then be understood to mean "Pastor-bishops"? Taking into account the citation of the constitution *Dei Verbum* which follows, I think it does mean bishops in their magisterial function. This is confirmed by the appeal to the Bishops' Conferences to support this type of meeting.

(2) How are we to understand this "magis assiduam necessitudinem"? "A more regular bond [of relationship]" (un lien [de parenté] plus assidu) seems to me to be a better translation than "a closer bond" (un lien plus étroit", in French). In any case, exegesis, theology and magisterium are seen as having to work together in a regular way, and in an "assiduous" – intense and on-going – manner in order to allow the Scriptures to become nourishment that enlightens minds, strengthens wills, and inflames hearts for the love of God.

(3) This more assiduous bond is presented as a necessity to insure an "authentic hermeneutic of faith". Here it seems likely, even certain, that Pope Benedict XVI is calling into question an



exegesis that would be practiced in isolation from theology and from the magisterium, but also a theology that would be practiced in isolation from exegesis and from the magisterium, and even perhaps a magisterium that would be exercised in isolation from exegesis and theology. In any case, the objective is to establish a permanent bond between exegesis, theology and magisterium, between the magisterium, exegetes and theologians, a bond that would be resolute and on-going, concerted, and, if I may venture to borrow another expression from *Verbum Domini*, "symphonic". In fact the challenge is to learn how to achieve, strengthen and render fruitful this relational bond, marked by dialogue between three partners who respect the competencies and missions of the respective agents, in the context of the universal

ecclesial community. This condition seems necessary in order to insure an "authentic hermeneutic of faith" at the level of the interpretation of the Scriptures.

2. “A more regular relationship”: difficulties and conditions of success

a. Difficulties

It is no secret that the Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, in line with a number of papers given at the 2008 Synod, gave expression to a certain unease that was felt in the Church throughout the 20th century with regard to the practice of historical-critical exegesis. To give a rapid – all too rapid – summary, the “historical-critical” study of the Scriptures (with its battery of methods of highly specialized literary analyses – textual criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, history of religions, rhetorical analysis, and so on) seeks to understand the process by which the biblical text came into being, with the aim of going back far as possible to the time of the foundational “events” of salvation history. Within the Catholic church, this procedure was often perceived as “modernist”, reductionist, atheistic, speculative, destructive of faith ... while at the same time these methods were receiving nuanced recognition in pontifical documents (*Providentissimus Deus* of Pope Leo XIII [1893], *Spiritus paraclitus* of Benedict XV [1920], *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of Pope Pius XII [1943]), in the dogmatic constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II (*Dei Verbum*), and again in *Verbum Domini* (2010) [VD 31]. The “speculative” tendencies of a certain scientific exegesis and the subsequent erection of scientific theories into established truths, together with the fact that these assured results have since been subjected to radical questioning (the documentary theory on the origins of the Pentateuch according to Julius Wellhausen comes to mind) have led some to question the usefulness of this exegesis, because it is of little or no benefit to the spiritual lives of Christians and to their salvation, and in any case is “incapable” of achieving its proper objective, which is to arrive at the historical events echoed by the Bible in its narratives, faith confessions, etc.

These conflicts took place on two well-known battlefields in the second part of the 20th century: on the one hand, that of direct political application of a certain biblical theology (the theology of liberation), and on the other, that of the psychological-psycho-analytical reading (see Eugen Drewermann) which looks for salvation not in the events of salvation but in the psychological processes inspired by the biblical narratives. The document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* [1993] underscored at once the fundamental necessity of the historical-critical study of the Bible and at the same time emphasized the use of a plurality of methods of interpretation and approaches so as to allow the Scriptures to be perceived as Word of God for the world of today. Only the reading referred to as fundamentalist (which I would rather call “literalist”) was rejected in an unambiguously clear fashion. Christian fundamentalism in the proper sense of the term had its origins in American Protestantism of the late 19th and early 20th century, which, as a direct challenge to liberal Protestant theology, affirmed the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, notably the inerrancy of the Bible in connection with a doctrine of immediate inspiration of the Scriptures and the doctrine of “*sola scriptura*” in an extreme form, according to which Scripture alone is the rule of faith, and consequently it likewise affirmed the historicity of the virginal birth of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, and the imminent return of Jesus, etc.

b. Toward a responsible exegesis and theology in the Church

Ultimately, the Catholic Church, for its part, in a nuanced way, attempts to take seriously the complex nature of Holy Scripture – the Word of God addressed to the community of believers, a Word which takes form in human words within this same community so that it can proclaim the Word of God, Jesus Christ. The ecclesial approach involves the effort to devote oneself to a hearing of the Word of God, to open oneself to the appeal of Scripture and to respond to it. As *fides quaerens intellectum*, theology seeks to comprehend this word in its original form and structure, to inquire into the many ways in which this word has been received and allowed to bear fruit throughout the ages, and, in a way that is subject to continuous renewal, to strive to listen to this word, to allow it to penetrate our human hearts and lives, to shape and to transform us each new day, both at the level of the individual and that of the ecclesial community. This is what is meant

by the journey of faith, whether at the level of the universal Church or the local parish, the community or the individual.

In order to meet this challenge it is of course necessary to strengthen the bond between pastors (bishops and animators of the Christian community), exegetes and theologians. To this triad I would add a fourth partner, the People of God, with its expertise in human life. Indeed, it is essential to listen attentively to the experience, which the People of God has with the Word, when it practices the dialogue between the scriptural text and human life, in all its concrete complexity.

If Pope Benedict XVI insists on the necessity of strengthening the bonds among pastors, exegetes and theologians, one has to believe that this bond is not self-evident, that relations between pastors, exegetes and theologians are sometimes experienced in a problematic way. The Pontifical Biblical Commission devoted a few paragraphs to the sometimes difficult interaction between exegesis and dogmatic theology (3.D.4). Differences of method, approaches and goals yield a situation in which collaboration is often complicated: exegesis, with its analytical, literary and historical methods and its objective centred on the comprehension of the biblical text at the time of its composition; dogmatic theology, with its own methods – historical, to be sure, but also speculative and systematic, which seeks to arrive at a coherent elaboration of the Faith or of doctrines, on the basis not only of the Bible but also of the whole of the Church's tradition. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* puts it this way: "Because of its speculative and systematic orientation, theology has often yielded to the temptation to consider the Bible as a store of *dicta probantia* serving to confirm doctrinal theses. In recent times theologians have become more keenly conscious of the importance of the literary and historical context for the correct interpretation of ancient texts, and they are much more ready to work in collaboration with exegetes. Inasmuch as it is the word of God set in writing, the Bible has a richness of meaning that no one systematic theology can ever completely capture or confine. One of the principal functions of the Bible is to mount serious challenges to theological systems and to draw attention constantly to the existence of important aspects of divine revelation and human reality which have at times been forgotten or neglected in efforts at systematic reflection" (III, 4). Even more so, difficulties can arise between Pastors, taken in the sense of the magisterium, and exegetes, since the deposit of faith, as received and formulated in the course of the Church's history, cannot always be fully justified by an appeal to the Scriptures which testify to the great diversity of sensitivities and forms of faith and of community in Judaism and nascent Christianity. To yield creative fruits, scientific research, both in exegesis and in theology, requires an openness guaranteed by "academic liberty", even if this freedom does not exempt the exegete or the theologian from his or her ecclesial responsibility.

In 2012 the International Theological Commission devoted a very interesting document to the theme: "Theology today: perspectives, principles and criteria". This reflection insists on the fact that

Theology, in all its diverse traditions, disciplines and methods, is founded on the fundamental act of listening in faith to the revealed Word of God, Christ himself. Listening to God's Word is the definitive principle of Catholic theology; it leads to understanding and speech and to the formation of Christian community... (4).

To acknowledge "the primacy of the Word of God" is "one of the criteria of Catholic theology" (9). It is in "the communion of the Church" that the "study of Scripture" can become the "soul of theology".

Theology in its entirety should conform to the Scriptures, and the Scriptures should sustain and accompany all theological work, because theology is concerned with 'the truth of the gospel' (Gal 2:5), and it can know that truth only if it investigates the normative witness to it in the canon of sacred Scripture,¹ and if, in doing so, it relates the human words of the Bible to the living Word of God (21).

Nevertheless, exegesis cannot be content with "doing historical-critical work only":

¹ Cf. Council of Trent, *Decretum de libris sacris et de traditionibus recipiendis* (DH 1501-1505).

Exegesis should strive to read and interpret the biblical texts in the broad setting of the faith and life of the people of God, sustained through the ages by the working of the Holy Spirit. It is in this context that exegesis searches for the literal sense and opens itself to the spiritual or fuller sense (*sensus plenior*) of scripture (22).

As for the relationship between theologians and bishops, theology and magisterium, this document recalls a number of fundamental points of what it calls “responsible adherence to the Magisterium of the Church” (37-44): the understanding of the Church as communion, the placing of both the work of theologians and of the magisterium of the bishops under the primacy of the Word of God, the on-going collaboration between theologians and bishops in view of the preparation and formulation of magisterial statements, the mutual respect of the competencies and missions of theology and of the magisterium...

In this connection, and taking into account the different levels of magisterial pronouncements,

the obedience that theologians as members of the people of God owe to the magisterium always involves constructively critical evaluation and comment.² While ‘dissent’ towards the magisterium has no place in Catholic theology, investigation and questioning is justified and even necessary if theology is to fulfil its task (41).

In this whole context, what better way is there to strengthen the regular bond between pastors, theologians and exegetes than for all of them to be placed under the primacy of the word, listening all together and with humility to the word of God and the human words of each, and this in advance of any reflection and decision on the Church’s pastoral ministry!



3. A few high-priority avenues of work

Pope Benedict XVI was not content to take up the recommendation of the Synod Fathers regarding this “regular bond” between pastors, theologians and exegetes. When one reads *Verbum Domini* one discovers a certain number of precise points where the bond is to become active. In

² Cf. *Theses on the Relationship between the Ecclesiastical Magisterium and Theology*, Thesis 8.

what follows I would like to mention five avenues, to which I will add a few remarks on their relevancy in “biblical-pastoral ministry”.

a) *The doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures*

The Church owes it to herself to better understand the central doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures and their inerrancy and to better elaborate a “theology of inspiration”. Pope Benedict XVI himself called for this reflection (VD 19). In a promising way, he speaks not of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scriptures, but of the inspiration and truth of the biblical text, when he cites *Dei Verbum* which specifies “that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation” (DV 11). The International Theological Commission was taken precisely by this reflection and we await the fruit of its investigations. This reflection is in a way urgent, if we observe the often conflicting ways of grasping the “literal sense” of the biblical texts, not only between the Catholic Church and “fundamentalist” religious groups, but also within the Catholic Church itself. This reflection ought to take into account the symbolic character of all language, which by its nature creates an opening for investigation of meaning rather than trying to define it once and for all, and also not only the inspired character of the biblical text and its authors, but also the inspiring character of these texts and, in a certain way, of the people who read and listen to them. Clearly, the contribution of pastors, of theologians and of exegetes is required, and this in an urgent way, also at the level of episcopal conferences, given the momentum of the so-called fundamentalist groups. And one must not yield to the temptation of responding to simplistic or populist challenges in a way that is itself simplistic.

b) *The relationship between the Old and the New Testament*

Verbum Domini 40 discusses the relationship between the Old and the New Testament:

Against this backdrop of the unity of the Scriptures in Christ, theologians and pastors alike need to be conscious of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. First of all, it is evident that *the New Testament itself acknowledges the Old Testament as the word of God* and thus accepts the authority of the sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people.

Even if it is clear within Christianity that the Old Testament finds its fulfilment in the coming of Christ and consequently also in the New Testament which witnesses to his coming and to the community which recognized in him the Messiah expected in Judaism, what we call the “Old Testament” is in the first place the Holy Scriptures of the Jews (in their Hebrew form or in their Greek form) and bears within it the expression of the multiple forms of the faith and hope of the Jewish people. The first locus of meaning of these texts is found in this historical context. It is with respect and gratitude that Christianity receives from its elder brother these Scriptures in which it sees total fulfilment in the person of Jesus. This consideration, which requires the activation of the permanent bond between pastors, theologians and exegetes, is full of repercussions for the order of the lectionary and for homiletics, as well as for catechesis and relations between Christians and Jews. It will likewise have implications for our view of Jesus the Jew himself. From this point of view, we should be careful to avoid the stereotypical opposition, which is both simplistic and Marcionist, between the Old and New Testaments, between the God of judgment of the old covenant and the God of love of the new covenant. Unfortunately, these antitheses remain strongly present in our mentality today.

c) *Biblical formation for the Christian people (VD 52)*

At the general level, “biblical formation” should be less an introduction to the study of the Bible than an initiation in the reading of the Bible and of those writings that favour a dialogue between the Bible and daily life. Indeed, if the Word of God in its written, i.e. in its biblical, form is to become a word of life, it should be able, in catechesis as well as in homiletics, to resonate in

our everyday lives. It is striking how the parabolic teaching of Jesus and the great majority of biblical narratives in general draw their language from the most concrete human-life sources. Accordingly, in the realm of biblical formation, one must likewise be trained to listen to and respect human life in all its forms. The apprenticeship in showing mercy, of which Pope Francis constantly speaks, is essential in this connection. Here the contribution of pastors, theologians and exegetes as regards the development of such basic formation programs is required, especially for “animators” of biblical groups, or more broadly of Christian communities, as well as for those who are engaged in preaching. Biblical formation – like Christian education generally – should be open to investigation of meaning rather than being content to fix meaning once and for all. It is only in this way that one can participate in the formation of Christian “citizens” capable of assuming their responsibility in the transformation of the world. But attention; Christians will not be able to be active and responsible in society if at the same time they remain passive within the Church.

In this connection, I would like once again to make a plea for setting up programmes of specific formation for persons in charge of biblical-pastoral ministry, in dioceses, in episcopal conferences and also in religious and missionary orders. At a time when we are moving toward the creation of chairs for evangelization, I think it would be high time to create chairs or even Masters Degrees in biblical pastoral ministry or in the biblical animation of ecclesial ministries. It is high time to acknowledge, in both academic and theological courses, that the reading of the Word of God among the Christian people is a *locus theologicus* and to insure that specific formation in this area can be acquired in the faculties of theology or the institutes of pastoral formation. Here, an appeal is made to pastors, theologians and exegetes and the Catholic Biblical Federation is ready to play its role in this regard, placing its experience and its competency at the disposition of academic authorities. At a time when the effort is being made to create broader networks of relationship between faculties and institutes, one could establish regional centres with links to the great Roman universities and others, and also places for biblical formation and experience in the Holy Land. One part of the formation could take place at the location where one normally lives and works, using means of modern communication; another part of the formation in the great academic centres and in the biblical countries of the Middle East. This would mean creating places for reflection, research and publication on the great questions of biblical pastoral ministry, as well as for formation that bears on methods of reading the Bible in Christian community.

d) *From “Sacrae Paginae studium sit veluti anima Sacrae Theologiae” (DV 24) to the “biblica animatio totius actionis pastoralis” (VD 73)*

Finally, and without wishing to repeat the reflections I shared with you in my conference a few days ago,³ I believe that it is the responsibility of pastors, theologians and exegetes to work actively and unceasingly in developing the intuition of DV 24 according to which the Sacred Scriptures ought to become “the soul of theology”, with ultimate aim of achieving the biblical animation of the whole of pastoral ministry, such as VD 73 recommends.

This “biblical animation” will not be achieved by reliance on stone, on paper or on electronic media; it is human support, mind, memory and the hearts of men and women that should be targeted, in an atmosphere of profound respect for life, for solidarity and for fellowship. This requires immediate, on-going personal and community contact with the Scriptures, so as to enter gradually into their narratives, their symbols, their symbolic language... It requires frequent contact and ever increasing familiarity with the individual writings and with the Bible as a whole, as a canon of the Scriptures. Only in this way can advances be made toward progressive insight into the mind of God.

³ See «Animatio biblica totius actionis pastoralis» (VD n° 73). – «Animatio biblica totius actionis pastoralis» (Verbum Domini n° 73): Actes de la VIIIème Assemblée plénière, Kachebere, Malawi, 17-23 septembre 2013 /Biblical Centre for Africa and Madagascar (BICAM). – Accra: BICAM Publications, 2014, pp. 79-85.

This requires also that the Scriptures be an obligatory step in the development of the pastoral ministry of local communities as well of the Church. It is our desire that individuals impregnated with this familiarity with the Scriptures will search these Scriptures in prayer so as to acquire the ability to guide our steps in the exercise of our responsibility in the service of the Gospel.

In order to assume this responsibility, it is clearly necessary to strengthen the regular bond of communion between pastors and theologians, exegetes, and the whole of the people of God, and this under the primacy of the Word of God.



St. Stephen's Cathedral at Breisach, Germany (photo: T. Osborne)

The Bible and the (new) Evangelisation

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Translated by Michael James

In the narration of the event of Pentecost in the book of Acts of the Apostles we find some curious information: *"Now there were devout people living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven, and at this sound they all assembled, and each one was bewildered to hear these men speaking his own language. They were amazed and astonished. 'Surely,' they said, 'all these men speaking are Galileans? How does it happen that each of us hears them in his own native language?'"* (Acts 2:5-8). Pablo Richard, in his commentary on the Acts of the Apostles¹, highlights the fact that it is not the Apostles who speak different languages, but rather it is the listeners who hear the message of the Apostles each "in their own language". This leads Richard to consider Pentecost as "the Christian celebration of the inculturation of the Gospel" – the message of God, which is unique, becomes concrete in different ways in different cultures. This process of receiving the universal message in a particular culture, which Pablo Richard identifies



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¹ *El movimiento de Jesús antes de la Iglesia. Una interpretación liberadora de los Hechos de los Apóstoles*, Sal Terrae, 2000.

with the modern term "inculturation" and which in exegetical language is called "rereading", does not originate with the beginnings of the movement of the disciples of Jesus, but is present throughout the biblical tradition.

1. The Bible read and reread

Thanks mainly to the results of historical-critical analysis we now know that much of the biblical texts are the end product of a complex literary process. These texts, as we know them in their present state, are the result of a long process of fusion, writing, reprocessing or reinterpretation of existing materials and traditions.

We can safely say that the interpretation of the Bible is not a recent phenomenon, but had already started within the Bible itself, and that our current interpretive effort is just an extension of a long process of interpretation that goes back to remotest origins of biblical history.

The great German biblical scholar of the last century, Gerhard von Rad (1901–1971), considered this interpretive editorial process as something normal, as a vital need of the people of Israel, driven by the continued search and affirmation of their identity as the People of God. "Each generation faces the task, ever ancient and ever new, of understanding itself as 'Israel'. In a way each generation had first to become Israel. Generally, the children could recognize themselves in the image that had been handed down to them by their parents; but this did not excuse them from recognizing themselves in faith as the 'Israel' of their time and to present themselves as such before Yahweh. For this contextualization to be possible the tradition had to be reformed in some points. The theological demands changed and so, for example, the Elohist editing of salvation history appeared alongside the earlier Yahwist version. Later times sought a theological meaning in the great historical complex narratives. To satisfy this desire, during the Exile the Deuteronomistic school introduced its interpolations into the ancient complex narratives in order to interpret and contextualize them. Thus the deposit of tradition slowly grew; new elements were added and old ones reinterpreted. Alongside the earlier versions there appeared more recent duplicates. No generation found itself with an autonomous, completed historical work; each continued to work on what it had received".²

A careful analysis of this process allows us to discover divine revelation not as a specific event in history, but, in all its complexity and richness, as a dynamic and on-going process that unfolds in history through various generations. We encounter a typical example of this process of rereading in chapter 4 of the Acts of the Apostles, in the narrative of the meeting of Peter and John with the community after their liberation from the prison (Acts 4:23-31). During this meeting, leading up to a communal prayer, Psalm 2 becomes the focus of this prayer and of its consequences. This same Psalm 2 appears in this short story in three different contexts: in its original context – not determined specifically in the context of the past; in the context of the life of Jesus – who is seen by the praying community as the new subject of this psalm and finally in the context of the community itself – which is also identified with the unnamed protagonist of this psalm and thanks to whom it discovers its identity as the new "Lord's anointed". The process of rereading the same biblical tradition in three different historical contexts clearly appears in this story. At the same time the Bible itself appears not only as a religious book transmitting divine revelation, but also as an important step in the process of building the identity of a people – the People of God.

2. A Biblical renewal in the Church

In the Second Vatican Council it is stated in the Dogmatic Constitution Dei Verbum, that "Therefore, like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her

² *Teología del Antiguo Testamento, I. Las tradiciones históricas de Israel*, Salamanca 1993, 164.

sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life" (DV 21). Since then in the Roman Catholic Church we have been living a constant renewal process, which takes place with constant reference to the Bible, making it the centre and foundation of the life of the Church. A witness and facilitator of this process is the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF).

The Catholic Biblical Federation was born as one of the first fruits of Vatican II, although its history begins before the Council. It would not be inappropriate to describe the Catholic Biblical Federation as a "daughter" of Vatican II, as it has been established for permanent promotion of awareness of the centrality of the Bible in the life of the Church. We can say that, in a real sense, the Constitution Dei Verbum, and especially Chapter VI, is the guiding text of the Federation and the vision that guides its work.

The CBF more than an institution is a coordinating platform for reflection and action, which is represented in 127 countries by 332 full and associate members. Countless women and men are engaged in Bible work in its varied forms. Priests, religious, catechists, lay people carry out the work of evangelization in different contexts and cultures. The CBF is a live network, linking together people from all regions, cultures and peoples of our Roman Catholic Church.

3. The old and the new

Based on the diversity of organizations affiliated with the Catholic Biblical Federation and the wide range of activities undertaken by them it can be said that for the past 50 years we in the Roman Catholic Church have been living in a new Pentecost – the biblical message takes on many forms and is heard in different languages in different cultures of our world. This renewing dynamism of the Word of God is stronger in young churches of the "New World" than in the traditional churches of our "Old Europe". The best and leading exponent of the dynamism of the Word is the Latin American Church.

Since the eighties, the Latin American church has been notable for its clear option for the poor and a growing biblical movement that runs through all church structures. It is a young church, dynamic, committed and grounded in the Word of God – the Word of God read in the context of life. All this is obviously the result of a constant process of search, of renewal and of options characterised by the CELAM conferences in Rio de Janeiro (1955), Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979). Also producing a major dynamic effect was the V Centenary of the arrival of Christianity in the Latin American continent and the process of preparation of this event in different areas of church life. In the context the V Centenary note should also be taken of the biblical programme for pastoral renewal "Word and Life" prepared by the Conference of Religious of Latin America and the Caribbean, which made a huge impact not only in religious communities, but also in the ecclesial communities of the continent in general.

Similarly the programme of the RED Biblical (Biblical Network) and the famous Intensive Bible Courses (IBC) – promoted by the World Council of Churches, gave rise to REBILAC, the Ecumenical Biblical Network of Latin American and the Caribbean, which energized the Church, and especially its grassroots sectors, through the committed and ecumenical reading of the Bible. The publication and the ecumenical group of biblical scholars of RIBLA – Journal of Biblical Interpretation in Latin America – are active to this day.

The Fourth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation took place during the period 27 June – 9 July 1990 in Bogotá (Colombia). Its central theme was "The Bible and the New Evangelization". As usual, at the end of the Assembly, the concluding document was published, with the same title – "The Bible and the New Evangelization". Without going into details of this document (the full text can be found on the website of the Catholic Biblical Federation – www.c-b-f.org) two aspects of it relating to the reading of the Bible in the context of life are worth noting.

First of all, this document marks the beginning of a true "Copernican revolution" on the place of the Bible in the life of the Church. It was during this Fourth Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation in Bogotá, that discussion began about the need to highlight the centrality of the Word of God in the life and pastoral activity of the Church. In the final document, among the practical recommendations, we read:

8.1.1 We appeal to Bishops and Bishops' Conferences to ensure that the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* is implemented in the various dioceses and regions through the establishment of biblical-pastoral centres or institutes.

8.1.2 We appeal to Bishops and Bishops' Conferences to give the biblical apostolate the priority it deserves in their pastoral endeavours and to encourage it through the formulation of a biblical-pastoral plan and through the conscientization of the faithful through pastoral letters on the biblical apostolate or other appropriate means such as the celebration of Bible Sundays, weeks, months or even a Bible year, especially in those areas where this is not yet a practice.

8.1.3 We appeal to Bishops and Bishops' Conferences to dedicate the next Synod of the Bishops to "Biblical-Pastoral Ministry" so that the relative neglect of the Conciliar Document "Dei Verbum" may be set right.³

This last appeal was the first official mention of the need to convene a synod on the Word of God. This call was repeated in successive General Assemblies of the CBF in Hong Kong (1996), Lebanon (2002) and during the audience granted by Pope Benedict XVI to the members of the "Dei Verbum" Congress in Rome in 2005, when the Holy Father received an official letter proposing an Episcopal Synod on the Word of God.

Three years after the General Assembly of Bogotá, in 1993, a document of the Catholic Biblical Federation outlining "guidelines for biblical pastoral ministry at the end of the second millennium" in the light of that General Assembly of CBF, was published in the *Dei Verbum Bulletin*, where among other things it says:

Biblical pastoral ministry, however, is not considered to be concerned with only one particular sector of the life of the Church; indeed, the reference to the biblical text and to its Good News must be the foundation of the entire pastoral and missionary activity of the Church. Moreover, in its quality of witness to God's presence in the life of the faithful communities of the first and second covenant, the Bible is, with the living tradition of the Church, especially a word which is spoken to us today and not only a word which was spoken in the past. This word can help us to be healed and freed from the forces which enslave us, to read the signs of the times, and to find our way in this world. In this regard, it might be better to speak of "biblical animation" of the entire pastoral and missionary activity of the Church. We must assure that the biblical message in its full depth is one of the fundamental references in our search for the Word of God for our Christian community and for our contemporary world, or, in other words, that this message animates and inspires our Christian involvement in everything we attempt to live".⁴

For the first time there appears the term "biblical animation of all pastoral life and mission of the Church". The term was furthered publicised following the meeting of European bishops in charge of biblical pastoral work held in Freising (Germany) in 1994, where it was taken up and reaffirmed. It appeared again in the final document of the Plenary Assembly of the CBF in Hong Kong in the year 1996. Thus, it became increasingly present in ecclesial awareness.

One year before the Synod on the Word of God, in 2007, the Latin American bishops meeting at Aparecida (Brazil), in the final document of the General Assembly of CELAM declared: "It thus becomes necessary to offer the Word of God to the faithful as gift of the Father for the encounter with Jesus Christ living, path of 'authentic conversion and of renewed communion and solidarity'. This proposal will mediate the encounter with the Lord if the revealed Word contained in scripture is presented as source of evangelization. Disciples of Jesus yearn to be nourished with the bread of the Word: they want to have access to proper interpretation of the biblical texts, to use them as mediation of dialogue with Jesus, and that they be the soul of evangelization itself and of proclamation of Jesus to all. Hence, the importance of a 'biblical ministry' understood as **biblical animation of all pastoral life**, that it serve as a guide to interpretation or knowledge of

³ *Bulletin DEI VERBUM* No. 15-16 (2-3.1990) p. 15.

⁴ *Bulletin DEI VERBUM* No. 28, 3.1993, p. 4.

the Word, to communion with Jesus, or prayer with the Word, and to inculturated evangelization or proclamation of the Word. This demands that bishops, priests, deacons, and lay ministers of the Word approach sacred scripture in a way that is not merely intellectual and instrumental, but with a heart 'hungry to hear the Word of the Lord' (Am 8:11)." (No. 248)



This whole process of awareness building of the centrality of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church, found its climax in the Synod held in 2008. In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "Verbum Domini" Pope Benedict XVI, Number 73 we read: "The Synod called for a particular pastoral commitment to emphasizing the centrality of the word of God in the Church's life, and recommended a greater 'biblical apostolate', not alongside other forms of pastoral work, but **as the Biblical animation of all pastoral life**. This does not mean adding a meeting here or there in parishes or dioceses, but rather of examining the ordinary activities of Christian communities, in parishes, associations and movements, to see if they are truly concerned with fostering a personal encounter with Christ, who gives himself to us in his word. Since 'ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ', the **Biblical animation of every ordinary and extraordinary pastoral outreach** will lead to a greater awareness of the person of Christ, who reveals the Father and is the fullness of divine revelation" (VD 73).

Thus, this concept, born in the local pastoral reality of Latin America, embraced and promoted by a universal church institution – the Catholic Biblical Federation – taken to the Synod and adopted in the Post Synodal document became the benchmark for the entire Catholic Church. It is the great contribution of the Latin American Church to the universal Church.

The first visible result of this movement of "biblical pastoral work" to "biblical animation of pastoral life" has been the renaming of the "Departments of Biblical Pastoral (Animation)" in dioceses and Episcopal Conferences, which gradually are now called "Departments of Biblical Animation (of all Pastoral Life)". But while this process is important, what is happening is greater than a change of language. It is primarily a "paradigm shift" – a process of putting the Word of God in the centre of the life and mission of the Church; a listening to the Word of God that leads to a personal encounter with the living Christ.

The two most recent popes, Pope Benedict and Pope Francis, speak insistently of faith and of Christian mission in terms of the testimony of a personal encounter with Christ, which is for the unbeliever an invitation to personally seek this encounter. In his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis writes: "Not only the homily has to be nourished by the word of God. All evangelization is based on that word, listened to, meditated upon, lived, celebrated and witnessed to. **The sacred Scriptures are the very source of evangelization**. Consequently, we need to be constantly trained in hearing the word. The Church does not evangelize unless she constantly lets herself be evangelized. It is indispensable that the word of God 'be ever more fully at the heart of every ecclesial activity'. God's word, listened to and celebrated, above all in the Eucharist, nourishes and inwardly strengthens Christians, enabling them to offer an authentic witness to the Gospel in daily life" (EG 174).

In the universal Church we are now speaking in terms of initiating something that the Latin American Church has lived and practiced for years. In relation to the Bible and its place in the

life of the Church it is now seen more clearly how much progress in the dynamism of faith and commitment to the world has developed in communities that are nourished by the Word of God and the degree of "petrification" of Christian communities which have resisted opening themselves to dialogue with God through his Word. To paraphrase the prophet Jeremiah it can be said, that while some drink from the fountain of living waters, others cling to their cracked water tanks, that hold no water or only stagnant water (Jer 2:13).

There is another element to keep in mind in discussing the differences or difficulties in establishing a dialogue with God through His Word – the sense of community. In the Churches of so-called "Third World" poverty and difficulties of life naturally lead the individual to seek refuge and support in the community. And it is the communities which seek solutions to the common problems of their members and also seek them to a greater or less extent in the Word of God. Hence, for example in Latin America there have emerged various "trade union" forms of reading the Bible, various "hermeneutics": peasant hermeneutics, indigenous hermeneutics, urban hermeneutics, feminist hermeneutics, youth hermeneutics, etc.

4. The New Evangelization

It is well known that John Paul II made the first appeals for a "new evangelization" in Latin American lands.

The New Evangelization springs from a new way of reading the Bible, a new way of encountering the Word of God. In the final document of the Plenary Assembly of the CBF in Bogota we read: "The New Evangelization to which we are committing ourselves demands from us new ways of reading and proclaiming the Word, in continuity with the sound tradition of the Church. This should enable us to discover God's plan today in our midst and to respond to it adequately and relevantly. We should start with the reality in which we actually find ourselves today, and we should allow the Word of God to throw light on this reality. This would entail on our part, attentive listening to the God who speaks through the Scriptures, through his Church, and through the human situation. In this process the joys and sorrows of the world will have to become the joys and sorrows of the disciples of the Lord. Such a reading will reveal to us the true face of God, not the God of abstract philosophy, who remains unmoved by the events of the world, but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose face in Christ and through the coming of the Reign of God is turned in loving compassion and concern for all those who suffer in every age and are struggling to find meaning in their life."

The Journey of *DEI VERBUM* Impact and Challenges

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Introduction: The Journey Begins

Individuals and nations need a point of reference in history – Independence Day for example. The Sinai experience provided the OT people of God with a ‘back then’ and point of reference as they were moving from Egypt to settle down in Canaan. There were obstacles and challenges but also hopes and expectations.¹ Similarly, the Church too is on a journey. The Second Vatican Council was a high point and a peak experience in this journey of the Church. Vatican II provided a point of reference for Church renewal, and impetus and momentum to its onward journey. As for the achievements of the Council we can only say that its vision and orientations need to be absorbed, formulated, worked out and implemented, in the everyday reality of the *local Church* after the ‘summit accomplishment in Rome.’ This is very true also of “**The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*.**”

Part I: The Making of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*

1.1. Renewal in the Making: From *Providentissimus Deus* to *Dei Verbum*²

Biblical renewal in the Church has to take into account what the Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (VD) refers to as the “crescendo of interventions” (no. 3) culminating in the promulgation of the Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei Verbum*. The process began in earnest with the Encyclical Letters *Providentissimus Deus* (18 November 1893 – Leo XIII), *Spiritus Paraclitus* (15 September 1920 – Benedict XV), and finally, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (30 September 1943 – Pius XII). These documents contributed immensely to a scientific approach to the study of sacred Scripture and gave decisive orientations to the preparation of and discussion on the schema of *Dei Verbum*. It is also true that some backward steps were taken between 1893 and 1965. The Instruction of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, On the Historical Truth of the Gospels (*De historica evangeliorum veritate* – 21 April 1964), became a major breakthrough in the study of the NT.

Besides giving impetus to a historically orientated biblical interpretation, and scientific exegesis among Catholic exegetes, they contributed to important developments in the field of biblical pastoral ministry as well. Among these was the birth of the biblical-liturgical movement with its rediscovery of the Bible and the founding of Catholic Biblical Associations. There was also

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¹ Claudio Ettl, “Rediscovery of the Word of God: The Second Vatican Council and the *Dei Verbum*,” *Bulletin Dei Verbum* 72/73 (2004) 4.

² Joseph Pathrapankal, “Reinstating the Bible in Theological Reflection,” in *Foundational Perspectives in the New Testament*, ed., Joseph Pathrapankal (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004) 1-46, here 18-28; Ettl, “Rediscovery of the Word of God,” 4-5.

substantial increase of contacts and communication between Catholic and Protestant scholars during this period. These initiatives had some formative influence on *Dei Verbum* especially on chapter six.



1.2. The Journey of *Dei Verbum*³

The Council Fathers rejected the schema with the title *De Fontibus Revelationis* (The Sources of Revelation) prepared by the preparatory commission, consisting mainly of those with a conservative orientation, and presented on 2 November 1962.⁴ Pope John XXIII on his own authority commissioned (20 November 1962) preparation of another schema and appointed a new joint commission, consisting of members from the former team and scholars trained in critical biblical study. A new schema *De divina revelatione* was presented during the last session of the Council and accepted on 18 November 1965, with 2344 'yes'-votes and only 6 'no'-votes. It was solemnly proclaimed on the same day and given the formal designation "Dogmatic" Constitution, as in the case of *Lumen Gentium*, to highlight its importance. While the rejected draft emphasized the sources of Revelation, the new draft concentrated on sacred Scripture itself.⁵

³ Joseph Ratzinger outlines the tumultuous journey of *Dei Verbum*: See "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Origin and Background," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. III, ed., Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 155-166. He was member of the final drafting committee of the Schema '*De divina revelatione*.' Karl Lehmann recalls the painful journey of *Dei Verbum*. He too was closely associated with the Council as he was the research assistant of Karl Rahner who was a *Peritus* (Expert theologian) of the Council. See "Unvorhersehbare Entwicklungen: Wie es zum Dokument 'Dei Verbum' kam," *Bibel und Kirche* 70/2 (2015). Both of them acknowledge the mediatory role played by the then Archbishop of Florence Ermenegildo Florit to bring about a compromise between the conservative and progressive groups, represented by its *two co-chairmen* – Cardinals Alfredo Ottaviani and Augustine Bea.

⁴ Ratzinger, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Origin and Background," 160 and note 12; Ettl, "Rediscovery of the Word of God," 6.

⁵ Of the approved text, Ratzinger states: "It [The Constitution, *Dei Verbum*] is the result of many compromises. But the fundamental compromise which pervades it is more than a compromise; it is a synthesis of

Dei Verbum represents the first comprehensive teaching on the Word of God and God's revelation to humankind, presented by an Ecumenical Council. Vatican II was truly the Council of the Word of God. The opening words of the Constitution *Dei Verbum* – “*hearing the Word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with faith*” – indicate this dimension. All through the Council sessions, *the Holy Bible was enthroned in the middle of the Basilica of St. Peter, which served as the Council hall for the plenary sessions*. That in itself was a *clear symbol of the central role of the Word of God* in the Council's deliberations. A further indication of the importance given to sacred Scripture was the *copious use of Scriptural quotations that effectively enriched the Council documents*.

Dei Verbum reminds us of the definitive role of the Church in determining what books are to be considered inspired. The Church is also the final guarantor of the interpretation of the Bible. But, the Church is not independent of sacred Scripture. Sacred Scripture remains the fundamental rule of faith and of life of the Church. For this reason, the Church continues to celebrate the Word of God with much devotion and dedication.⁶

Chapter 6 of *Dei Verbum* takes up the theme “*Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church*.” It is the most important section from the pastoral point of view. Though structured by a powerful theological image, it is mainly practical. The practical directives call for biblical renewal in the formation of priests and religious, especially the former. Thus, it emphasizes that Scripture is the “**soul of Theology**” (DV 24; cf. *Verbum Domini*, 31). The bishops are urged to promote Scripture study for different sections of the laity and provide translations and commentaries to assist them in their pursuit.⁷

Part II: The Impact of *Dei Verbum*

2.1. Biblical Renewal

We consider two key areas of Biblical Renewal and implementation of *Dei Verbum*: *Biblical studies and Biblical pastoral ministry*.

2.1.1. Biblical Studies

For defining the relationship between biblical scholarship and the Magisterium of the Church and for the question of the value of scientific exegesis, articles 11–13 are of particular importance. Article 12 deals with the fundamental principles of historical criticism and endorses them as necessary. The historical character of Revelation, the human aspect of its transmission and the irreplaceable role of Magisterium are emphasized. Catholic biblical scholars consider article 12 as the “**Magna Carta**” of *Catholic exegesis*. *Dei Verbum* offered important impulses for further development in scientific biblical interpretation. Article 23 encourages constant biblical updating, study and research.

Dei Verbum gave impetus to further development at the scientific level such as upgrading of studies at the existing biblical faculties, starting new departments for biblical studies, and greater emphasis on the use of scientific methods and the study of biblical languages. The results are seen in the emergence of world renowned Catholic biblical scholars and publication of high standard Catholic biblical commentaries and monographs.

great importance. The text combines fidelity to Church tradition with an affirmation of critical scholarship, thus opening up anew the path that faith may follow into the world today.” Idem, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Origin and Background,” 164.

⁶ John Onaiyekan, “From *Dei Verbum* to *Novo Millennio Ineunte* – The Reception Process of *Dei Verbum* in the Light of Change of Paradigm in the Past 40 Years,” *Bulletin Dei Verbum* 78/79 (2006) 3.

⁷ For a brief summary of the Constitution, see Lawrence Culas, “Second Vatican Council and Biblical Renewal: Prospects and Challenges in India,” *Journal of Indian Theology* VII/3 (2014) 50-52; Antony C. Valan, “*Dei Verbum* – A Revisit,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 79 (2015) 138-140.

2.1.2. Biblical Pastoral Ministry

Dei Verbum, particularly articles 21–26 (chapter VI) provided far reaching inspiration for biblical pastoral ministry.

Articles 21 and 26 constitute the framework of chapter VI. In both, there is the mention of the veneration of the Word along with the Eucharist, and a plea to prepare and make accessible the table of the Word and the Bread. Article 21 provides the rationale for biblical pastoral ministry. Article 22 emphasizes the necessity of *making copies of the Bible accessible to all the faithful* and of undertaking *'suitable and correct translations* in different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books.' This article in a way describes the necessity, the character and scope of biblical pastoral ministry at least in broad terms. Article 22 represents the '*Magna Carta*' of *biblical pastoral ministry*.

2.2. From *Dei Verbum* (1965) to *Verbum Domini* (2010)

Dei Verbum was to remain for many years and still remains one of the most important pronouncements of the Magisterium on the meaning of sacred Scripture and its interpretation in the life of the Catholic Church. But during the post-Conciliar period, a series of documents and pronouncements devoted to the Word of God appeared. One of the most important among them is undoubtedly the Instruction of the Pontifical Biblical commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993). It offers a comprehensive overview of the methods and tools of biblical scholarship. It sketches guidelines for using these methods and puts in place a number of hermeneutical principles. Alongside historical critical methods, newer scientific and literary methods as well as insights from human sciences are also taken into account. Particularly important in this connection is the *rejection of every form of fundamentalist reading of the Bible*. The last part of the document concerns itself explicitly with its interpretation in the life of the Church. It reconfirms the centrality of Scripture for the Church and the importance of pastoral ministry.



Another very significant post-*Dei Verbum* event was the XII Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2008 (5 – 26 October 2008) on *"The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church"* and the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (November 2010).⁸ Referring to the previous official interventions by the Church, the Exhortation

⁸ It is significant that this Synod (2008) followed the XI Ordinary Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist (2005) realizing the vision of *Dei Verbum* regarding "the one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ" (DV

speaks of the “crescendo of interventions aimed at an increased awareness of the importance of the Word of God and the study of the Bible...” (VD 3).

2.3. Organizational Initiatives for Biblical Renewal

Dei Verbum was in part a typical compromise text. There are ambiguities in the doctrinal sections dealing with the precise nature of revelation, the relationship between Scripture and tradition or the relationship between Scripture and Magisterium. But *Dei Verbum* was *indisputably positive and unambiguous regarding the significance of sacred Scripture for the life of the Church* and the importance of a biblical interpretation appropriate for our time. Pope Paul VI who went about implementing the Documents of the Council both in letter and spirit undertook two initiatives.

2.3.1. At the scientific and doctrinal level, Pope Paul VI revamped (*Motu Proprio ‘Sedula Cura’*, 27 June 1971) the Pontifical Biblical Commission. It was established by Pope Leo XIII (1902)⁹ in order to carry out the proposals of *Providentissimus Deus*. The reconstituted Commission, now attached to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has as its members only biblical scholars from around the world. One of the tasks of the Commission immediately after its reconstitution was to explain and clarify the ambiguities of *Dei Verbum*. It is also meant to promote scientific approach to the study and interpretation of sacred Scripture. But now, the Commission takes up other current issues and has brought out several documents. Its three documents in particular, namely, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001), *Bible and Morality* (2008) and the latest, *Inspiration and Truth of sacred Scripture* (2014) have contributed to carry forward the spirit, vision and direction envisaged by *Dei Verbum* and to actualize them. The Pontifical Biblical Commission received appreciation and gratitude from both the Synod and Pope Benedict XVI (VD 31) who as its President had guided its deliberations for over 20 years.

2.3.2. At the pastoral level, particularly with regard to the implementation of the recommendations of chapter VI of *Dei Verbum*, Pope Paul VI approved and encouraged the initiative of Cardinal Augustine Bea to found the *World Catholic Federation for Biblical Apostolate*. The idea was expressed during the third session of the Council itself even before the schema of *Dei Verbum* was presented.¹⁰ In 1968, Cardinal Augustine Bea called together for consultation in Rome the existing directors of Catholic biblical-pastoral organizations. On 16 April 1969, the Federation was founded in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity to which it continues to be attached.¹¹ This arrangement in itself is an indication of the *ecumenical orientation* of the Federation itself and biblical pastoral ministry in particular. The Federation was commended for its great contribution in this field by the XII Ordinary Synod on the Word of God (VD 115).

The Federation (now known as Catholic Biblical Federation – CBF) remains the main official organization of the Catholic Church for promoting biblical pastoral ministry including collaboration with other Churches (e.g. *inter-confessional Bible translation projects*), contextual hermeneutics, *lectio divina* as well as supporting translation and diffusion of sacred Scripture and biblical materials. It does so *by coordinating this ministry in the Church* with over 350 member or-

21). This in turn was followed by the XIII Ordinary Synod of Bishops on the ‘the New Evangelization’ (2012). The Eucharist – Word of God – New Evangelization sequence has been meaningfully brought together.

⁹ The 1902 Commission (30 October 1902 – *Vigilantiae studii*que) had only Cardinals as its members with a few experts as consultants.

¹⁰ This intervention was made by Bishop Emile Cekada of Skopje, Macedonia (former Yugoslavia). The idea of such an organization for promoting the Catholic biblical apostolate was proposed by the Austrian Canonist Pius Parsch. Ettori, “Rediscovery of the Word of God,” 8.

¹¹ Ettl, “Rediscovery of the Word of God,” 9.

ganizations all over the world.¹² Thousands of lay faithful, religious and priests have become engaged in varied realms of biblical pastoral ministry, and that too in the most varied contexts and cultures.¹³



2.4. The Constitution *Dei Verbum* and the Church in India

Like other Churches the Catholic Church in India, too, responded quite promptly to the call of renewal envisaged by *Dei Verbum*.¹⁴

2.4.1. Study and Research

Dei Verbum 23 provided fresh enthusiasm to study and research and called upon those “who are engaged in biblical studies constantly to renew their efforts, in order to carry on the work they have so happily begun, with complete dedication and in accordance with the mind of the Church.” The responses too have been positive. *National Associations* for Biblical Studies have come up which devote themselves to serious study and reflection on biblical issues and themes. India has for example, both a *Catholic Biblical Association* and *Society for Biblical Studies* (Ecumenical).

Seminaries and Theological Colleges took up *seriously the continuous teaching of the Church* that sacred Scripture is the “soul of theology.”¹⁵ They updated the

theological curriculum with greater focus on the study of sacred Scripture (30% or more credits) to equip the candidates to priesthood and students of theology (OT 16; cf. DV 21, 25). Similar steps have been taken by formation institutes run by and for Religious men and women (PC 6; cf. DV 25; VD 94). Bible Institutes have come up in several parts of India to train the laity in Biblical matters. Further, *Departments for specialization in Biblical Sciences* with authority for conferring academic degrees have been established by some of the Catholic Theological Faculties in India, which collaborate with similar departments of other Churches.

India witnessed not only an increase in the number of specialized persons, but also emergence of widely acclaimed biblical scholars. Their contribution has been recognized by the universal Church too as is indicated by the fact that during the last 40 years *five from India have been nominated by the Holy See as members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission*.¹⁶

¹² In India, the National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC) representing the CBCI is a full member and there are over 20 Associate members of CBF.

¹³ The ministries include training, organization of seminars and workshops, translation of biblical texts, distribution of copies of the Bible, developing methods of reading, studying and praying the Bible, production of media materials, organization of Bible based-social projects (Basic Human Communities), etc.

¹⁴ For more details, see Culas, “Second Vatican Council and Biblical Renewal,” 52-59.

¹⁵ See *Providentissimus Deus*, 16; DV 24; PDV 24; *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, chapter III/D, 2; VD 31, 47.

¹⁶ They are: Lucien Legrand, Matthew Vellanickal, Joseph Pathrapankal, R.J. Raja and Thomas Manjaly.

High quality vernacular translations of the Bible have been brought out. Commentaries, studies and researched articles have been published by the Indian scholars, many of them with contextual orientations. Publications include Journals fully dedicated to Biblical studies, or specific issues of Theological Journals, and of course scholarly articles by Indian scholars in Indian and International Journals. Attempts have been made to develop an Indian approach to the interpretation of sacred Scripture from the socio-cultural and inter-religious points of view.

2.4.2. Biblical Pastoral Ministry

Before Vatican II, hardly any organized work was done in the field of biblical pastoral ministry or biblical apostolate. *World Catholic Federation for Biblical Apostolate* (now known as Catholic Biblical Federation) strengthened the organizations for biblical pastoral ministry. In India, this work was taken up with the founding of *National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre* (NBCLC – 1966/67),¹⁷ and establishing corresponding Commissions under the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI). Since the strengthening of the *Ritual Bodies/sui juris Churches* began, the work of the National Commission for biblical pastoral ministry has been entrusted to them.

NBCLC and the *National Commissions* have rendered yeomen service in the field of biblical pastoral ministry. The Centre took several initiatives to establish both Regional and Diocesan commissions for biblical pastoral ministry. Besides organizing national level consultations for national level projects and coordinating the work in the regions and dioceses of the country, they have been conducting *training programmes, short courses including Bible correspondence courses, publication of biblical literature with pastoral orientation, and holding seminars* for all sections of the faithful.¹⁸ Even more important and useful have been the production of media materials for the use of those engaged in this ministry.

2.5. The Impact of *Dei Verbum* on the Church in Northeast India¹⁹

One of the things that happened in the 1970s was the effort made by several dioceses to offer updating programmes *for priests and religious with a view to familiarize themselves with the Documents of Vatican II, including Dei Verbum.*

2.5.1. Biblical Studies

In line with the *continuous teaching of the Church* that sacred Scripture is the “soul of theology,”²⁰ the two *Theological Colleges in Shillong* have updated the study programme *with greater focus on sacred Scripture* (30%) to equip the candidates to priesthood (OT 16; cf. DV 21, 25), the Religious (PC 6; cf. DV 25; VD 94) and the laity with “excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:8). *Formation programmes of the Religious* too have been re-organized so as to give greater attention to the study of sacred Scripture. *Making available the services of those specialized in biblical sciences, publications, translation projects, organizing updating programmes for various groups are some of the ways* by which these institutions have promoted biblical renewal in the Region.²¹ Since 2012, the *Society for Biblical Studies* (Ecumenical) has a *Northeast India Chapter*. Christopher Becker Institute (an Associate member of CBF), attached to Oriens Theological College, Shillong, has been promoting and supporting biblical pastoral ministry in significant ways.

¹⁷ While NBCLC representing the CBCI is a full member, there are over 20 Associate members of the Biblical Federation in India. Organization of Diocesan and Regional Seminars leading to the All India Seminar in Bangalore in 1969 was such an attempt, and Northeast India too was actively involved in this process.

¹⁸ The *Logos Quiz* programme organized by the Regional Bible Commission of the Kerala Catholic Bishops' Council (South India), now conducted in English and in some Indian languages, has attracted a few hundred thousand participants from all walks of life.

¹⁹ This section (2.5) is based on the Diocesan and Regional Bible Commission Reports of 1992 – 2012.

²⁰ See *Providentissimus Deus*, 16; DV 24; PDV 24; *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, chapter III/D, 2; VD 31, 47.

²¹ Khasi language is one of the very few languages that can boast of having Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries, prepared by Dr. Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh SDB from SH College, Shillong.



2.5.2. Biblical Pastoral Ministry

2.5.2.1. The **Region**. NBCLC and the National Bible commission have been instrumental in establishing the Bible commission in the Region and the Dioceses. Since 1970s, some of the dioceses in Northeast India had diocesan Bible commissions. But it was only in 1987 that a *Regional commission for biblical pastoral ministry* began functioning. As much of the work is being done by the diocesan commissions, the first task of the Regional commission was to strengthen them and to establish wherever they did not exist. This is particularly important for Northeast India with such *variety of languages*. The commission functions under the chairmanship of a bishop and an Executive secretary. The main work of the commission has been to *inspire, coordinate and collaborate with the diocesan teams*, and to network with other Regional commissions of similar interest, with other Regional commissions for Bible, the National Bible commissions and NBCLC.

The *Regional commission* has been organizing on a regular basis *animation programmes and study sessions* for diocesan teams, *meetings of diocesan secretaries/directors*, and *translators' workshops*, making *available animation materials* and *assisting* the diocesan commissions to organize programmes in the dioceses. In preparation for some significant events, the Regional commission organized programmes in the Region for the celebration of the Year of the Word of God – 1988, 1997, 2007, 2008.

2.5.2.2. Dioceses. The *Diocesan Bible commission* functions in close *collaboration with the Regional Bible commission, other diocesan commissions and with the parishes and institutions in the diocese*. Taking the fervent appeal of the Council to make sacred **Scripture accessible** to all (DV 22), several translation works have been undertaken in the dioceses, including inter-confessional translations. Along with texts of the Bible, other biblical materials too have been produced.

Many efforts have been made to make **people familiar with the sacred text. Enthronement of the Bible** in every Catholic home, regular reading of the Word of God in the family, memorizing a verse by family members, etc. have been promoted. *Bible conventions* have been successfully held at the diocesan and parish levels, and in some cases even in villages. *Bible week or Bible Sunday celebrations* (occasionally also ecumenical) with several Bible based programmes have been organized at parish and diocesan levels.

The **Diocesan Pastoral and Catechists' Training Centres** have been imparting biblical training to lay leaders, be they catechists, community leaders, youth groups, and teachers. Liturgical renewal too has meant giving greater importance to the liturgy of the Word. *Preparation of lectionary and training of lectors*, more effective use of the Word of God in the celebration of the Sacraments, promotion of chanting of Psalms and composition and use of biblical hymns, community praying of lauds and vespers are some of the initiatives for making the Word of God more effective in the life of the Christian community. Some of the diocesan centres publish biblical material in the local languages.²²

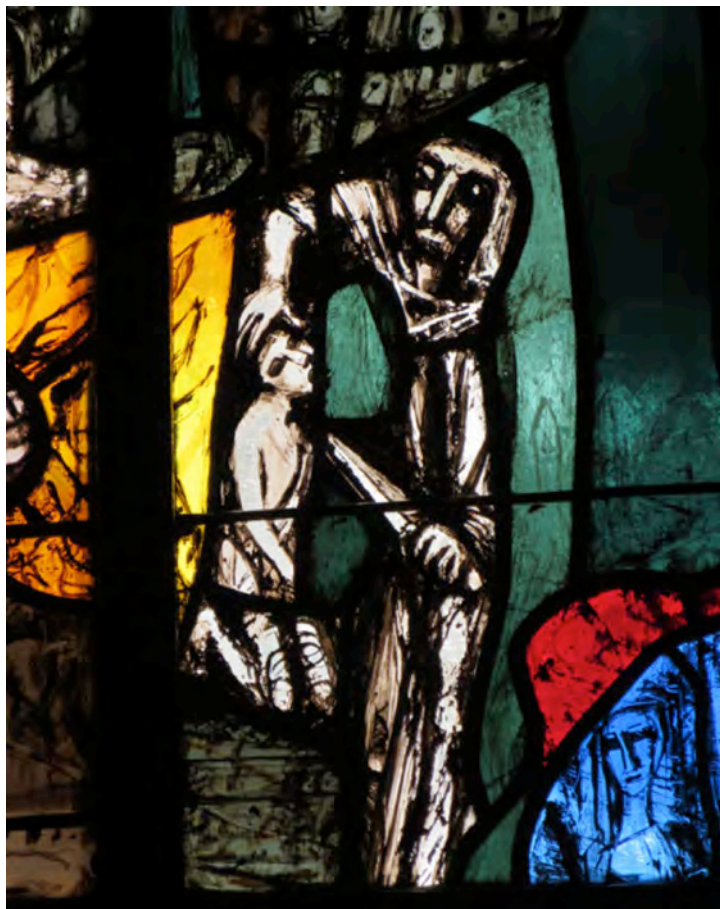
Scripture centred Faith formation and Catechesis and teaching of parts of the New Testament, in the higher classes are taking roots. *Parish conventions/congresses, Family prayer meetings*, ceremonial handing over of a copy of the Bible on occasions like First Holy Communion and Marriage, integrating Bible reading/sharing into Family prayer, are some of the other ways of making more effective use of the Word of God. A very significant development in the recent years has been the introduction of *Small Christian Community* as a new way of being the Church. By making use of the Lumko method, *Small Christian Communities* have been able to inspire the people to read, reflect on, pray with and live the Word of God. SCCs have helped to reach the Word even to the illiterates. Similar is also the significant contribution of *Charismatic Movement* through Bible conventions and retreats, to make the people get familiar and pray with the Word.

2.5.3. The Positive Impact of the Efforts

- i) Improved awareness has been created of the necessity and importance of God's Word in the life of the Church, the local communities, and of family and individuals.
- ii) Developing a 'Bible culture' or 'Bible literacy' in a limited way has been another immediate result.
- iii) The use of Popular and Mass/Electronic media, and Bible conventions have helped the rural masses to understand and love the Word of God.
- iv) There is greater interest among the laity for personal reading of the Bible, and making Bible-reading as part of family prayer.
- v) The *liturgy of the Word*, including homily, has received better attention. There is greater use of the Word of God in the *celebration of the sacraments*, as well as in prayer meetings. The use of hymns based on biblical texts/themes and chanting the Psalms are becoming more common.
- vi) Faith formation has become more *Scripture-based*.
- vii) Limited *success has been achieved in the area of translation* of the Bible/New Testament into major local languages.
- viii) *Ecumenical collaboration* has also taken the form of joint translation work and joint 'Bible Festivals'.
- ix) Through the SCCs *Bible/Gospel sharing is taken more seriously*, which helps to promote and foster a Word-centred spirituality and life.
- x) The concept that sacred Scripture is the 'soul' of theology is reflected in the strong emphasis on sacred Scripture in theological curriculum and formation programmes, in get-

²² For example, the late Fr. Juan Larrea SDB (Shillong Pastoral Centre – Associate Member CBF) has published homiletic and catechetical materials based on the Lectionary in English and several local languages.

ting greater number of specialized persons in biblical sciences, and in efforts *to develop indigenous, particularly socio-cultural, approaches to interpret the Bible.*



Part III: Facing the Challenges Ahead and the Way Forward

For the growing Church of Northeast India, it has not been an easy task to implement all that has been envisaged by the Council. We ought to *consolidate our gains, and take new initiatives to usher in 'a Bible Culture.'*²³ It is from this point of view that we shall now look at certain areas which offer great possibilities. In *theology*, it means that sacred Scripture is to be taken not as a reservoir of proofs, but as its "soul" (DV 24; VD 31); in *pastoral ministry*, it would imply a more effective "biblical apostolate, *not alongside other forms of pastoral work, but as means of letting the Bible inspire all pastoral work*" (VD 73; cf. 75).

We need to remind ourselves that "the Scripture can only be understood if it is lived" (VD 47), and that it should "enlighten the mind, strengthen the will and fire the hearts with love of God" (DV 23),

and that 'the Word grows with the reader' (Pope Gregory the Great).

3.1. Centrality of the Word (VD 73): The mission of the Church is to be grounded in the *Word of God*. One of the priorities of the missionary task proposed by the first Asian Mission Congress in Chiang Mai, Thailand (2006) was "a deeper study and living of the Word of God in such a way that the power of Jesus' story transforms our life."²⁴ *The cry of the Ethiopian seeking an interpretation of the Word is felt even today* (Acts 8:31). Thus ministry of the Word has to become one of telling a story that is both "Good" and "News." What is needed today is a *meaningful interpretation of the Scriptures that can recreate the Emmaus experience of the disciples* (Lk 24:13-35), *or one like the deacon Philip-Ethiopian encounter* (Acts 8:26-40) *or a prophetic proclamation of the Word as Jesus did in the Synagogue of Nazareth* (Lk 4:16-21) that can provide a vision for the future.

The people have a deep rooted longing and thirst for the Word of God. One of the reasons why many are attracted to Pentecostal movements/sects is their emphasis on the word of God (cf. VD 73). Breaking the Word has to be a sharing *the experience of the Word* (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-4). This demands reflecting on 'experience through the lens of the Gospel.'

²³ Lucien Legrand, "The Pastoral Exhortation *Verbum Domini*: A New Outlook," *Prabhodhana* VI (2012) 7-13, here 10-13. Culas, "Second Vatican Council and Biblical Renewal," 56-59.

²⁴ Chiang Mai, 18-22 October, 2006. See *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition; 24 January 2007) 9. See also EG 174-75 which emphasize the centrality of the word of God: "All evangelization is based on that word, listened to, meditated upon, lived, celebrated and witnessed to" (EG 174).

3.2. Word-centred Life/Biblical Spirituality: All genuine Christian spirituality is biblical spirituality. The Word of God is not just an aspect of spirituality or devotion in the Church. *A piecemeal approach cannot help to develop biblical spirituality. It is the Word of God that gives birth and identity to and energizes the people.* But it has yet to become the source of Christian spirituality so that Christians can “hold fast to the sacred Scripture through diligent sacred reading and careful study” (DV 21). The role of the ministers of the Word is to help the community to see life against the backdrop of God’s plan revealed and transmitted through the written Word.

3.2.1. Promoting Prayerful Reading of Sacred Scripture – *Lectio Divina*: A very helpful method to develop a *lived biblical spirituality* is the *lectio divina* method – moving from reading through meditation and contemplation to prayer and action. Benedict XVI invites the ministers of the Word to help the faithful to “appreciate the riches of sacred Scripture through pastoral initiatives, liturgies of the Word and reading in the context of prayer (*lectio divina*)” (DV 25; VD 86). Pope Francis recommends to priests this method to prepare homilies as he himself does (EG 152-153). The CBF has been consistently and actively promoting it.

3.2.2. Word-centred Proclamation and Catechesis: Bible is essentially a *book of faith and faith-sharing and of religious instruction*. Proclamation in the early Church was nothing but sharing the multifaceted experience of the Word (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-4). Jesus made extensive use of the insights from the OT. The faith formator must target his/her pedagogy chiefly toward an experience of the word of God in the Bible, and ensure that *not just information*, but the *transformative power of the Word of God* is imparted. It is *not enough to sprinkle doctrines with Bible quotations* without relating them to their context.²⁵

Efforts are to be made to make catechesis “permeated by the mind-set, the spirit and the outlook of the Bible and the Gospels through assiduous contact with the texts themselves” (VD 74; EG 174-175).²⁶ It requires applying to life the biblical values by attending to the affective and lifestyle content of the Scriptures. *The OT in a general way and the NT more extensively should be taken up for study.* This task is all the more urgent in the context of the *growth of sects and fundamentalist groups*. Specialized programmes like the ‘Philip’ programme for evangelization, ‘Emmaus’ method for catechesis and ‘Amos’ programme for justice-peace efforts need to be promoted in a more organized way.

3.2.3. Scripture-based Homily: Though there have been positive signs in this area, there is much more to be done. Are we doing justice to the *thousands of assured audience on Sundays and feast days* – about 60 of them during the year – (SC 51 & 52) who like the Ethiopian are waiting for the intervention of modern (deacon) Philips? *Verbum Domini* emphasizes the crucial role of the homily, as the ordinary way that people can get into contact with sacred Scripture, and points to the need of relating the word of God to life and to the basics of theology and morality (VD 58-60; cf. DV 24). The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* deals at length on the topic.²⁷ The homily should help the community see everything against the backdrop of God’s story and vision. It has to give life to the Scriptures and help people see the Word as energizing their lives. By linking the texts with one another and with the themes of the liturgical seasons, it is possible to present certain important catechetical themes and to offer liturgical catechesis.

3.3. Making the Bible/NT Available (DV 22): An area that requires urgent attention is the *correct translation of the Bible/NT* (wherever possible other biblical literature) into local languages, which can suit the needs of various groups of people (DV 25). This is presented as part of

²⁵ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has 4121 references to the Bible. Half of them are in the first part (2125). Part II – 572; Part III – 896; Part IV – 528.

²⁶ DV 24; John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (1979) 27.

²⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium* deals extensively with the topic (135-159), especially 135-136, 142-144, 151.

Church's motherly concern (DV 22). Many communities in (Northeast) India *still lack a Catholic version of the Bible/New Testament in their own languages*. Pope Benedict XVI has strongly recommended "the investment of resources in this area" (VD 115).

3.4. Greater Use of Popular and Mass/Electronic Media: Popular media are in line with the ethos of the people – music, song and dance, plays, story-telling, street play, etc. Further study for adapting them is necessary. The Mass media like print, audio-visual media, etc., and the electronic/new media like SMS, internet Bible, internet, twitter, etc. must be more and more used as they have quicker and wider accessibility (VD 113).

3.5. Inculturation of the Gospel (VD 114)

3.5.1. Translation of Bible: Bible translation offers great *possibilities for inculturation* because translation is always "more than a simple transcription of the original texts ... and involves a change of cultural context" (VD 115). Bible, the Old Testament in particular, is a very good example of assimilation, confrontation with and integration of cultures. The cultural sensitivity and creativity that St Paul showed can serve as a model for communication of the Gospel without compromising its *non-negotiable aspects*. *Images, metaphors, symbols and terms existing in the socio-cultural and religious context of the people convey a philosophy of life, relationship with God and one another, and fundamental human values and have more effective and communicative power and can appeal better to the sensibilities of the people*. As they are drawn from the life of the people, they experience some kind of *connaturality* with them (cf. EA 20; EN 63).

3.5.2. Promoting Contextual/Indigenous Hermeneutics: This is another important area of inculturating the Gospel by means of reading the Bible from peoples' world-view. It will be a true-to-the-text reading, but prompted by the concerns and sensibilities of people. Their ways of experiencing reality such as (i) *inclusive* rather than exclusive, (ii) *cosmocentric* rather than anthropocentric, (iii) *symbolic* rather than empirical should be given serious attention. Such a reading of the Bible will be faithful both to the *biblical text* and the *Christian community in context*.

These principles of contextual approach can be applied especially to a *tribal cultural reading* of the Bible because "the Bible is particularly responsive to a tribal interpretation. It is a book steeped in tribal ethos."²⁸ It is important to *identify* the tribal values that ought to be *affirmed* and elements that need to be *relativized, confronted and transformed* (EG 69-70). Since both the Bible and indigenous traditions give great importance to narratives, stories, symbols folk tales, proverbs, etc., developing an appropriate hermeneutical method based on them is crucial. Because the Gospel is the message and culture is the medium, *intercultural and cross-cultural hermeneutical methods too need further study*. This approach can also contribute to a *dialogue between cultural anthropology and exegesis*.

3.6. Biblical Pastoral Ministry, Ecumenical Collaboration and Inter-Faith Dialogue: Since sacred Scripture is a common Christian patrimony, *ecumenical collaboration* needs to be explored particularly in the fields of common Bible translation (DV 22), distribution, organizing Bible Festivals, Bible exhibition, promoting Pastors' fellowship for Bible study, etc. *Networking and collaboration with the Bible Society of India* at various levels need to be strengthened.

Considering the fact *that scriptures are an integral part of world Religions*, can we see in them a kind of '*preparation for the Gospel*' in the sense that the Word "which enlightens all men" (Jn 1:9) was active in non-biblical scriptures at least in a *seminal way*?²⁹ *Verbum Domini* reaffirms Church's respect for the ancient religious and spiritual traditions/*religious books* (VD 118-119). This in turn means to see their scriptures as part of the long process of God speaking to humani-

²⁸ George Soares-Prabhu, "Editorial: Tribal Values in India," *Jeevadhara* 24/140 (1994) 88.

²⁹ *Areopagus* speech – 17:22-34; cf. Acts 14:15-17. *Nostra Aetate* (1) and *Ecclesia in Asia* (20) refer to these texts from Acts.

ty (cf. Heb 1:1-2), and requires *sufficient knowledge of scriptures of other religions* and of various issues, especially of social issues. It may be useful to think of *making available biblical texts which can be easily understood by followers of other religions* (cf. DV 25; EG 251).

3.7. Greater Efforts to Train Personnel in Biblical Sciences: If we want to make real headway in Biblical pastoral ministry, and if we want implement the vision of *Dei Verbum*, there is urgent need to *train personnel* and make their services *available to the people at large*. *Verbum Domini* highlights the importance of *training specialists for translating the Bible*. It requires giving *greater importance to the teaching and learning of the biblical languages*. Periodic *updating programmes for priests to get to know the recent developments in biblical matters and in homiletics* are necessary.

The Council states that the Laity should find God in the Word (AA 4; VD 94). *Bible study programmes for the laity* require urgent attention (VD 75). Many of the pastoral challenges (threats from Pentecostal movements, sects, etc.) can be successfully faced only when a generation of *biblically literate laity will emerge*. If adequate steps are taken to train the laity, we will be able to witness the emergence of *many more convinced and committed Priscas and Aquilas who will come forward to instruct the modern Apollos*. It is also important to make clear the *close link between Scripture and Tradition*, to avoid danger of ‘biblical fundamentalism’ or individualistic interpretation of the sacred texts. Similarly, it is vital to safeguard the relationship *between sacred Scripture and doctrine of the Church*.

3.8. Biblical Renewal – A Challenge to Church Leaders: Sustaining the gains of the past and carrying forward the biblical renewal depend largely on the enthusiasm and commitment of the *pastoral agents and leaders in particular*. Vatican II documents speak clearly about their responsibility for ministry of the Word. The first in the list are the bishops (CD 12; DV 25; VD 94) followed by priests (PO 4; DV 25; PDV 26; VD 80),³⁰ who must provide nourishment to the people who are entrusted to them. They should draw strength from reading and meditating on the sacred Scripture (cf. DV 25; PDV 26; VD 94), and “nourish themselves with the Word in order to be ‘servants of the Word of God’ in the work of evangelization.”³¹ The temptation to abandon the ministry of the Word, for other more visible forms of ministry is an ever-present one (Acts 6:2; cf. Mal 2:8-9).

Conclusion

The Bible as the Word of God can make an important contribution to confronting many questions that modern and post-modern era have created. When the Word of God is discovered and interpreted anew as a witness to the relationship of God and His people, when its liberating and transforming message is unfolded and applied to people’s actual life situations, when we discover the multifaceted character of our own lives in the texts and life stories of the biblical books, *then Scripture is unfolding its potential to transform our lives and with us the world at large*. This makes the Word visible and palpable. Scripture is at one and the same time ‘a historical document of the past and a faith witness of the present, and a harbinger of hope for the future.’³²

This type of an understanding has an impact on biblical pastoral praxis and exegetical work as well as on the way that these two relate to each other. It is needed to seek and find ways to facilitate exchange and interplay between scientific studies and biblical pastoral ministry. This is necessary so that the people do not approach Scripture in their own independent ways.

³⁰ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4 citing Malachi (cf. 2:7) is cited here to emphasize the role of the priest as the minister of the Word of God (cf. Rom 10:14-17). The decree on ‘the Ministry and Life of priests’ (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) makes clear two points: (a) *The people of God are formed and live by the Word of God* (cf. 1 Pet 1:23; 2 Tim 3:16) and (b) *they seek it from the priests* (PO 4).

³¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (NMI; 2001) 40; cf. 39.

³² Ettl, “Rediscovery of the Word of God,” 10.

The second Vatican Council has been a gift of God to the Church and to the world. The Constitution *Dei Verbum* is one of the main pillars of that Council. We need to rededicate ourselves to a strong emphasis on the sacred Scripture in the life and mission of the Church. As the Constitution *Dei Verbum* reminds us, let us become aware that ‘God our heavenly Father continues to speak to us in our daily experiences, and above all through the sacred Scripture’ (DV 21).

The Constitution *Dei Verbum* remains a vital force even half a century after its publication. The rediscovery of the Word of God, which had begun long before, came to full fruition through Vatican II. In the Post-Vatican II era, the Constitution became fertile ground for numerous positive initiatives and developments. The wish and the hope expressed by the Council that “the treasure of Revelation entrusted to the Church may more and more fill the hearts of men” (DV 26) continue to bear abundant fruit in Northeast India. ***The Journey has to continue till the fulfilment of the vision of Moses, “Would that all people of the Lord were prophets!” (Num 11:29a).***

“When we take up the sacred Scriptures in faith and read them with the Church, we walk with God in the Garden” (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, using the words of St. Ambrose).³³



The Bible in Togo

³³ As quoted by Valan, “Dei Verbum – A Revisit,” 141.

Bible and Homily

GIOACCHINO BISCONTIN *

1. "The synod fathers, more than forty years after the promulgation of the Dogmatic Constitution on divine revelation *Dei Verbum* as part of the work of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, recognize with a grateful spirit the great benefits brought to the life of the church by this document, on the exegetical, spiritual, pastoral and ecumenical levels". Anyone who has been in a position to observe what has occurred in the homiletic preaching of the last decades can only subscribe to what the synod fathers affirmed in *Proposition 2*, cited also by *Verbum Domini*, which in turn states in n. 3: "Everyone is aware of the great impulse which the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* gave to the revival of interest in the word of God in the life of the Church, to theological reflection on divine revelation and to the study of sacred Scripture".

We still have a long way to go, but the conciliar reform has transformed into a common conviction what *Sacrosanctum Concilium* affirmed in n. 24: "Sacred scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from scripture that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung; the prayers, collects, and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration and their force, and it is from the scriptures that actions and signs derive their meaning". Such a conviction is very much alive in the post-conciliar ecclesiastical documents which have treated of the relationship that should exist between homily and Bible. One example can stand for all, from the document of the Congregation for the Clergy of 19 March 1999: *The Priest and the Third Christian Millennium, Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments, and Leader of the Community*: "The principle source for preaching is naturally Sacred Scripture, deeply meditated in personal prayer and assimilated through study and adequate contact with suitable books. Pastoral experience well demonstrates the capacity of the power and eloquence of the Sacred text to stir the hearts of those who hear it. [...] The pedagogy with which the Church reads, interprets and applies the Word of God throughout the liturgical seasons should also be a point of reference for preaching."

A conviction, therefore, that is by now deeply rooted, even if it is not always translated adequately into practice. For homiletic preaching, in particular, a variety of problems remain open, both at the theoretical and at the practical levels. I will highlight three that seem to me to be particularly urgent.

2. A first problem has to do with a correct hermeneutic of biblical texts, a hermeneutic to which *Verbum Domini* devotes many intense pages, from n. 29 to n. 50. The hermeneutic to which I will refer below is one required by the nature of the homily. There are in fact preachers who conceive of their task as though it were a matter of giving a brief exegetical lesson. So, they are content to simply supply necessary clarifications for a comprehension of the literal sense of the biblical readings proclaimed. Often they add along the way what might be described as a data conversion, which consists in restating the biblical message in the terms of contemporary language.

Naturally, the homily does also have the task of explaining the literal sense of biblical texts, and more generally speaking that of contributing, together with catechesis, to the process of

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familiarizing the faithful with the language, the cardinal events, the concepts and the important symbols of the biblical universe. However, the homily cannot limit itself to this. Its nature requires that the preacher convey, in a compelling way, that what the Scriptures narrate and announce is happening here and now, for this congregation of disciples of the Lord Jesus, the people of God. The homilist therefore cannot limit himself to interpreting the biblical texts, but, while drawing light from them, he should be offering to the hearers a faith interpretation of what is happening in this very celebration.

Observation of the state of current preaching would authorize the statement that a sensitivity to this task, which is the proper characteristic of preaching, is not yet sufficiently widespread. Too often homilies have the form of a short conference without contextual reference to the celebration. How many preachers show an awareness of the fact that when they speak of God and of Jesus in the homily, they do so in the presence of God and of the Lord Jesus? We don't talk about a person who is present in the same way as we do of someone who is absent. The homilist cannot limit himself to mediating an understanding of the doctrinal contents of biblical passages; he must also mediate the presence of the speaker. Benedict XVI offers an example of such a reading in n. 2 of *Verbum Domini*: "Before all else, I would like to call to mind the beauty and pleasure of the renewed encounter with the Lord Jesus which we experienced during the synodal assembly". We should also meditate in full on n. 51, which is entitled: "*Christ's constant presence in the life of the Church*".

To be servants of the Word of God means also and primarily to be mediators of a presence and of an encounter. This can be inferred from n. 11 of *Verbum Domini*, which recalls in an important aside *Deus caritas est*, in the context of a fascinating "Christology of the Word": "Here the



Detail from the portal of St. Stephen's Cathedral (photo T. Osborne).

word finds expression not primarily in discourse, concepts or rules. Here we are set before the very person of Jesus. His unique and singular history is the definitive word which God speaks to humanity. We can see, then, why 'being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty

idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a definitive direction”.

What the synod fathers write in *Final Propositions*, n. 7, is to be understood in this perspective: “The Word of God becomes flesh sacramental in the Eucharistic event and carries Sacred Scripture to its fulfilment. The Eucharist is a principal hermeneutical context for Scripture, just as Scripture illuminates and explains the Eucharistic mystery”. *Verbum Domini*, in its turn, in n. 52, affirms: “To understand the word of God, then, we need to appreciate and experience the essential meaning and value of the liturgical action. A faith-filled understanding of sacred Scripture must always refer back to the liturgy, in which the word of God is celebrated as a timely and living word”.

In the light of these considerations, we would have to say that the Liturgy of the Word, including the homily, constitutes a sacramental mediation of the presence of God and of the Lord Jesus, of their speaking to the assembly here and now. This is affirmed explicitly in the whole of n. 56 of *Verbum Domini*, which states: “The proclamation of God’s word at the celebration entails an acknowledgment that Christ himself is present, that he speaks to us, and that he wishes to be heard”. And again: “Christ, truly present under the species of bread and wine, is analogously present in the word proclaimed in the liturgy.” From a lively awareness of this task would flow a greater engagement in the preparation of the homily and a lofty religious quality in both its contents and its modalities, the need for which is strongly felt.

3. Linked with this first problem is a second one. Allow me to introduce it by proposing a mental experiment. Imagine that we pick up a Bible and leaf through it with the aim of removing from it all pages that have anything to do with a story. What would we be left with in our hands, besides the book cover and a few wisdom passages? Now let us conduct the experiment of recording the sermons given by a priest during one liturgical year and transcribing them on paper. Let us look through the pages thus obtained and repeat the operation, that of tearing out all pages that have to do with a story. What will we be left holding? In all probability almost the whole thing! This evident diversity of results is a symptom of something wrong in our preaching, to the extent that it is supposed to have Scripture as its model. *Verbum Domini* has an interesting narrative passage in n. 4, when it relates: “Together we listened to and celebrated the word of the Lord. We recounted to one another all that the Lord is doing in the midst of the People of God, and we shared our hopes and concerns.”

Returning to what is wrong in our preaching, the matter has to do with a task, which is also proper to the homily, which is usually described by the term *actualization*. As *Proposition* n. 13 also recalls: “The homily enables the Word which is proclaimed to be realized: Today, this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing’ (Luke 4:21)”. This task too does not appear to be carried out in a satisfactory manner in a typical sampling of preaching.

To appreciate what is at stake, we need to clarify what ought to be understood by the term *actualization*. We can note that already within the Bible itself, what is happening in the present, right in the here and now, takes on a particular importance. To demonstrate this is it sufficient, among other things, to read attentively the Acts of the Apostles. If it is true that the sacred texts illuminate the salvation-historical sense of the present, it is also true that the present, if perceived as salvation-historical, allows the Scriptures to unveil themselves, as though in process of growing into the fullness of their sense. An example from Acts 4:23-28:

After their release they went back to their own people and reported what the chief priests and elders had told them. And when they heard it, they raised their voices to God with one accord and said, “Sovereign Lord, maker of heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them, you said by the holy Spirit through the mouth of our father David, your servant: ‘Why did the Gentiles rage and the peoples entertain folly? The kings of the earth took their stand and the princes gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed.’ Indeed they gathered in this city against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed, Herod and Pontius Pilate, together

with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do what your hand and (your) will had long ago planned to take place”.

The verses of Psalm 2 illuminate what is happening to the young Church, but the events which involve this Church in their turn make a fuller meaning spring forth as it were from those verses, a meaning through which God speaks to the persecuted disciples and sustains their fidelity and their hope. It is the speaker who in this way makes himself present, in an event and in a word that is closely linked with the event. And all of this can be related only through a story.

Why is it that stories abound in the Bible and that they are so absent in preaching? Because those who gave us the Scriptures were aware of being involved in a holy story in which God himself was active, while all too often we live within the narrative, even the humble narrative of our Christian communities, as though it were a profane story. This is why our preaching shows a familiarity with doctrinal exposition and with the propositions of moral precepts, but shows less familiarity with the witness that takes place through salvation-historical stories in which we are involved as protagonists. Only if we rediscover a faith perspective which, instructed by the light of the Bible, would be able to discern the action of God in our stories will preaching succeed in effecting an authentic actualization as it is supposed to do.

Dei Verbum, in n. 2, a much cited passage, indicated the modality chosen by God to reveal himself and to communicate himself to men: “This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them.” In this perspective the homily appears as the word that can mediate the self-communication of God only if it is closely in touch with the salvation-historical events which directly pertain to us. And it is from within the awareness of being protagonists in a holy story that we have the capacity to actualize the biblical readings which we proclaim in the liturgy, because the only thing that can serve as a bridge between us and them is our belonging to the same holy story.

Such an intense form of actualization of the biblical texts can be effected only through the intervention of the Holy Spirit who, through the Scriptures proclaimed in faith, illuminates the path that this community is following, and with his power fashions and directs it. *Verbum Domini* affirms in n. 16: “Just as the word of God comes to us in the body of Christ, in his Eucharistic body and in the body of the Scriptures, through the working of the Holy Spirit, so too it can only be truly received and understood through that same Spirit”.

In this connection, allow me to express some puzzlement regarding the use in preaching of the *lectio divina* method, in its canonical form that came to maturity in a monastic ambience. *Verbum Domini* rightly speaks of this method in laudatory terms in many places, particularly in nn. 86-87. While acknowledging, therefore, the great spiritual fecundity of this method, I maintain that it would respond to a method of inquiry that does not exhaust that which should be proper to the homilist. While in the *lectio* the perspective is dictated by the solitary search for substantive spiritual nourishment, in the preparation for a homily the hermeneutical perspective is generated by the *caritas pastoralis*, as concern for the salvation of this assembly convoked for the celebration, in its path of fidelity to the God of covenant, and in all of the multiple dimensions related to this. Because the holy Word is spoken above all “for us men and for our salvation”, that hermeneutical point is the most suitable for an integral understanding. *Verbum Domini*, in n. 29, affirms: “the primary setting for scriptural interpretation is the life of the Church”. And in n. 30: “As the Pontifical Biblical Commission, echoing an accepted principle of modern hermeneutics, has stated: ‘access to a proper understanding of biblical texts is only granted to the person who has an affinity with what the text is saying on the basis of life experience’”.

A splendid example of all of this is found in 2 Cor 5:19—6:2:

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him. Working together,

then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says: 'In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.' Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation".

4. A third problem is constituted by the present situation of the preparation of future preachers. In the past, the course of their formation normally provided for an instruction on preaching. With the reforms that came after Vatican II the materials of this institutional cycle were broadened both qualitatively and quantitatively. This required choices, among which, almost everywhere, that of eliminating the course on sacred oratory, or sacred eloquence, as it had come to be called. There are a variety of reasons that explain this omission; among them the fact that the related material was not much cared for and was therefore felt to be of little use. Or, it was simply a question of a naïve prejudice, which allowed one to think that if someone knows what he is supposed to say, he also knows how to say it. The fact is that this discipline was eclipsed. By way of example, here in Italy it is possible to obtain a license or doctorate in Pastoral Liturgy without ever having taken a course explicitly devoted to preaching. There are not many seminaries in Italy, as far as I am aware, that have a course devoted to preaching, which is however expected of seminaries, perhaps too vaguely indicated, according to *La formazione dei presbyteri nella Chiesa Italiana. Orientamenti e norme per i seminari* (The Formation of Priests in the Church in Italy. Directives and Norms for Seminaries) of November 2006. And even courses for the specific formation of potential future teachers of this material are lacking.



St. Stephen's Cathedral at Breisach, Germany (photo T. Osborne).

It is of course true that the teachings of the normal institutional curriculum represent an indispensable preparation for preaching, but there is a growing sentiment now of the need for a specific discipline. A clear sign of this too is *Proposition* n. 32, which expresses the wish to see an "intensifying, during the years of study, of formation for preaching, and vigilance concerning permanent formation during the exercise of ministry, so that the homily can speak effectively to those who hear it". The synod fathers moreover consider it necessary "that a Directory on the Homily be developed, whose purpose it would be to expound together with the principles of

homiletics and of the art of communication, the contents of the biblical themes that recur in the lectionary in use in the liturgy". The concerns of the synod fathers have been explicitly made his own by Benedict XVI in numbers 59 and 60 of *Verbum Domini*.

In this regard it should be said that the concern that the homily should also be the fruit of a high art of communication is not only a problem that regards the form of the preaching. On the basis of a sacramental conception of the ministry of preaching, because the human word is required to be a mediation of the speaking of God himself, the human word must be suitable for a true and efficacious communication. It is a matter analogous to what is recommended in the sacramentary, where the scruple for the genuineness of the "material" is a safeguard of the truth of the sign and thereby also of the sacrament itself.

I maintain that the structuring of a course on homiletics in the immediate preparation for ministry should have the form of a seminar, or workshop, during which not only theoretical knowledge of the nature of the homily is transmitted, but an effort is made to develop also the corresponding ability to seek and to give adequate form to the contents of the preaching. The goal should be that of imposing from the beginning a practice of preaching that is aware and reflective, which serves the maturing of a good experience in the young homilists. Thereafter, on the basis of this experience, in the on-going formation of preachers, follow-up courses and training for good preaching should be offered.

Exegesis and biblical hermeneutics have undergone rather significant transformations, even only in the past fifty years, and *Verbum Domini* expresses the hope for further integrations and enrichments. The preacher should be informed and kept current on the fruits of this research and should be able to read and comprehend good, widely available texts that treat this topic. In the last sixty years, then, studies on communication have had an extraordinary development, including those that deal with the topic of public speaking, with very solid results. Because communication is the way in which every pastoral activity is mediated it is surprising that in the studies for future priests there is not a sufficient commitment to transmitting the knowledge and skills that concern communication. This applies too, of course, to homiletics.

A serious preparation both with regard to the nature of the homily and to the conditions for a correct and effective communication, enables preachers to climb onto the pulpit with the motivated conviction that they are performing an invaluable ministry with respect to God and to the congregation, and with the certainty that they are able to offer it in a professional and efficacious manner. The state of mind of serene self-esteem and even enthusiasm which follows from this are factors of great importance to enable the announcing of the Gospel to reach the hearts of the hearers and to effect their existential involvement. Not only this, but precisely this type of preparation also has an ascetical effect, with beneficial influences on the spirituality of the homilist. Indeed, the awareness of what is the true nature and what are the true tasks of the homily, and insights pertaining to the proper functioning of communication, correct and purify attitudes and behaviours that are not infrequent among homilists. In particular, one could point to a contrasting attitude in a certain narcissism, more widespread than we are perhaps willing to admit, that makes not a few preachers conceive of the homily as though it were a short conference left entirely to his own whim, and makes them focus too much on the performance and on the contents of their own utterance. The asceticism that emerges from the exercise of a serious preparation causes the preacher's attention to shift ever more in the direction of those whom the homilist serves: God, the Lord Jesus Christ, the congregation and its pastoral needs. In sum, toward the attention we would expect from one who is a servant and who exercises a ministry.

I conclude with a bold prayer which is found in the Missal in the Italian language, and which contains a dizzying awareness regarding the ministry of preaching: "O God, who in your Son made man have said everything and given everything to us, because in the plan of your providence you also need men to reveal you, and you remain mute without our voice, make us worthy proclaimers and witnesses of the word that saves" (*Messale Romano*, colletta XIV per le ferie del tempo ordinario, p. 1020).

Federation News

First meeting for the Masters Programme in Biblical Animation of all Pastoral Life (ABP) – February 1st, 2014



The CBF Formation Commission met on 1 February for the inaugural meeting on the Masters Programme in Biblical Animation of all Pastoral Life. It was attended by Prof. Dr. Thomas P. Osborne, Prof. Dr. Sr. Margareta Gruber OSF, Prof. Dr. Jean Ehret and the Secretary General of the CBF, Fr. Jan J. Stefanów SVD. Also invited to attend the meeting was Fr. Yves-Lucien Evaga Ndgana, Director of the Biblical Centre for Africa and Madagascar (BICAM).

The main reason for and central theme of the meeting was to study the feasibility and develop the outline of the Masters Programme in Biblical Animation of all Pastoral Life for the training of pastoral agents appointed as directors of diocesan or national departments of biblical pastoral ministry. The need for this type of programme has been identified recently in Africa, but is present in all regions. Hence in the CBF General Secretariat the decision was taken to develop this type of programme initially for Africa with the possibility of then extending it to other regions of the Federation.



*Fr. Corrado
Pastore SDB*

Subregional Meeting in Rome May 8, 2014

In May 2014, on the initiative of the new Secretary General of the CBF, a meeting of the members of the CBF belonging to the Rome subregion took place at the *Collegio Verbo Divino* in Rome. This meeting, organized after several years of inactivity in the subregion, had a dynamic effect: communication was restored, the coordinator – Fr Corrado Pastore SDB – was re-elected and the programme for the following year was developed.

Meeting of the Southern Cone Zone (Buenos Aires, Argentina) May 31, 2014

Between May 31 and June 2 there took place in Buenos Aires the National Biblical Pastoral Meeting which provided a framework for the first meeting after 11 years of inactivity of the Southern Cone Zone of CBF-LAC. The meeting served to re-establish contact between the CBF-LAC Subre-

gion and the General Secretariat of the CBF in Sankt Ottilien and also to energize coordination and joint activities among members of the subregion, especially in the Southern Cone Zone.



Second meeting for the Master programme in Biblical Animation of all Pastoral Life July 7, 2014

On July 7, at the headquarters of the General Secretariat of the CBF, the second meeting of the Formation Commission of the CBF took place with the participation of Prof. Dr. Thomas P. Osborne, Prof. Dr Sr Margareta Gruber OSF, Prof. Dr Jean Ehret, Fr. Yves-Lucien Evaga Ndgana (Director of the Biblical Centre for Africa and Madagascar [BICAM]) and the Secretary General of the CBF, Fr Jan J. Stefanów SVD. Work on designing the Masters programme in Biblical Animation of all Pastoral Life continued.

The most important decision taken was to create a strategic alliance with the Catholic University of East Africa in Nairobi for the implementation of this Masters programme.

Regional FEBIC LAC Meeting (Bogota, Colombia) August 23, 2014

The Latin American and Caribbean Subregional Executive Committee of the Catholic Biblical Federation (FEBIC LAC) met in Bogota (Colombia) 19-23 August 2014. The Subregional Coordinator and Coordinators for Central America, the Caribbean, the Andean countries, the Southern Cone and Brazil and from CEBIPAL who form the Subregional Executive Committee participated. The meeting was also attended by the Secretary General of the CBF.

After reports and with the contributions from Fr. Stefanów, the Committee committed to renewed efforts in the tasks of animation and coordination of the Federation in the region. The status and payment of membership fees and the updating of membership data were addressed. The importance of maintaining communication was highlighted; in this context options for increased internet presence as well as the relaunch of "La Palabra Hoy" publication in digital form were explored.



An important task was the pre-planning and coordination of meetings and events in different countries for the following two years. The Executive Committee thus seeks to further promote biblical animation in the region.

Subregional Meeting of southwestern Europe (Fatima, Portugal) **October 16, 2014**

As is the yearly custom, the meeting of the Southwest Europe subregion was held, this time in Fatima (Portugal), 16 – 19 October.

The meeting was attended by the new General Secretary of the Catholic Biblical Federation, which facilitated members being brought up to date with the actual situation in the Federation and improve communication between the subregion and the General Secretariat of the Federation.



Meeting of the CBF Executive Committee **October 24, 2014**

The Executive Committee of the Catholic Biblical Federation held its annual meeting in Rome 24-25 October. Present were: the President of the CBF, Bishop Vincenzo Paglia (Rome), Vice-Chair of the Executive Committee, Don Cesare Bissoli (Rome) and members Bishop Renato Mayugba (Philippines), Bishop Juan Usma Gómez (Rome), Don Giuseppe Virgilio (Rome), Fr. Guillermo Acero (Colombia). Bro. Mike Chalmers (South Africa) participated via Skype.

The Executive Committee received the final report of the CBF Constitution Review Committee and approved the final text thereof to be submitted to the Holy See for approval. The list of candidates for the new President of the CBF proposed by members of the Federation was studied and the election of the new President took place. The name will be publicised after approval by the Holy See.

Much of the meeting was devoted to the preparation of the Plenary Assembly of the CBF to be held next year in Nemi, 18-23 June and the "Action Plan" for the CBF for the years 2015-2021.

Among administrative matters that are part of the agenda of each meeting of the Executive Committee are the admission of new associate members of the CBF: Fundatia "Verbum" (Romania), Movimiento Catolico Presencia del Evangelio (Peru) and El Centro Biblico Ntra. Sra. De Sion (Argentina).

The next meeting of the Executive Committee was scheduled to take place 5-6 March 2015.



Enthronement of the Bible in Bogotá

Subregional Meeting for Central Europe (Passau, Germany) **October 26, 2014**

Members of the Subregion meet annually, each time in a different country. The latest meeting took place in Passau, 26-28 October this year.

The subregion of Central Europe, especially in Germany, is where the Catholic Biblical Federation has lost most members, especially associate members. The reincorporation of the German Episcopal Conference of Germany was recently achieved and the dialogue with the Swiss Episcopal Conference continues with promising results. We are working intensively on restoring fluid communication with all members of the subregion, both individually and in subregional meetings.

The presence and report of the General Secretary of the CBF helped to bring the subregion closer to the central administration of the Federation and in the clarification of some outstanding issues. As always, most of the meeting was devoted to sharing the initiatives and activities of each of the members of the Sub-region and in planning some common activities.

The next meeting will take place next year in Vienna.

Secretary General's visit to Ghana and Togo **October 29, 2014**

In late October and early November (29 October to 15 November) the Secretary General paid a visit to Africa. The main reason for the trip was to attend the meeting with the Standing Committee of SECAM in Accra (Ghana) in order to present the report on the CBF and its activities and clarify the status of BICAM within the structures of the CBF and SECAM.

The trip to Ghana also facilitated an extended stay in neighbouring Togo to visit various biblical centres in Lomé and elsewhere in the country. Fr Stefanów was also able to meet with Monseigneur Benoit Colman Alowonou, President of the Episcopal Conference of Togo (CET) and President of the Biblical Commission of the CET and member of the International Commission for the New Liturgical translation of the Bible for Francophone Africa.



Subregional Meeting of South Asia (Mumbai, India) **December 1st, 2014**

Fifteen representatives of eleven members of CBF met 1-4 December in Mumbai (India). The meeting was held concurrently with the symposium "The joy of the gospel." Subregional activities were reactivated with renewed participation of 33 of the 36 institutions affiliated to the Federation.



Its deliberations included the renewal of biblical animation and a review of the administration, especially as regards to the payment of membership dues and member database information.

More information on our website: <http://cbf.org/cbf-news/item/44-cbf-sub-regional-meeting-held-at-mumbai-1-4-dec>

Meeting for the Masters programme in biblical pastoral animation **December 12, 2014**

From 12-14 December 2014 the coordinating team for the Masters Programme in Biblical Pastoral Ministry of the Federation met at the Centre Jean XXIII in Luxembourg. Issues relating to the participating institutions, modalities, lodging, academic programmes and financial aspects of the project were discussed and the corresponding decisions taken. The project received the endorsement and institutional support from Archbishop Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg.





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66. The creation accounts in the book of Genesis contain, in their own symbolic and narrative language, profound teachings about human existence and its historical reality. They suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to "have dominion" over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), to "till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15). As a result, the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became conflictual (cf. Gen 3:17-19). It is significant that the harmony which Saint Francis of Assisi experienced with all creatures was seen as a healing of that rupture. Saint Bonaventure held that, through universal reconciliation with every creature, Saint Francis in some way returned to the state of original innocence. This is a far cry from our situation today, where sin is manifest in all its destructive power in wars, the various forms of violence and abuse, the abandonment of the most vulnerable, and attacks on nature.

67. We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man "dominion" over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to "till and keep" the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). "Tilling" refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while "keeping" means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. "The earth is the Lord's" (Ps 24:1); to him belongs "the earth with all that is within it" (Dt 10:14). Thus God rejects every claim to absolute ownership: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Lev 25:23).

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 66f