



# Catholic Biblical Federation

## Biblical Pastoral Ministry in Africa

Hong Kong Plenary Assembly  
Follow-up: Integrative Language

Italian Bishops' Conference:  
The Bible in the Life of the Church



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**T**he Catholic Biblical Federation is a world-wide union of Catholic organizations feeling obliged to serve the Word of God in various ways. At present the organization has 88 full members and 219 associated members from 123 countries.

The activities of this organization include Catholic and interconfessional Bible translating, the propagation of Bibles and helping people to get a better understanding of Holy Scripture.

The Biblical Federation promotes the biblical-pastoral activities of these organizations, provides an opportunity for world-wide sharing of experiences, searches for ways to promote the joyful experience of the Word of God among the faithful and promotes undertakings beyond the means of individual organizations. The Biblical Federation promotes co-operation with representatives of biblical scholarship and the Bible societies of various confessions.

The Biblical Federation particularly tries to promote a reading of the Bible which mirrors every-day reality and help the many servants of the Word to read the Bible in this way.

Service of the Word of God is a service for unity and communication between people. For it is precisely a world which grows together through the communication media - while still demonstrating many symptoms of hate and destruction - that needs the Word of peace and community with God and with peoples.

**Wilhelm Egger, Bishop of Bozen-Brixen  
President of the Catholic Biblical Federation**

**"Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided  
for all the Christian faithful"**

*(Dei Verbum, 22).*

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The Catholic Biblical Federation is an "international Catholic organization of a public character" (cf. Code of Canon Law, 312.1.1).



## Editorial

The Movement of Women of Zaire for Peace and Justice, in a reflection on the situation in their country, asked the OAU (Organisation for African Unity) that they utilise the word and wisdom of their ancestors in a way that they can recover dignity and escape from a similar situation to that from which other peoples have escaped.

We believe that there is also word and wisdom in the Christian biblical tradition of the African continent. The authors of the first article in this number: *Jesus in Africa*, explain to us what it can signify and it signifies the ancestor in African cultures. Jesus as ancestor offers to the community protection, mediation and hope. He is the vine which transports life to the branches (Jn 15:4-7). He is the water of life (Jn 4:14), the bread of life (Jn 6:51) and life in abundance (Jn 10:10).

The importance of decentralisation and of the regions is coming to be a constant in the Catholic Biblical Federation since Bogotá and this was declared also in Hong Kong. This must be tirelessly pursued so that they may get to know one another and be mutually enriched by their distinct contributions. Knowledge facilitates dialogue, understanding and tolerance.

This Bulletin is the first of a year which will be devoted to giving a general view of the different regions. And so it will further this greater contact and interchange.

In addition to the leading article mentioned, you will get an experience of translation and adaptation of biblical material in a local language: lingala. We have good news of formation plans being put into effect for biblical monitors. We also offer a work on theological, biblical narrative, in which we see functioning the interaction of biblical "stories" and other traditional stories. Many parts of the planet seem to be in need of "stories". Perhaps, then, narrative and narratological methods might be more and more appreciated.

Along with this you will come across a theme for reflection and deliberation as a follow-up to the debates and topics which arose in Hong Kong at the last Plenary Assembly. Hannes Schreiber, a member of the Catholic Biblical Service of Austria, offers a reflection on inclusive (the author would call it interactive) language and biblical translations.

Also, it seemed opportune to us to reproduce fully the document of the Italian Episcopal Conference on the Bible in the Life of the Church. It is gratifying to note how this Episcopal Conference takes very seriously the importance of the Constitution *Dei Verbum* and puts it into practice so as to journey with it into the next millennium. It may well serve as an incentive to other Episcopal Conferences and Members of the Federation.

We hope that all this may be to your liking and useful for the biblical pastoral ministry. At this beginning of a new year, we send you our hoped-filled wishes with the words of the prophet Baruch: *Take off your garment of sorrow and affliction and put on the robe of righteousness that comes from God. Arise, stand upon the height and look toward the east ... for God has remembered you.*

Pilar de Miguel

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# Jesus in Africa

*Taking into consideration the contexts is one of the maxims of the Federation for reading the Bible. Of special importance is the context of the readers, their lives, their situation, their preoccupations, all of which determine their way of reading (Hong Kong Final Statement 8.1.1).*

*John R. Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison have coauthored Jesus in Global Contexts (Westminster/John Knox Press 1992) which contains in far greater detail the substance of this series of articles. We find it interesting*

In the political realm, those who assumed the vacant positions of leadership were often the African elite who had been groomed by the colonials. From the midst of the African elite came forth leaders - such as Kenyatta of Kenya, Nyerere of Tanzania, and Kaunda of Zambia - who embodied the best of leadership.

Unfortunately other leaders emerged who were like Idi Amin of Uganda, who killed an estimated three-hundred thousand of his own people, or Bokassa of the Central African Republic, who spent twenty million dollars to install himself as emperor.

In addition, political divisions within Africa are heightened by tribalism, which remains a powerful force in daily life. Through favoring members of one's own tribe, a leader can control educational and employment opportunities.

In the cultural realm, colonialism devastated African customs and practices.

This is particularly true in religion where, according to the South African Christian leader Desmond Tutu, a religious schizophrenia exists in the African soul between traditional African culture and Western Christianity.

Frequently, Western culture was imposed on Africans along with the Gospel. For example, the rhythm and

sway of African music and dance all too often were replaced by Western hymns accompanied by an imported organ.

When theologians in Africa strive to relate the Gospel to their diverse contexts, it is not surprising that some give priority to political questions (liberation theologians), while others give priority to African culture (inculturation theologians).

Most liberation theologians, until recently, have been in South Africa where black theology related the gospel message of liberation to the oppressive context of apartheid. For these theologians, Jesus is a liberator.

Throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa, however, the dominant form is an inculturation theology whose goal is to integrate Christianity into the life and culture of the African people.

Inculturation theologians champion portraits of Jesus as elder brother, ancestor, chief, or healer. These images resonate with the pulse of African culture.

## Jesus as Elder Brother

A popular interpretation of Jesus in Africa is that of an elder brother. Christians in Angola sing, «Jesus Christ is our Elder Brother/He is African!» This song interprets Jesus as

one who fulfills the kinship responsibilities of the elder brother, who defends the younger siblings in quarrels, mediates between younger siblings and parents in matters such as marriage, and even bears responsibility for younger siblings' actions.

This interpretation draws African theologians to the figure of the high priest in Hebrews who is a brother whose solidarity with his family leads to salvation: *For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters ... Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest ... Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.* (Heb 2:11, 17-18)

This portrait of Jesus also introduces a significant point of identification between Jesus and his African brothers and sisters: sharing in the rites of passage by which an individual becomes fully human within the boundaries of tribal life.

Although rites of passage differ markedly from tribe to tribe, they often include birth rites (such as the proper disposal of the umbilical cord), puberty rites (such as solitude and seclusion followed by reentry and celebration), marriage rites, and death rites. These rites of passage are required to establish Jesus' full humanity in an African context.

The Gospels supply specific instances of the rites of passage Jesus underwent to become a mature member of his community. Genealogies in Matthew and Luke clarify his tribal affiliation. His parents give the prescribed offerings, and his mother undergoes a period of maternal seclusion to restore purity after his birth.

With baptism Jesus joins in solidarity with his people. Following a period of seclusion in the wilderness, he enters public life as an adult, healing and



teaching among his brothers and sisters.

His life ends in the final rite of passage, death on the cross, which, for Africans, symbolizes completeness rather than shame.

## Jesus as Ancestor

If Jesus becomes a full member of the human community as an elder brother through rites of passage, he becomes a member of the ancestral community through his resurrection.

The centrality of the resurrection raises the possibility that Jesus is not only firstborn of the living as elder brother but also firstborn of the living dead as ancestor.

The portrait of Jesus as ancestor resonates with the portrait of Jesus in the Gospel of John in three specific ways.

First, ancestors are mediators of the *élan vitale*, the life-flow, to their community. In the same way, Jesus is like a vine that mediates life to the branches John 15:4-7). He is living water John 4:14), living bread (6:51), and abundant life (10:10).

Second, ancestors mediate the prayers and offerings of the living to God. This is how many Africans understand the familiar words, «I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me» (14:6).

Third, ancestors provide a watchful presence over the community. Jesus, too, refused to leave his disciples desolate (14:18), and he left his presence or Spirit with them until they entered the community of the living dead.

## Jesus as Chief

Salvation in traditional African religion is wholeness within this life. It entails social equilibrium - harmony with the living and the dead. It also entails

personal equilibrium - inner harmony that produces physical well-being. It occurs here and now in the blessings of friendship, plentiful offspring, and a long life.

For Jesus to become a savior to Africans, he must do more than procure for them an eternal destiny. He must control the forces from which Africans themselves struggle to be saved here and now, whether that be infertility or malevolent spirits. One figure within African communities who has the responsibility of accomplishing this sort of salvation is the tribal chief.

The chief is the guardian of African community, the one person who embodies the religious and political aspirations of the tribe. The chief must be a courageous, heroic figure, able to triumph over enemies in the terrestrial and spiritual worlds. The chief derives strength from his position as the intersection of terrestrial and spiritual realms. The chief's authority derives from the ancestors.

Among the Akan tribe, for example, the chief gains intimate access to the ancestors through a ritual of initiation when the chief is lowered and raised three times on the chair of his most renowned ancestor. Once installed, the chief is, in a sense, an ancestor himself.

The chief is the mediator between all the constituents of the community: the tribe, the ancestors, and even those unborn. Further, the community derives its identity and coherence from the chief. Such solidarity between the tribe and chief matches that which exists between the Church and Christ. As the tribe is identified with the chief, so the Church is identified with Christ (1 Cor 12:27).

As the chief mediates blessings from the ancestors, so Christ mediates blessing to the Church. Christ is «the head ... from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love» (Eph 4:15-16).

There is another dimension to this mediatorial role. When communal misfortunes occur and the social equilibrium becomes imbalanced, the chief must subordinate his own well-being to the needs of the community.

This requires doing all he can to allay the tensions that disrupt the community. In other words, mediation becomes reconciliation. Jesus' ultimate act of reconciliation took the form of complete self-subordination to the community.

On the cross, Jesus reconciled the world to God (2 Cor 5:18) and created one new humanity free from hostility (Eph 2:11-16). Jesus is lord or «chief» precisely because he humbled himself in life and in death (Phil 2:5-7). Therefore the entire cosmos - which is itself a web of relationships that exist under, on, and above the earth - will confess that Jesus Christ is «chief» (Phil 2:8-11).

## Jesus as Healer

Another key figure in African tribal life is a person responsible for restoring wholeness and salvation. This is the witch doctor (*nganga*) or holistic healer. A Congolese theologian explains that the healer is the most powerful and complex person in that society.

In fact, the word «healer» can also be translated as priest, chemist, doctor, magician, prophet, and visionary. Whatever the name used, the constant of African healing is its holistic quality. It requires determining perhaps the spiritual cause of a physical ailment or the social cause in communal tensions.

Once the ailment is diagnosed, the healer prescribes remedies that range from sacrifices to dances to restoration of social relationships. Often healing requires the use of the particular fetishes, or sacred devices, of the healer.

The Synoptic Gospels are replete with accounts of Jesus' healing, which reflect an African healer's holistic ap-

proach. Three similarities in particular underlie the portrait of Jesus as healer.

First, like an African healer, Jesus acknowledged a relationship between body and spirit. Along with physical healing, Jesus absolved the unhealthy guilt («Your sins are forgiven» [Mark 2:5]) and commended the sick for their faith («Your faith has made you well» [Mark 10:52]).

Second, Jesus placed healing within the context of social reintegration. Lepers had to report to the priest (Mark 1:44; Luke 17:14); the Gerasene demoniac had to go home to his friends (Mark 5:19); and Peter's mother-in-law took up her role as host immediately upon her healing (Mark 1:31).

Even the simple words, «Go in peace,» were redolent of social wholeness and restored health (Mark 5:34).

Finally, Jesus' methods of healing approximate those of an African healer. He applied saliva or a mixture of saliva and dirt to the unhealthy body part (Mark 8:23); he spat on his finger and touched the tongue of a deaf mute (Mark 7:33); and he made noises interpreted variously as a sign, snort, or groan (Mark 7:34).

### Jesus as Liberator

South African black theologians turn to the historical Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels, where, like other liberation theologians, they discover a liberator of the oppressed.

But they incorporate into their portrait of a liberating Jesus influences from the Black Consciousness Movement that calls blacks to embrace the beauty of their blackness.

Integral to this embrace is a reclamation of their history and their tradition.

It is no longer a history told by Dutch and English oppressors about black heathens, but a history about black martyrs who sought justice for their black brothers and sisters. It is not a history of exclusion and subjugation, but of inclusion and liberation.

These theologians recognize that Jesus spent his life restoring to the oppressed their lost histories and traditions. Healed lepers could now make the prescribed offerings to the priests. Healed cripples could now worship on the Sabbath.

The blind, the lame, and children could now follow Jesus directly into the Temple. Prostitutes could lay claim to entrance into God's reign. Tax collectors could now be called, «children of Abraham.»

All these people, the sick and sinners who were once excluded from the traditions and history of their people, had their history and institutions returned to them by Jesus.

Jesus' point of departure for his ministry was the inauguration of the year of Jubilee, when debts were canceled and land that had been taken as payment of a debt was returned to its original owner (Luke 4:16-21; see Lev 25:8-17).

For South African blacks in homelands and townships, the year of Jubilee represents far more than financial restoration. There is a vital link between the people and the land. It is the locus of the community: a sacred place of initiation for generations. It is the rocks, trees, and rivers where the ancestors commune with the living.

When the colonizers violently displaced the blacks and put them into foreign homelands, they stripped the blacks of their history, consciousness, and community.

Jesus' proclamation of the year of Jubilee, in this context of displacement, is a reconnection of the black umbilical cord of history. ♦

### **The Catholic Biblical Federation commits itself to**

further strengthening the process of regionalization begun in Bogotá, and seeking creatively new forms of networking

(Hong Kong Final Statement 8.1.1)



## “MAY THE WORD OF THE LORD SPREAD AND BE GLORIFIED” (2 Thess 3:1)

Italian Episcopal Conference:

### The Bible in the Life of the Church

#### Pastoral Note from the Episcopal Commission for doctrine of faith and catechesis.

*The Pastoral Nota of the Commission for Doctrine of Faith and Catechesis of the Italian Bishops' Conference can help members of the Federation to implement the recommendation of no. 40 of Tertio Millennio Adveniente: "that Christians return to the Bible with renewed interest".*

*May other Bishops' Conferences find this initiative inspiring ... so that by hearing the message of salvation the whole world may believe, by believing, it may hope, and by hoping it may love. (DV 1).*

*May all, like the disciples of Emmaus, experience that their hearts set on fire at the interpretation of the Scriptures and rediscover the reasons of their hope.*

#### PREFACE

"The church has always venerated the divine scriptures as it has venerated the Body of the Lord, in that it never ceases, above all in the sacred liturgy, to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the word of God and the Body of Christ" (*Dei Verbum*, 21).

This is the solemn affirmation of the Second Vatican Council: the proclamation of a living experience, a profession of faith, a re-affirmation of a duty and a commitment.

"God speaks to his people and Christ is still proclaiming his gospel" the

Council recalls (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 33).

But thirty years after the proclamation of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (18 November, 1965), Pope Paul VI's interpellation resounds strongly: "In our day, what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man's conscience?" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 4).

John Paul II reveals the vista of the "new evangelization" and pushes on towards the new millennium, wishing that Christians "should turn with renewed interest to the Bible" (*Tertio*

*Millennio Adveniente*, 40), since the word of God is always "the criterion of evangelization, of personal and ecclesial life, of ecumenism" (*Angelus*, 5.11.1995).

After all, the two disciples, in the experience of their symbolic journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus, precisely through the explanation of the Scriptures, found again ardour of heart, rediscovered reasons for hope, and were filled with the joy at the meeting (cf Lk 24, 13-35).

This is precisely the prime purpose of this *Note*, through which is expressed sincere gratitude to the Presidency of the Italian Episcopal Conference and to the Permanent Episcopal Council which wanted it, guided it and approved it; and to those - of the Biblical Apostolate section of the National Catechesis Office and the Italian Biblical Association - who took upon themselves wholeheartedly the long and laborious journey.

It has no other scope save "pastoral", as is stated in the introduction.

Recollection of the publication of *Dei Verbum*, a cardinal document of the conciliar event, may serve to drive on, to train and to confirm our ecclesial communities in that essential attitude that is "hearing the word of God reverently [...], so that the whole world may hear the summons to salvation, and hearing it may believe, through belief it may hope, and through hope it may come to love" (*Dei Verbum*, 1).

This is the wish which sustains the *Note*, which we deliver with confidence and joy, repeating with Saint Paul: "We constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you hear from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers" (1 Thess 2,13).

On the strength of this Word is our hope founded for a journey towards the third millennium, inspired by that of Israel who, after the exile, redis-

covered *"the Book"*: a journey of courage, of sharing, of joy (cf Neh 8,12).

† LORENZO CHIARINELLI  
Bishop of Aversa

President of the Episcopal Commission for doctrine of faith and catechesis

Rome, 18 November 1995  
30th anniversary of the promulgation of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*

## INTRODUCTION

1. Two disciples, disorientated and perhaps disillusioned, were on their way from Jerusalem. Jesus, crucified and risen, joined them on the road *"and, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures"* (Luke 24:27),

The Emmaus account suggests to Christians the way to encounter and get to know the word of God. Jesus, the living Lord, is the master who introduces in the mystery of the Word, the direct interlocutor whereby he opens the sacred Book.

Today, like yesterday, he encounters us on the road of life; not rarely are we sceptical and discouraged, but with the strength of his Spirit and his gesture of love at the breaking of bread, he interpellates, converts, infuses joy, stirs up ardour.

Jesus disappeared from the sight of the two disciples, and yet they were happy: he was, henceforth, in their hearts<sup>1</sup>. And, thanks to the Word that animated them, they became heralds of his resurrection to the brethren<sup>2</sup>.

2. To those who approach the Scriptures, who search for a word of life, Jesus says: *"It is they who testify on my behalf"* (John 5:39).

The Church confesses that the Lord Jesus is the centre and the goal of

Scripture. He is the supreme Word that God reveals to us, after having spoken over and over through the prophets<sup>3</sup>.

In him, the books of the Old Testament, completely assumed into the gospel preaching, acquire and show forth their full significance<sup>4</sup>. *"The whole of Scripture is a single book and this unique book is Christ."*<sup>5</sup>

For this reason the Church, following the apostolic tradition, encounters the Bible *"through Christ, with Christ and in Christ"* and, in his light, understands it as the integral plan of God for our salvation; it considers that the New Testament is born of the Old and the Old Testament is revealed in the New<sup>6</sup>; it seeks with loving care the original historic sense of the word of God; it reveres the divine Scriptures as it does through the same body of Christ<sup>7</sup>; it communicates it to the people of God as the Word of truth and life; it recognises in the exemplary conduct of believers a spiritual commentary always alive and present in the heeded Word.

3. The listening to and the announcement of the word of God, witnessed by the Bible and proclaimed by the Church throughout twenty centuries, have produced an extra-ordinary history of faith, of prayer, of works of charity and also of culture: a history of holiness.

The magisterium of the Church has devoted renewed attention to the Bible in the last hundred years. Two important biblical anniversaries bear witness to this in our times: the centenary of the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* of Leo XIII (1893) and the fiftieth anniversary of the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of Pius XII (1943).

From these two documents the science and spirituality of the Bible, its ascetic value and its pastoral use, have come to maturity in our midst. The measure of this stupendous growth gives encouragement that it will continue all the more.

In more recent times, such maturing reached authoritative and normative expression in the Second Vatican Council, markedly in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, which, this year, celebrated its thirtieth year of promulgation (1965).

It is something of a theological and pastoral *"Magna Carta"* of every encounter with the Bible: found by God, we are able, in our turn, to go towards him along the same way in which he comes to us, namely, that of Sacred Scripture.

This *Note* wants to recall in a proper manner the thirtieth anniversary of *Dei Verbum*, by taking up once more the pastoral perspective with regard to one of its more diffuse and profound accomplishments in our community.

We are encouraged, also, by the recent document from the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), which, as noted by John Paul II, puts the accent *"on the fact that the active biblical Word speaks universally, in time and space, to the whole of humanity"*. *If the "words of God [...] are expressed in human language (Dei Verbum, 13), it is so as to be understood by all. They must not remain remote, not "too hard" for you nor "too far away [...]" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe"* (Dt 30,11,14)<sup>8</sup>.

4. The scope of this *Note* is pastoral. In the words of the Council we wish to exhort *"earnestly and specifically all the faithful [...] to learn 'the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ' (Phil 3,8) by frequent reading of the divine scriptures"*<sup>9</sup>, so that, as Saint Jerome says in a celebrated saying, quoted in the same *Dei Verbum*, *"ignorance of the scriptures is, indeed, ignorance of Christ"*<sup>10</sup>.

The *Note* speaks in a particular way to those in the Church who are at the service of the Word, so that they may become more vitally aware of and



strengthen their capacity and courage to carry out a task that is both sound and demanding: to introduce all the people of God to the inexhaustible richness of truth and life in Sacred Scripture.

In referring to the faith and doctrine of the Church on the Bible, this *Note* consists of three parts: it illustrates briefly how the treasure of Sacred Scripture may be put to good use in the Church in Italy (part I); it indicates the principles and criteria whereby Christians may encounter it (part II); it proposes ways and methods for the correct use and full utilisation of the Bible in the life of the Church, particularly in catechesis, liturgy and through the exercise of the biblical apostolate directly (part III).

The breadth of the subject matter leads to a concise treatment. The implications of the Bible in the life of the Church would be many, both on the pastoral side and in the historico-cultural context. We recommend them to the study and reflection of believers.

5. This *Note* rests upon a profound and inalienable conviction of faith: *"The sacred scriptures contain the word of God, and, because they are inspired, they truly are the word of God"*<sup>11</sup>.

This Word comes to us as a manifestation of the *"admirable condescension of eternal Wisdom"* and *"the words of God [...] expressed in human languages, are similar to the language of human beings"*<sup>12</sup>.

Still today, while we are invited to become involved in the *"new evangelisation"*, it is God himself, by means of the sacred book, who evangelises his people, who speaks to their hearts as a Father to his children<sup>13</sup>.

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, Sacred Scripture is, indeed, like a sacrament of the word of God, and finds in holy Mother Church a guarantee of sure understanding and vital assimilation.

The announcement of a great promise, together with a grave responsibility, the ancient prophetic oracle interpellates us bishops first, then the priests, deacons, religious and lay Christians: *"The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord"* (Amos 8,11).

## I. "A FAMINE ... OF HEARING THE WORDS OF THE LORD"

### *The Bible in our Communities*

#### **The Fruitfulness of Renewal**

6. We are aware that we ought to give glory and thanks to God, because Sacred Scripture in Italy today is held in high esteem by very many of the faithful as an incomparable treasure of the faith. The roots of this providential situation come from long ago.

For a long time personal reading of the Bible was limited to a few situations, for reasons understandable from the historical and social point of view. But already, at the beginning of this century, thanks above all to the impulse of *Providentissimus Deus* of Leo XIII and later of *Spiritus Paraclitus* of Benedict XV (1920), the *"biblical movement"* began and made a name for itself among us.

The Pius Association of Saint Jerome and other tireless promoters of popular biblical animation co-operated with dedication in its development.

Following from the other biblical encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of Pius XII, the Italian Biblical Association was established; we owe sincere gratitude to this for the fundamental role that it has played and still plays, not only in the area of biblical studies, but also in the biblical formation of priests, religious and laity.

7. But above all it is with Vatican II that our ecclesial communities were urged

to re-discover the centrality of the community and personal encounter with Sacred Scripture for their life and mission.

Thus the Bible has become the determining element of catechesis and liturgy: it founds and animates the pastoral project of the Italian Church, expressed in various programmatic documents, up to the latest *The Evangelisation and Witness of Charity* (1991); it is at the beginning and at the heart of the life of contemporary ecclesial associations, groups and movements; it inspires and sustains ecumenical dialogue.

Guided providentially by the Spirit, the Churches in Italy are committed to animate all their pastoral actions with the word of the Bible, in a way that is always more conscious, extensive and sharing.

In such a perspective, one is more strongly aware today of the need to carry out fully the dictate of *Dei Verbum* *"Access to Sacred Scripture ought to be widely available to the Christian faithful"*<sup>14</sup>, by promoting direct contact with it.

The Italian Episcopal Conference has officially assumed this aspect as a programmatic undertaking with the decision to support the Catholic Biblical Federation (1988).

By dint of such a decision, the Episcopal Conference has entrusted to the Italian Biblical Association and the National Office for Catechesis the task of promoting, even more strongly, the biblical apostolate and every other form of utilising the Bible in pastoral ministry.

### **Positive Fruits**

8. *"Every good tree bears good fruit"* (Mtt 7, 17) said Jesus of those who receive the word of God in a correct and vital way. Having mentioned the strong biblical inspiration underlying Italian pastoral ministry, we can note, even if rather succinctly, the varied and

abundant fruits which have been produced and are being manifested because of it.

The most evident fruit of this renewal is the importance that the Bible has assumed in celebrations: first of all the liturgy of the Word in the Eucharistic celebration; the proclamation of the word of God in the celebration of all the sacraments; praying the psalms in the community; a biblical style in preaching.

There is a proper, specific place for the Word, the ambo, and there is the expression of a ministry concerning the Word; from the instituted ministry of lector, re-introduced again today, and including ministries aimed at animating the liturgy, like those of the psalmist, the commentator and the cantor.

The renewal of consecrated life, the new educative projects in the preparation for holy orders, the models of the presbyteral life are firmly anchored in a rediscovery of the centrality of the Bible.

It is easy to find, not only in the communities of consecrated life, but also in many lay faithful, in parishes as well as in various associations, a genuine love for Sacred Scripture, understood as the word of God.

The initiation of many into the sacred book is helped by a varied system of formative ways, with evident cultural, spiritual and pastoral growth.

Many practise *lectio divina* or other analogous forms, such as "schools of the Word" and experience of prayer centred on Scripture, with a particular and significant participation by young people.

Specific and ample space is given to Sacred Scripture in theological studies, in catechetical formation and religious teaching in school.

An official translation of the Bible has been published in Italian for liturgical use in the Catholic Church (*Bibbia*

*CEI*), as well as an interconfessional translation "in everyday language", the fruit and precious instrument of ecumenical dialogue and profitable collaboration with the Bible Society in Italy.

The exercise of charity, of ecumenical dialogue and the missionary tension of groups and communities draw inexhaustible life blood especially from the Gospel of Jesus.

We possess many, various, and for the most part well made, instruments of biblical work. In particular we recall, for example, how the new catechisms for Christian life are inspired by Scripture.

Also the mass media (TV, radio, newspapers) are beginning to make fuller and more genuine use of biblical transmission.

9. In summary, we can register three fundamental signs of the promising biblical awakening in our midst: a radical and interior renewal of the faith, coming from the resurgence of the word of God; the conscious affirmation and assumption of the primacy of the word of God in the life and mission of the Church<sup>15</sup>; the promotion of a more solicitous ecumenical journey sustained by Scripture<sup>16</sup>.

### Aspects that are lacking

10. While confessing that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword ... able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4, 12), we must humbly admit to being not always up to the gift which God gives us in Sacred Scripture.

The Bible is among the most widespread books in our country, but it is also, perhaps, among the least read. The faithful are still little encouraged to encounter the Bible and helped little to read it as the word of God.

There are persons who want to get to know the Bible, but often there is no one to break the bread of the Word. Direct encounter is still for the few so that the approach to Scripture seems

to be reserved to some elite, and to movements and associations equipped with particular resources. The sacred book does not appear to be at the disposition of every Christian, according to their capacity.

The need for good actualisation is often enough disregarded, thus being reduced to superficial and extrinsic juxtaposition between the biblical word and human experience.

Even priests and deacons, ministers of preaching the word, do not always show themselves adequate to the task. Nor can it be said that our catechists and pastoral animators are sufficiently prepared for good communication of the Bible.

Often, lacking or too scarce is the climate of interior and exterior silence, which alone can favour prayer, reflection and discernment, and thanks to which, in the light of the Bible, there are recognised the signs of the Spirit of God in the world and in history, and which can reproduce human experiences and problems in the vast project of the history of salvation to which the Bible gives testimony.

11. Even more profoundly, one wonders at times whether a set routine of reading corresponds to the faith of the Church. There are various motives for our uncertainty.

The first stems from a neglect of the elementary exegetical requirements, with the consequent danger of falling into distorted biblicism.

In particular one is concerned about the spread of the "fundamentalist" reading of Scripture, which, by "refusing to take into account the historical character of biblical revelation, it makes itself incapable of accepting the full truth of the incarnation itself"<sup>17</sup>.

We cannot remain silent about a superficial approach to the sacred book, intended as a fashionable and consumer product, carried out at times in an ambiguous way, as happens when one wishes to receive the word of God the Bible in a material way,



and not having come ultimately from listening with faith and with genuine discernment.

We are struck and saddened by a reading of the Bible not carried out according to the spirit which is had in the Church, and which, therefore, ignores and undervalues the living doctrinal, liturgical and living Tradition.

From this comes the origin of the effort to make synthesis between Scripture and the Catechism, between biblical and liturgical experience, as well as the biblical poverty of so many homilies and often the lack of evangelical motivation in the exercise of charity.

12. Finally, we recall the weakness of an association with the Bible which risks, here and there, seeming to be based on personal and subjective satisfaction rather than on sharing in the evangelising force of the Word.

The impassioned memory of Christ which determined the apostolic longing of Saint Paul<sup>18</sup>, is not always manifested among us full of community spirit towards our brothers and sisters, of love for neighbour, of understanding towards the human demands of our time. That missionary witness which permeates in a lively way the contents of the sacred book and is an essential dimension of it appears to be still feeble.

13. The meagre number of faithful who approach the Sacred Scriptures and the feeble commitment towards parochial biblical pastoral ministry; the lack of concern about reading the Bible from an attitude of ecclesial faith; the isolation from the signs of grace which the Church sets in place for the life of the faithful, in particular the sacraments and the catechetical investigation; an approach unprepared by the elementary rules of comprehension, above all, at a time when certain religious sects are abusing the proper use of Scripture; the lack of incisiveness of the word of God in the conversion of the heart, in the missionary task and in charity, in the service of political and social life; the

absence of silence and contemplation on the word of God: all these are shadows that do not quash, but certainly weigh down the fervour for the Bible that is already alive among us and which the Spirit intends to make grow and spread, since it is the destiny of the Word that it *"may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere"* (Thess. 3:1).

## II. "HE OPENED THEIR MINDS TO UNDERSTAND THE SCRIPTURES"

(Lk 24,45)

### *Principles and criteria for a correct use of the Bible in the life of the Church*

14. *"From that city our Father has sent us letters, he has had the Scriptures delivered to us, whence there arose in us the desire to return home"*, writes Saint Augustine<sup>19</sup>. Often called by the Fathers *"God's letters"* to humankind, the Bible is first of all the Father's loving and beneficent communication to his children, to which should correspond a devoted, intelligent, prayerful and obedient letter.

The Church has never considered a Bible a book easy of consumption however interesting it might be. Instead, it proposes reading it as a true and real encounter of faith and love, supported by some principles, and guided by precise criteria.

For this reason, not every approach to the Bible is automatically welcoming of the grace which God wants to impart. Therefore, it is the main task of every Christian, pastors above all, to recall and have present the identity of the sacred book according to the faith of the Church, and thus the reason for its presence, the mystery of its grace, the commitment to and the ways of contact with it.

### **God's Communication and Communion with him**

15. Today a teaching summarises, with authority, the Christian way of

the word of God to us and our way to the word of God: it is the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, of the Second Vatican Council.

This Constitution bears witness to the traditional faith of the Church concerning Scripture, in the light of the same Bible, of the teaching of the Fathers, of the Councils and of the Magisterium, and expounds it in ways more adapted to being understood and experienced in the cultural and ecclesial horizons of our times.

*Dei Verbum* has become, therefore, an indispensable introduction and instrument for the correct understanding of Sacred Scripture, to be made known to all the Christian faithful<sup>20</sup>.

16. Guided by this document, we are made to grasp the truth and importance of Scripture. This belongs to the mystery of the word of God or Divine Revelation, the gift of which the Holy Trinity has made to us in the Church.

The first and last purpose of Scripture is, then, first of all the grace of an adoring meeting with the Father who speaks with his children<sup>21</sup>, and not, therefore, for other purely legitimate objectives of knowledge and procedure. Saint Gregory the Great advises us: *"Learn to recognise the heart of God in the words of God"*<sup>22</sup>.

It is an encounter with the risen Lord *"since it is he himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in church"*<sup>23</sup>.

It is an experience of the Holy Spirit, because through the same unique Spirit Scripture is written, read, and interpreted<sup>24</sup>; in fact, *"it grows with the one who reads it"*<sup>25</sup>.

It is an encounter that takes place in the bosom of the Church, of its living Tradition, illuminated by the example of Mary, *"in whose womb God has conveyed the whole of the Scriptures, every word of them"*<sup>26</sup>, for the light and comfort of his people.

It is a feast with *"the bread of life"*, which the Church does not cease giving to the faithful, through which Sacred Scripture becomes *"a strengthening of faith, a food of the soul, and a pure and never failing source of spiritual life"*<sup>27</sup>.

It is an experience of singular human and cultural dimension, since Scripture is the book of yesterday and today, a place of life in which are reflected questions and answers, sorrows and joys, doubts and certainties of people of every time; it represents the source of so many historic, artistic and cultural events, a true spiritual patrimony of the whole of humanity.

In a world seeking true communication God draws close to us with his Word, to reveal truth and create communion.

## Ecclesial and Vital Reading

17. The Word stirs up faith<sup>28</sup> and calls the Church together: in its turn, it is the faith of the Church that receives, guards, interprets and transmits the Word. It is, therefore, from the mystery itself of the word of God incarnate in the biblical sign that the criteria of understanding and interpreting come. They are founded on the divine and human identity of the sacred book, together with its vital and indissoluble insertion into the totality of the faith of the Church<sup>29</sup>.

The experience itself of believers attests to it, as St Gregory the Great testifies: *"I know, in fact, many things in Sacred Scripture that alone I have not been able to understand, but I have understood them by placing myself in the midst of my brethren"*<sup>30</sup>.

A series of objective norms follows, which, moreover, do not exclude a healthy pluralism of methods. We get them from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*<sup>31</sup>, and from the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, which expresses them succinctly, thus:

- seeking carefully the literal or objective sense of the sacred text; in this

the use of the historico-critical method is indispensable, suitably backed up by other methods, whilst rejecting decisively a fundamentalist reading and every other purely subjective approach;

- paying great attention to the content and the unity of the whole of Scripture, and, therefore, to the mystery of Christ and the Church;

- reading Scripture in the living tradition of the whole Church;

- being attentive to the analogy of faith, that is, to the cohesiveness of the truth of faith in the totality of the plan of divine revelation;

- carrying out the process of inculturation and actualisation, thanks to which the word of God resounds as a word for today.

In the light of such indications there are two objections which sometimes arise in the community regarding commitment to promoting Scripture reading.

There are those who are afraid that skilled use of the Bible may bring about a separation from the Magisterium and from other forms of communicating the faith, like catechesis and catechisms. Were that to happen it would be a sure sign of a mistaken encounter, since what the Spirit communicates in the sacred book takes place in the Church, in communion with its pastors and in co-ordinated harmony with other forms of transmitting the Creed received from tradition.

There is underlined, then, the danger of a certain spiritualistic intimism from contact with the Bible. In fact, whoever encounters the Scriptures in the correct way, meets in a Word what is ultimately the person of Jesus Christ, who, as already in the Gospels, urges a conversion of the heart as well as in deeds, presses for greater justice, stimulates concrete love towards one's neighbour, proposes a necessary style of communication and fraternity within the community and sincere missionary commitment in the world.

## Pastoral Implications

18. Beginning from these last orientations, we propose some concrete indications of method, aimed at fostering a more profitable approach to the Bible.

### a) *Paying attention to the literal sense*

Since the written Word shares in the mystery of the Incarnation, it is indispensable to seek, first and always, the literal and historical sense, namely, that which God himself has intended to communicate through the biblical authors. To this end, it is necessary to have recourse to the tools of correct exegesis, and not to fall into arbitrary interpretations.

This literal and historical sense, as already mentioned, takes its fullness in the totality of biblical revelation, and therefore, in the revelation of Jesus Christ, the definitive Word of God<sup>32</sup>.

### b) *Comparing a biblical passage with other texts in the Bible*

The unity of the salvific plan of God, which the Holy Spirit manifests in the Bible, requires that every part be read within the whole, that one single passage be compared with others, in particular that the Old Testament be read in the light of the New, where it acquires its sense more fully, but also, that the New Testament be read in the light of the Old in order to recognise the *"teaching on God"*<sup>33</sup>, which supports the history of our salvation.

### c) *Reading the Text in its Ecclesial and Sacramental Context*

Every encounter with and use of the Bible requires, to be authentic, the full sharing of the faith of the Church. When we read the Bible we not only open a book, but we meet the Father, who, in Christ and in the force of the Holy Spirit, speaks precisely to us; and we listen to the Trinity if we have in ourselves the attitude of understanding and fidelity of the Church, which takes its origin from the Father



and is the body of Christ and spouse of the Spirit.

In a way, such an ecclesial reading reaches its fullness in sacramental celebrations and especially in that of the Eucharist, the "*source and summit*"<sup>34</sup> of the communication which God makes of himself to his people, through the proclamation of a Word which requires the support of life.

#### **d) Reading the Text troubled by the great Demands of Today**

Being the word of the living God, Sacred Scripture is always contemporary and actual to every reader, whom it enlightens, calls to conversion and comforts.

Through reading about the past the Spirit helps us to discern the sense which he himself gives to the problems and events of our time, enabling us to read the Bible with regard to life and life with regard to the Bible.

#### **e) Knowing how to correlate the Bible with Life**

Like every word, that of God also accepts entering into our processes of communication, which should respect the mystery of transcendence, but which cannot lessen the responsibility for a pedagogy and teaching of the Bible according to the proper demands of literature and of the biblical message, as well as in correlation with the conditions of the addressees.

19. The Bible, therefore, belongs to the life of the Church as a foundation document, "*the supreme rule of her faith*"<sup>35</sup>, of extraordinary human and cultural relevance, above all as a channel of continuous dialogue, silent but no less ardent, which the Church has with its Lord. It is important to realise the tireless dynamic that Scripture introduces into the life of the faithful.

First comes the announcing and the hearing of the Word, to which is indissolubly bound the celebration of the Word in sacrament: indeed at the single "*table be it of the Word of God or the body of Christ*"<sup>36</sup>; listening and ce-

lebration are necessarily interchanged in the experience of life according to the Word with testimony, service and charity.

Finally, the Word completes its course when it becomes missionary, according to the living witness of the apostle Paul, who, encountering peoples, religions and cultures that are seeking God, who "*perhaps grope for him*" (Acts 17:27), said frankly: "*What ... you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you*" (Acts 17:23).

### **Practical Consequences**

20. In the light of this dynamism one can see clearly that the Bible and the pastoral ministry that serves it enter into the whole life of the Church, like sap for every service of the faith: in proclamation and catechesis, in liturgical celebrations, in prayer and spiritual reflections, personal or in common, especially in family life, in the witness of charity, in ecumenical engagement and in inter-religious dialogue.

Biblical pastoral ministry ought, therefore, to permeate the entire pastoral ministry of the Church. Its ultimate and unifying scope will be to enable the life of faith and ecclesial hope through the gift of the Scriptures, that convey to us the extraordinary patrimony of the living testimony of salvation history, through its events and its protagonists, in its meaning and its call to decision.

21. On the strength of such considerations, biblical pastoral ministry should aim at the following principal objectives:

- helping the faithful to know and read the Bible, personally and in groups, with respect to its theological and historical identity;
- encouraging the direct encounter of the faithful with the written Word of God, in such a way as to know how to listen, pray, actualise and carry out the Word in everyday life;
- enabling some forms of Bible sharing, such as happens in Bible groups;

- producing suitable ministers of the Word and other animators who can introduce the faithful to the Bible.

22. In order to attain such objectives it is necessary to comply with some very definite methodological requirements:

- a faith encounter with the Bible has value in itself if it is also not closed in itself; that is, it should be able to have its own autonomy in proceeding, in always maintaining a vital relationship with other forms of communicating the faith proper to the traditions of the Church (liturgy, catechesis, etc.);

- two diverse and complementary ways of employing the Bible to advantage are considered: the direct way to the sacred text, and the development of the biblical components in other channels of transmitting the faith, like catechesis and celebration;

- various and several are the forms of encountering the Bible, with reference to the conditions of the faith and the life of the addressees; to this end one will take account wisely of the various experiences of biblical pastoral ministry carried out in the ecclesial community of the world.

23. Today, above all, while the Holy Spirit stimulates us to a "*new evangelisation*" in the context of the multiplicity of religions and culture, we are invited to participate in a unique dialogue between biblical revelation and the various signs that God has left of himself in existence. That is part of the task of the inculturation of the word of God, of which the Bible is, at once, the primary witness, the irreplaceable inspirational source and the guarantee of trustworthiness.

Attention to the history of the effects of Scripture, whether in the Church or in society, at the level of religious, spiritual, ethical, cultural expressions, becomes today a providential way of recognising that "*the Lord has done great things for us*" (ps. 126:3). He has done great things and continues to do them in the midst of his people, beginning with creation as far as the definitive completion of salvation.

### III. "IT SHALL NOT RETURN TO ME EMPTY"

(Is 55:11)

#### *Forms and Ways of encountering the word of God in the Bible*

#### Priority Tasks

24. It is the duty of bishops "to instruct the faithful committed to them in the correct use of the Bible, especially the books of the New Testament, and, in the first place, the Gospels [...] so that the Church's children may be securely and usefully made acquainted with the Sacred Scriptures, and may be filled with their spirit".<sup>37</sup>

We are convinced that the Spirit of the Lord is calling every community to bring about a renewed, ample and penetrating presence of the Bible in every area of pastoral ministry. Indeed, the Spirit is calling for the promoting of a direct encounter with the Sacred Book, through gradual and patient effort, but with clarity of intention and tenacity of purpose.

Such a biblical pastoral task, which, per se, addresses every Christian, certainly should stand out among us on two counts. First of all, it should be able to concern and involve the faithful of our parochial communities, particularly those who are not attached to any ecclesial association.

Moreover, it ought to be able to unite and coordinate the many initiatives of biblical experience in the area, searching that the word may be present within the Church through individuals, groups and the community, in its manifold grace: factors of growth and unity in the faith, original energy in spiritual life and a strong thrust of missionary witness.

#### Forms of Encountering the Bible in the Pastoral Action of the Church

##### a) In Liturgical Celebration

25. The contact that many Christians have with Scripture today still comes

about, above all, if not exclusively, through the liturgy, particularly in the readings offered in Sunday Eucharistic celebrations. In truth, the liturgy is not alive without the word of God and the liturgical context constitutes the proper situation for hearing the Word, which should be always a profiting of grace through the gift which is received.

Therefore, it should be always at the heart of our ecclesial communities that the proclamation of the Bible in the liturgy be made with due dignity and that every means be taken to ensure that the people of God understand it.

Above all, it will be the task of pastors to help them to understand the indissoluble link between the two sorts of signs of the word of God: how the Bible announces what is fulfilled in the celebration, and how the liturgy carries out what the Bible announces, setting the proclamation within the faith and within the life of the believers united around Christ in praise of the Father. The Eucharistic celebration, the liturgical year, the sacraments of initiation are abundant channels which bring about familiarity with the Bible.

26. The most incisive biblical way offered by the liturgy is the "liturgy of the Word", particularly that which is celebrated in the Mass. The Word proclaimed in the celebration does not have a purely didactic function in comparison with the sacrament, as though simply an explanation of its significance.

It is not a preparation for the sacramental moment in the strict sense of the word. The proclamation of the Word is a constitutive element of the celebration and this makes the various actions joined only lightly at the end to the celebration, especially to the Eucharistic celebration incoherent.

"In the readings, explained by the homily, God speaks to his people of redemption and salvation and nourishes their spirit; Christ is present among the faithful through his word"<sup>38</sup>. That implies great concern for the proclamation of the readings and also for their interpretation. All this takes into

account the formation of the presidents of the assembly, of the readers and of their other collaborators. So the new lectionaries can be exploited in all their potentiality, which, enriched by the reform of the liturgy, allows for the working out of a way which covers the whole development of the history of salvation.

In this context we put on record that the liturgy of the Word is also a model for reading the Bible: all the forms of a believing approach to the Bible should reflect the various aspects of the liturgy of the Word.

The homily, which follows the biblical readings, develops a fundamental task. The risks of distorting this primary service of the Word are all noted: neglect or marginalisation of the sacred text; exploiting the sense, moralistic interpretation, abstractness and irrelevance for the life of the faithful, lack of concern for the context of the celebration itself ... one can sense the great responsibility that falls on the homily.

It must preserve for the biblical message its character of "glad tidings" of the salvation that God offers to humanity. "Preaching will perform a task and more conformed to the Bible if it helps the faithful above all to 'know the gift of God' (John 4:10) as it has been revealed in Scripture; they will then understand in a positive light the obligations that flow from it"<sup>39</sup>.

That involves, in reality, adequate time for preparation, perhaps with contribution from other members from the community, and, above all, the clear recognition of the centrality of the gospel passage, in the light of which the other readings are understood, and the explicit investigation of a vital link between the Word, the sacramental celebration and the historical experience of the believing community.

##### b) By Way of Initiation

27. The great tradition of the Church often speaks of initiation in the sacraments and carries it out in various



ways. From initiation in the faith comes also initiation in the word of God. The Christian ought to be capable of reading and understanding the word of Sacred Scripture. Here one of the aims of the catechetical approach is to "initiate a person in the correct understanding and fruitful reading of the Bible. This will bring about the discovery of the divine truth it contains and evoke as generous a response as possible to the message God addresses through his word to the whole human race"<sup>40</sup>.

As regards this aim it is all the more opportune that there be established ways of deepening the biblical component abundantly present in the various volumes of the *Catechism of the Italian Episcopal Conference for Christian Life*, which draw up courses for infants, young children, youngsters, young people and adults.

It promotes, besides, in the light of a beneficent pedagogico-religious tradition that has characterised the catechesis of our country, the publication of manuals of "sacred history" adapted to various ages, which introduce in an organic and progressive way a deeper understanding of both the Old and New Testaments.

### c) Catechesis

**28.** It is recalled, moreover, that "the ministry of the word, which includes pastoral preaching, catechetical teaching, and all types of Christian instruction [...] is advantageously sustained and spiritually fortified by the words of Scripture"<sup>41</sup>.

Catechesis is certainly one of the most eminent ways of contact with the Bible. We have just noted the great biblical richness of the catechisms of our Episcopal Conference, inserted into a valid way of teaching, by means of the harmonious interlacing of various data: scriptural, dogmatic, ecclesiastical-historical, sacramental, ethical, anthropological.

Since catechesis is the main way of progress of so many Christians, children, young people and adults, it has become necessary to know how to

put this biblical component to good use, without setting it against the theological data nor adapting the significance of the biblical text. In truth, catechisms express the Bible within the broader context of the faith of the Church.

In fact they link it with three vital experiences of the word of God: doctrine, that is, reflection on the faith of the Church; the sacraments, that is, the celebration of the faith of the Church; charity, that is, the life of faith of the Church.

To encounter the Bible in catechisms one needs to respect this contextuality, certainly extracting from the text in biblical way, but not to make it live only for itself, but rather to find in it the very soul of catechesis, which is precisely the Bible, and to draw around it, in great harmony, all three ecclesial experiences of the Word.

### d) The Teaching of Religion in School

**29.** A precious channel which permits learning the alphabet of biblical consciousness is the teaching of the catholic religion in school. This, as already noted, considers the Bible to be the primary and principal reference document.

With respect to catechesis, it has, as its own objective the realisation of a cultural alphabetization as regards the Bible, always more intense and well programmed.

More specifically, it aims to make known the historical, literary and theological identity of the Sacred Book, its contribution to understanding the Hebrew religion and the Christian one, its place in the reflection and life of the Church, its ecumenical value, the prestigious history of its many religious, civil and artistic effects in Italy and Europe, its contribution to interreligious and intercultural dialogue in the scholastic and current social context.

To teachers of the Catholic religion is entrusted the task of drawing up a

programme which is capable of meeting the objective presentation of the Sacred Text which is more lively for their students, so that all can pursue the effects of a Word that is capable of illuminating and orientating existence.

### e) Using the Various Opportunities to Advantage

**30.** Every community ought to be enabled to listen to and read the Bible fruitfully, and put to good use the various and diverse offerings that are introduced in pastoral ministry: the festive and ferial lectionary, the divine office, the celebration of the sacraments, *The Catechism of the Italian Episcopal Conference for Christian Life*, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the teaching of Catholic religion in schools. On the whole there is considerable room which, in fact, gives to many of the faithful a unique possibility for approaching Sacred Scripture.

Each one of these ways has its own requirements, which demands specific knowledge of and penetration of the sacred text and, at the same time, seeks to maintain a vital contact with other expressions and languages of faith with which the Church encounters the Bible.

## Ways and Means of direct Encounter with the Bible

### a) *Lectio Divina*

**31.** It remains true, however, that the above ways can be fully realised only if each individual member of the faithful listens to the word of God through direct contact with Sacred Scripture sought for itself.

There comes to mind immediately that privileged experience among all the others which is *lectio divina*, called by other names, too, according to the situation. Present in the tradition of the Church from ancient times, it is a spiritual experience which is theologically solid and sure, pedagogically accessible to all and very efficacious for the maturing of faith.

In substance, "*lectio divina* is a reading, on an individual or communal level, of a more or less lengthy passage of Scripture, received as the Word of God and leading at the prompting of the Spirit, to meditation, prayer and contemplation [...] The end in view is to create and nourish 'an efficacious and constant love' of Sacred Scripture, source of interior life and apostolic fruitfulness, also to promote a better understanding of the liturgy and to assure the Bible a more important place in theological studies and prayer"<sup>42</sup>.

Practised originally in the monastic environment, today *lectio divina*, following the invitation of Vatican II<sup>43</sup>, is becoming more open to all the faithful in Christ and constitutes a true grace available to every Christian. It is time, therefore, that appropriate forms of *lectio divina* are planned and put into practice for young people and adults in every community of believers.

To this end an enlightened formation of the faithful is indispensable, carried out with wisdom, patience and perseverance, overcoming the temptation to being fashionable and encouraging, and instead, through *lectio divina*, searching for a deeper experience of God and a greater awareness of his plan of salvation.

Practice of *lectio divina*, then, may be introduced and continually sustained by a reflection that presence motivates, that explains its identity well in its objectives and methods, that clarifies its difficulties, overcomes resistance, demonstrates its root in the tradition of the Church, shows resources which originate from a communion that is properly ecclesial, underlines a strong evangelical change, which is ordered to witnessing to charity: all gifts and tasks which the Holy Spirit lavishes upon those who genuinely arrive at an encounter with the word of God.

### **b) The Diffusion of the Bible**

**32.** Alongside the task of promoting the practice of *lectio divina*, there are other ways of making the Bible more present in the life of the Christian

people. It belongs to the biblical apostolate to recognise and to promote these. To this end, it is useful to keep in mind the various initiatives of which the Catholic Biblical Federation is an authoritative spokesman, and to participate in projects that elaborate on them, particularly in what concerns the Bible and the "*new evangelization*"<sup>44</sup>.

In particular, we consider as pastorally necessary for our people the distribution of the biblical text itself, in well prepared editions, both exegetically and from a pastoral point of view, the setting up of Bible groups, establishing Bible weeks, the publication of aids, and, of course, the vital importance of basic biblical formation.

It is not difficult to put this latter into effect at the local, interparochial and diocesan level, all the more so because such formation is greatly desired and is carried out by experts and by educational means. Such formative intention is still more urgent for helping the faithful to understand the Christian reading of the Bible compared with the abuses of some of the religious sects.

To achieve such objectives, the Catholic Church in Italy is collaborating willingly with other Churches and ecclesial communities in bringing out translations, publishing common editions, and promoting the distribution and knowledge of the Biblical text<sup>45</sup>.

### **c) The Bible in the Family**

**33.** A place in which direct contact with Sacred Scripture ought to be promoted today is the family. This stems from a double reason: the family is the first and vital nucleus for Christian existence and also the primary sphere of religious education for children.

Corresponding to this is the fact that the Bible itself, the history of the family of God among the families of humankind, is so very rich in pedagogical and didactic resources suited to the family environment: the narrative style, the primary and elementary religious symbolism, the concreteness

of facts and the clarity of teachings, the continual revelation of the love of God for his children, etc.

The presence of the Bible in the family is required first of all to enable the parents to get to know the Bible, to recount it as sacred history, to use to advantage the signs and symbols, to pray the Psalms, to recall the principal salvific events, and, above all, to familiarise themselves profoundly with the character of Jesus in the Gospels. We recommend that families prepare for the Sunday Eucharistic celebration by reading together, one day during the week, the biblical texts of the Word proposed by the liturgy for the following Sunday.

An excellent aid for encountering the Bible in the family is to be found in the children's Catechism, *Let the little Children come to me*, and in the manual of the Italian Episcopal Conference, *The Family at Prayer*.

### **d) The Ecumenical Movement**

**34.** The encounter with the Bible has a decisive importance in ecumenical dialogue. The Bible, being the common basis of the rule of faith, is the point of contact between Churches and ecclesial communities.

It "*summons all Christians to a re-reading of the inspired text, in docility to the Holy Spirit, in charity, sincerity and humility; it calls upon all to meditate on these texts and to live them in such a way as to achieve conversion of heart and sanctity of life. These two qualities, when united with prayer for the unity of Christians, constitute the soul of the entire ecumenical movement*"<sup>46</sup>.

It is recommended that "*members of the Churches and ecclesial communities read the word of God and, if possible, do this together*"<sup>47</sup>. Ecumenical collaboration in promoting knowledge of the Sacred text and praying with it, besides reinforcing the bond of unity that already exists, constitutes "*an important form of common service and common witness in the Church and for the world*"<sup>48</sup>.



### e) *The Bible and Culture*

**35.** By virtue of the close bond that exists between faith and culture, it is widely recognised today that the Bible is the matrix of so many aspects of western culture, and that of Italy in particular. It is also considered by many non-believers as a great “code” of thought, ethics, art, customs, religious and civil institutions.

Plumbing the depths of such fruitful richness in the history of the written word of God, contributes to penetrating still more the mystery of the Word and does much to promote intercultural dialogue and the safeguarding of universal spiritual and human values. Ways of bringing into effect such a task are, among others, religious teaching in school, dialogue with groups and movements which are dedicated to the study of Scripture, research at university level.

### Formation of Agents

**36.** Such lofty pastoral undertakings require a specific duty on the part of biblical agents or animators and specific attention to their formation. This is a task of particular importance, in that it requires theological competence and a capacity for effective communication. The Council admonishes: “Hence it is necessary that all clerics, more especially priests and those who, as deacons and catechists, are lawfully engaged in the ministry of God’s word, should remain in close contact with the Scriptures by means of reading and accurate study of the text”<sup>49</sup>.

At the end of one’s years in the seminary, pastoral formation concerning the use of the sacred book will not cease, but will continue being brought up to date throughout the exercise of priestly ministry. Equally it will be necessary in the formation of deacons. It should be of value also in the basic formation of readers, catechists, liturgical animators and charity workers, providing the specific preparation of lay people for animating biblical groups among the adult faithful and in the service of families.

Part of the formation and of the spiritual and ecclesial life of agents and ministers of the Word is a regular and organised widening of their knowledge of the written word of God.

**37.** We are conscious that to encounter or, better, to let oneself be encountered by the word of God, is a demand that requires a pure heart and complete availability for following its ways.

In such a situation is invested the indispensable apostolic commitment of the dedicated; as the Councils says: “Catholic exegetes and others dedicated to theological studies should, by zealous collaboration, devote their energies so that under the watchful eye of the sacred magisterium, and making use of all apt subsidiary studies, they may investigate and interpret the sacred books. This would provide that as many as possible of the ministers of the divine word may effectively offer the people of God the sustaining gift of holy Scripture, which may enlighten the mind, strengthen the will, and enkindle the hearts of men and women with the love of God”<sup>50</sup>

Within the perspective of such eminent service we address ourselves to the many Italian biblicists. We recognise that they are already giving precious help and they are able to give still more to the biblical renewal of our communities in accordance with the aims of this Note.

### Aids and Tools

**38.** Along with the preparation of people there is also needed the drawing up of suitable tools and aids for an effective encounter with the Bible. The starting point is the Sacred text itself, expressed in a good translation<sup>51</sup>. Then there are other useful aids: biblical itineraries for various ages and occasions; guides for a programmed reading of the Bible, perhaps with reference to the liturgical lectionary; collections of biblical passages chosen for school and the catechesis of children; biblical commentaries on the liturgy of the Word; tools for groups or Bible circles; readily

available popular reviews and periodicals for understanding the Bible and its message.

In general good sense will be maintained in accompanying every initiative with suitable tools and, at the same time, of stimulating the agent to be able to place at the service of the Word his or her creativity in adherence to concrete situations.

**39.** The press, radio and television, the modern mass media, can become precious instruments for spreading the announcement of the word of God and knowledge of the Bible.

However, it is a question of means which respond to precise rules in their utilisation, which come to be known through specific preparation, so as not to obtain undesired results. In particular, one must avoid allowing oneself to be trapped in mechanisms of research of a spectacularity which sacrifices the message for mere general approval. All this obliges one to reject improvisations and to offer results that are accurate and respectful to the nature of the sacred text.

**40.** We recognise that in Italy the biblical pastoral sector is rich with initiative and quality. However, there remain certain gaps to be filled, especially as regards didactic communication, and, above all, there appears to be necessary the production of tools more aimed at and harmonious with the pastoral objectives set out in this Note.

Among the many possibilities stressed, it is worth recalling both at the level of the formation of animators, and in the production of teaching material, the invitation to promote fidelity to the word of God according to the faith of the Church and with reference to the subject which the Word addresses. Authentic biblical pastoral ministry is that which generates ecclesial communion, stimulates the sense of service and charity, induces exegetical and communicative competence, urges “one to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine

*Scriptures*"; this latter "should be accompanied by prayer, so that it becomes a dialogue between God and the human reader"<sup>52</sup>.

With regard to this the same Council quotes the charming expression of Saint Ambrose: "We speak to him when we pray and we listen to him when we read the divine oracles"<sup>53</sup>.

## A Basic Structure

41. The numerous and lofty objectives proposed here require today much more than cordial assent and good will. A programmed service within a permanent structure is indispensable. At the national level the "Biblical Apostolate" sector has developed within the National Catechetical Office.

Its scope is to promote, in collaboration with the Italian Biblical Association, biblical-pastoral initiatives at the national level, and to stimulate and assist analogous diocesan and regional structures that might operate for the service of particular Churches in dialogue with various pastoral offices and organisms: catechetical, liturgical, missionary, charitable, communication, cultural, etc.

Moreover, the national and local Biblical Apostolate sector will take account of the contribution that can be offered in this area by those associations and ecclesial movements which employ to advantage Bible reading in an ecclesial faith and witness task perspective.

Within this horizon, there is the opportune possibility of dialogue and collaboration with other Christians, and also with many other believers and non-believers, in a cultural way, that will promote knowledge and love of the Bible.

## CONCLUSION

42. "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Lk 2:19). Perfect image of the Church, Mary is also this through the way in which she encounters the word of God: she listens to it attentively, and meditates upon it with intense discern-

ment, giving herself to it without reserve: "Let what you have said be done to me" (Lk 1:38).

In her, listening becomes a celebration of the Word<sup>54</sup>, a concrete act of charity<sup>55</sup> and attentive presence<sup>56</sup>, courageous fidelity in time of trial<sup>57</sup>, communion in prayer and hope with the missionary Church<sup>58</sup>.

Mary, mother and disciple of the Lord, be for us all the model of how to give hospitality, love and fidelity to the word of God.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf Lk 24:31-32

<sup>2</sup> Cf Lk 24:33-34

<sup>3</sup> Cf Heb 1:1-2

<sup>4</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Const. dogm. *Dei Verbum*, 12

<sup>5</sup> HUGO OF SAINT OF VICTOR, *Noah's Ark*, II, 8

<sup>6</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Const. dogm. *Dei Verbum*, 16

<sup>7</sup> Cf *ibid*, 21

<sup>8</sup> Cf JOHN PAUL II, *Discourse on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 23 April 1993, n.15

<sup>9</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Const. dogm. *Dei Verbum*, 25

<sup>10</sup> ST JEROME, *Commentary on Isaiah*, Prologue

<sup>11</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Const. dogm. *Dei Verbum*, 24

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*. 13

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*. 21

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*. 22

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*. 1

<sup>16</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Decr. *Unitatis redintegratio*, 21

<sup>17</sup> Cf PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, I, F

<sup>18</sup> Cf 2 Cor. 5:14

<sup>19</sup> St Augustine, *Commentary on the Psalms*, LXIV, 2-3

<sup>20</sup> Cf *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 51-133

<sup>21</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Const. Dogm. *Dei Verbum*, 21

<sup>22</sup> ST GREGORY THE GREAT, *Collected Letters*, V, 46

<sup>23</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Const. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7

<sup>24</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Const. Dogm. *Dei Verbum*, 12

<sup>25</sup> ST GREGORY THE GREAT, *Homilies on Ezekiel*, 1, 7, 8

<sup>26</sup> RUPERT OF DEUTZ, *Commentary on Isaiah*, II, 31

<sup>27</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Const. Dogm. *Dei Verbum*, 21

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*. 5

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*. 10

<sup>30</sup> ST GREGORY THE GREAT, *Homilies on Ezekiel*, II, 2, 1

<sup>31</sup> Cf *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 109-114

<sup>32</sup> Cf Heb. 1:1-4

<sup>33</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Const. Dogm. *Dei Verbum*, 15

<sup>34</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Decr. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 5

<sup>35</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Const. Dogm. *Dei Verbum*, 21

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>37</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Const. Dogm. *Dei Verbum*, 25

<sup>38</sup> *Roman Missal*, General Instruction, 33

<sup>39</sup> PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, IV,C,3

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Const. Dogm. *Dei Verbum*, 24

<sup>42</sup> PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, IV,C,2

<sup>43</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Dogm. Const. *Dei Verbum*, 25

<sup>44</sup> Cf CATHOLIC BIBLICAL FEDERATION, *The Bible and the New Evangelization. Final Statement of the IV Plenary Assembly*, Bogotá 1990

<sup>45</sup> Cf PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PROMOTION OF CHRISTIAN UNITY, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, 183

<sup>46</sup> PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, IV,C,4

<sup>47</sup> Cf PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PROMOTION OF CHRISTIAN UNITY, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, 183

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>49</sup> Cf VATICAN II, Dogm. Const. *Dei Verbum*, 25

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*. 23

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*. 22

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*. 25

<sup>53</sup> SAINT AMBROSE, *The Duties of Sacred Ministers*, I, 20, 88

<sup>54</sup> Cf Lk 1:46-55

<sup>55</sup> Cf Jn 2:3-5

<sup>56</sup> Cf Mk 3:31-34

<sup>57</sup> Cf Jn 19:26-27

<sup>58</sup> Cf Acts 1:14



# For Reflection

## Hong Kong Follow-Up:

### Integrative Language and Its Use in Bible Translations

*A correct translation into contemporary language must use - at least in western Europe - a moderate measure of integrative language. However, awkward word creations should be avoided and great care should be taken that the biblical text is not manipulated (Hong Kong Final Statement 8.1.8).*

In 1920, when the Skeleton in Hoffmannsthal's "Everyman" first clattered across the cathedral square in Salzburg, the situation was still quite clear.<sup>1</sup>

"Everyman": the listeners recognized the echo of a legal text, in which each paragraph typically began with "Everyman ..." Women understood that they were included in the intention.

In the meantime, however, the way language is perceived has - at least in parts - changed.

If Hoffmannsthal wanted to write the same play today, he would find it more difficult. He would have to choose between "Whoever ...", the typical beginning of a legal text today, and "Everyman and Everywoman". Neither of these would be appropriate for good drama.

Writing was indeed easier for Hoffmannsthal. When he wrote his play in 1911, no one could have foreseen that on December 10, 1948, the General Declaration of Human Rights would state the equality of men and women in Art 2 Z1, that on December 19, 1966 the UN Human Rights Pact would declare the same in Art 3, and that there would be an increasing emphasis in the 1970's on claiming the equality of men and women not only with regards to enfranchisement and economy, but even with regards to wording.

In other words, no one could have foreseen that the female majority<sup>2</sup> that populates this planet would begin to demand being explicitly named and no longer merely "included in the intention".

This demand is certainly justified as it expresses the wish for a language that explicitly names women as well as men - the desire for an inclusive language or - as it is frequently designated now - for an integrative language.

Year after year, "Everyman" comes to a completely unexpected conclusion before the Salzburg Cathedral; in legal texts, the curtain fell quickly on "Everyman" in the 1980's. He was replaced by gender-neutral wordings such as "whoever".

In different central European countries this issue is handled with a varying degree of urgency; in many cases, Switzerland has frequently taken the role of a forerunner. In addition, the problems are not always the same in all languages.

In Hungarian, for example, grammatical distinctions between women and men only rarely occur, so that many of the problems addressed by integrative language do not even arise.

Although the use of integrative language has largely been implemented

on an official level in at least several countries, in the private sphere it still mostly only concerns various special groups: in my experience (which is certainly not based on a sociological study), integrative language is used primarily in groups of people who have learned a certain sensitivity for it and in academic circles.

In these circles, integrative language is used more by liberal arts scholars, theologians and women from technical fields.

In comparison, many people - male and female - from the field of jurisprudence and from the world of business, as well as men from technical fields tend to belittle its use.

In my opinion, for a translation of the Bible there is a fundamental question that must be asked:

- If it is intended **to simply translate the Bible into modern language**, then it must be oriented to current language usage.

In German, for example, this would mean using a moderated integrative language such as that used in "Guten Nachricht 1997" ("Good News 1997"). In this case, however, I find that the last editorial phase sometimes reflects a bit too much caution.

I believe that we must also take into consideration that a Bible translation that was correct thirty years ago may be incorrect today, because language usage has changed.

Although the principle of "being included in the intention" was still widely accepted at the time, now there are many women who no longer feel they are being addressed in traditional linguistic forms. A translation must also take this into consideration.

As Luther once said: You have to use the language of the people in the streets.

- The situation is different, if a translation is intended **to influence lan-**

**guage.** From a historical perspective, this does not appear impossible. The German Luther Bible played an essential role in forming the common German language, for example.

However, it is more than doubtful that a translation today could achieve this significance. Language now is far more heavily influenced by the media than by Bible passages.

Thus a translation that is intended to strictly adhere to the aims of integrative language is in danger of becoming the Bible of a certain social group, rather than a generally accepted text.

- The situation is entirely different, of course, if the Bible is not regarded as inspired writing. Then one could follow the example of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's wishes and reject or alter individual sections. This would be an open invitation to arbitrary changes.

Then it is no longer a question of translation, but rather of a new creation. Where women have become "invisible" in language, a translation can make them visible again. However, it is inadmissible - as I would consider self-evident - to interpolate the text.

The basic principles that apply to the public sector - the requirement that advertisements for open positions must be formulated so that they are gender-neutral, for example - cannot simply be adopted for the Bible. There are two reasons in particular for this:

1. The Bible was written in an androcentric environment
2. It is a literary text

### 1. The Bible was written in an androcentric environment.

The translation must be in accordance with this fact, if the text is not to be manipulated.

The most sensitive issue, however, is the question of where to draw the line. Should the text read "Our Mother and our Father in heaven", or is that a manipulation? In my opinion, it is a

manipulation, since it does not express the original wording.

On the other hand, there are good arguments for translating the Greek word *αδελφοι* in many epistles with "sisters and brothers".

The author certainly intended to address the entire community. Extensive studies have already been published on these and similar questions.

The deciding question is where to draw the line. The basic demand put forth by the proponents of integrative language is roughly this: where women are mentioned in the Bible, they should also be specifically named as women.

This is a demand that many people can accept. Indeed it is a logical component of a serious translation that the persons mentioned in the original language should also be mentioned in the translation.

Accordingly, the Bible Federation and its members agreed to obligate themselves to the use of integrative language with an overwhelming majority.

However, it is not entirely clear whether all those who agreed to this principle understand it in the same way.

### 2. The Bible is a Literary Text

Many translations aim to make the biblical text understandable for a general public. Many constructions, particularly those which use slash marks (e. g. his/her, man/woman), obstruct this aim and appear to be unsuitable for literary texts such as the Bible.

It seems to me, therefore, that those forms which use neutral formulations should be given preference (e. g. fire fighters, rather than firemen/women); forms that include both genders without a slash (e. g. men and women of science) also seem appropriate.

The important point is that the intention of the Bible passage is retained as the focal point and is not distorted by difficult linguistic constructions.

However, another point that must be taken into consideration is that **many existing translations do not correctly convey the original text's** view of women.

In German translations, an almost classical example of this is Phoebe in Rom. 16,1, who is the *διακονον* of the community in Greek, whereas in German, she usually just "serves" the community, even though men who are designated with the same word in Greek are deacons in German.

In any case, what is important for our topic is that women have frequently "disappeared" in translations. There are particularly detailed studies of this in the old "Gute Nachricht" (Good News-Bible) available.<sup>3</sup>

It is certainly a positive step that this problem is being corrected in more recent translations, that women are "reappearing".

On the whole, the issue of using integrative language in biblical translations is entirely justified. The use of integrative language is especially advantageous when it helps to ensure that the Bible is more correctly translated.

It is also necessary to use integrative language to accommodate changes in modern language usage. This just cause, however, is not furthered by exaggeration.

Hannes Schreiber

<sup>1</sup>"Everyman", a medieval mystery play: A rich man is suddenly confronted by Death. He loses his friends and his wealth, only faith and acts of charity accompany him as he comes before God for judgement. Hoffmannsthal's version of this familiar tale is a regular feature of the Salzburg Festival in Austria.

<sup>2</sup>The majority of the world population is female. This is due to the longer life expectancy of women, and there are genetic reasons for it as well.

<sup>3</sup>cf. Meurer, S., *Die vergessenen Schwestern: Frauengerechte Sprache in der Bibelübersetzung, Bibel im Gespräch 1*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993



# LIFE OF THE FEDERATION

## Experiences

### An experience of Biblical Apostolate in a remote corner of the Zaïrean rain forest

*Fr. Frans Kwik, mhm, relates us his experience of preparing new biblical materials for an entire diocese, adapted to and inculturated in the Lingala language and the concrete life experiences in Basankusu (Zaire).*

In 1992 Bishop Ignace Matondo kwa Nzambi asked me to blow new life into the Biblical Apostolate in the diocese of Basankusu/Zaire by composing a Bible Course in the vernacular (Lingala).

The course, he indicated, should be simple and practical, it should be geared to the needs and interests of the average Christian in the diocese, exegetically well founded and should treat the most important texts of the Old and the New Testament.

For a considerable number of years I had been involved in giving Bible courses to a variety of groups - catechists, leaders of Small Christian Communities and other committed Christians - in the parish of Basankusu.

To compose a basic course for the whole diocese adapted to the local culture and ways of thinking was a challenge I was eager to accept!

At a national level in Zaïre there exist a number of Bible courses in Lingala. Some systematically follow the canonical order of the books of the Bible and provide comments on the main themes.

They provide little incentive for the participants to 'take and read' the texts themselves in the light of their own life experiences and thus develop a love for the Word of Life.

I accepted the challenge and immediately got to work with a 'trial group' of 24 men and women who had previously passed a literacy test. Experience had shown that with such a group as a testing ground the accessibility of the course to the average Christian in the diocese would be measured and greatly enhanced.

#### The course

As point of departure and basic framework I decided to take a well known text written by Etienne Charpentier: "Une première Approche à la Bible", in Cahiers Evangile No 35.

However, it was clear from the start that a simple transposition into Lingala of this study would not answer the needs of the prospective participants in the diocese. The original French text would clearly be beyond the scope of the average Christian.

Moreover the examples and illustrations given by Charpentier were drawn

from a European context. The text had to be thoroughly adapted to the African reader.

Safeguarding the headings of the original text I divided each chapter into three parts, each part comprising the following elements:

- the historical background
- the context in which the text is written
- the reading of the text
- the study of the text
- the application of the text to the community and the individual

This resulted in a series of 32 meetings of 2 hours each for the Old Testament and a similar number for the New Testament.

The search for an inculturated approach led to the introduction of important changes in the original text as presented in "Une première Approche". Most important among these are:

- the examples are taken from African life situations
- space is left in the participant's textbook itself to write in the answers to the various questions.
- at the end of each section or meeting the participants are given some homework.

Homework usually consisted of the study of another text similar to the one(s) studied at the meeting. This was designed to help the participants to get into the habit of reading the Bible at home and become more familiar with its content.

#### Teething problems

It all sounded beautiful in theory but in practice few got around to doing their homework for a variety of reasons such as an apparent lack of time.

Scraping together a living in present day Zaïre leaves most people little time for anything else! Some simply forgot all about it.

After some experimentation we came up with a strategy to overcome this obstacle: participants were advised

to choose a partner with whom to study and do the homework together on a particular day and at a mutually agreed time. This proved much more affective and we managed to study about 50 texts of the Old and the New Testament.

Again many people are keen to join the Bible Study Groups to "fight the sects" which are mushrooming everywhere in Zaïre.

We make it clear again and again that the purpose of Bible Study Groups is primarily a fuller understanding of the Word of God, to build up community and foster personal spiritual growth.

### Publishing the material

Before editing the final text we (I soon acquired the assistance of a qualified lay animator) went through the material in two different groups. The language (Lingala) was scrutinised and improved. The intelligibility of the questions and the degree of difficulty of the exercises were tested.

We have now published two handbooks for the diocese: one for the New Testament and one for the Old Testament. An additional tool called a "Companion for the Animator" is also available.

It provides the necessary background information and the answers to the questions for the animators who have now taken up the programme in 5 different parishes in the diocese. Their training had also begun in earnest some months previously.

### Training of animators

To make it possible for the programme to be disseminated elsewhere in the diocese there was an obvious need for 'multipliers'.

That is why a training programme for animators was set up. At regular intervals we now invite 2 or 3 people from every parish in the diocese for a six day training programme.

During that time they work through the material of 10 meetings, do the homework and study part of the 'Companion for the Animator'.

They then return to their parish and are asked to start a Bible Study Group. Those who have effectively started a group are invited back for the next instalment of 10 sessions and so on.

On completion of the course they all receive a copy of Etienne Charpentier's outstanding "How to read the Old Testament" and "How to read the New Testament". These have been found to be excellent tools for self-study.

### Gospel Sharing

Everywhere in our region we also organise workshops to initiate people into the seven steps of Gospel Sharing as developed by the Lumko Institute of South Africa.

It has become the mainstay of our Basic Christian Communities. Gospel sharing and Bible study go hand in hand and mutually enrich each other.

The quality of sharing is enhanced by the Bible study and the quality of the Bible study gains in depth through the lived experience of the Bible sharing.

## News

### Perspectives on the Biblical Pastoral Ministry

*Emmanuel Kofi Fianu, SVD from Togo-Benin. Article for Afram Contact.*

#### Forming Biblical Pastoral Facilitators

There is an ever increasing call by the church and also our Society to put more effort into the Biblical Apostolate which is a priority for us. The biblical apostolate over the years seems to take on diverse forms or ramifications. Every aspect of it seems to be of prime importance for those who are involved in it. We cannot but appreciate the amount of work being done in the various domains.

In this article I would like to reflect on the formation of biblical-pastoral facilitators or what some people call 'Bible Study Group facilitators.' This forms part of the integration of the Bible in the various aspects of our pastoral activities. One aspect of the biblical apostolate is to make the Bible available to people. This service is

important but we also need to keep in mind that the Bible is not so much a book as "the Word of God." The biblical apostolate must be of such nature that the Word of God touches the hearts and the lives of the people who receive it.

It is only when we achieve this aim that those who receive the Bible will come to see it as the living Word of God. To make the Bible meaningful to our Christian communities, we need to encourage the formation of bible study groups. This effort is already under way in a number of communities.

Present day biblical pastoral ministry lays emphasis on the reading of Scripture in the concrete context in which we find ourselves. In other words, the Scriptures should become meaningful to the Christians of today.



We cannot however overlook the danger of such a method. When there is no well formed facilitator in the group, they risk arriving at conclusions that may be far from the message of the text before them. It is true that Bible Study Groups in themselves do not need biblical resource persons but it is essential to have a well formed facilitator who will ask the right question at the right time.

I think it is becoming more and more evident that we need to train more facilitators who in turn will help our people appreciate the Bible and have at least a basic understanding of its contents. This will allow them to read it not only with ease but also with greater understanding.

It is good to apply the contents of Scripture to concrete everyday life but I think we may arrive at faulty results if we do not in the first place identify and understand the historical context, the intent of the author and the basic message of the passage that we went to apply to our particular situation.

At times when we take texts out of context we end up not taking into consideration the primary message that the author of the text wants to communicate. I am of the opinion that it is only through a critical reading of the Scriptures that we can make the right application of the text to our concrete situation of today.

The critical reading of the text demands a certain amount of formation on the part of the facilitator. We do not have to read a letter of St. Paul in the same way as we would read Gn 1-11, nor can we read the Gospels in the way as we read the Apocalypse.

If we want to have good facilitators then we cannot deny that the work of biblical-pastoral coordinators or resource personnel is more and more indispensable. It is true we can all read the Bible but just as in any field of scientific work a certain amount of expertise is indispensable if we want to arrive at the right conclusions, so also is it for the Scriptures. Ministers of the Word of God and all who desire

to make known this Word, should give time for personal formation so as to acquire the necessary tools for their work.

We emphasise the role of the laity in our mission. The training of biblical group facilitators will be a concrete way to manifest our collaboration with the laity. Our biblical formation programmes should be of the type that aim at forming laity who could form others. We cannot overextend ourselves but in collaboration with the laity we can reach more people and make the Word of God alive in the various communities.

The formation of the laity for the biblical apostolate also needs to take on a zonal outlook. This is one area where our desire for zonal cooperation can become a reality.

With the limited number of biblical resource personnel that we have in our zone we need to coordinate our activities if we want to make good use of our resources.

In more concrete terms it should be possible to exchange programmes, experiences and personnel between the various provinces and regions of the zone.

## Materials

### African Story-telling and Biblical Narratives

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Listen to a story of the Sukuma people in Tanzania called *The Parable of the Two Brothers*: Two brothers wanted to go to a distant country to make their fortune. They asked their father for a blessing saying: "Father, we go on our way to make our fortune. Your blessing please."

Their father agreed saying, "Go with my blessing, but on your way put marks on the trees lest you get lost." After they received the blessing the two brothers started on their safari.

The older brother entered the forest and cut down some of the trees as he passed and made marks on other trees. He did this for his whole journey. The younger brother took another route.

While on the way he arrived at the house of a certain person. He knocked

on the door. He was invited in and made friends with the children of that family. The younger brother continued on his journey and made friends wherever he passed.

Finally the two brothers returned home. On their arrival their father gave them a warm welcome saying, "How happy I am to see you back home again, my sons, especially since you have returned safely. Wonderful! Now I would like to see the marks which you have left on the trees."

So the father went with his firstborn son. On the way the older brother showed his father all kinds of trees that he had cut down and others with the marks that he had put on.

They traveled a long distance without eating on the trip. Finally they returned home empty-handed.

Then the father set out with his secondborn son. During the journey the youngson and his father were warmly received by different friends. They were treated as special guests at each place they visited. A goat was slaughtered to welcome them. They were very happy. They brought home many gifts including meat.

Then the father summoned his two sons and said: "Dear sons, I have seen the work that you have done. I will arrange a marriage for the one who has done the best."

He turned to the firstborn son and said, "My son, I think you are foolish. You cannot take care of people. I told you to put marks on the trees wherever you passed. You have cut down many trees. What is the profit of all these trees?"

Turning to the second son he said: "My son, you are clever. I am happy you have put such important marks wherever you have gone. Wherever we passed we received a very good welcome. This came from your good personal relationships with the people we visited."

Then he said: "My dear children, now it is good for me to give my reward. I will arrange a big feast for my younger son. We will slaughter a cow for him. For my younger son has made good and lasting marks wherever he passed."

From this Sukuma story comes the proverb: *To make marks on the trees*. The theme of the story and the proverb is "Good Personal Relationships in Life."

The meaning is that to build good relationships with people is a very important priority in our lives. Western people can learn a great deal from Africans on how to be present to other people and to relate to them in a lifegiving and positive way.

Africans are deeply aware of the presence and needs of other people in their lives.

To pass by a person without greetings is totally *un-African*, but is considered a normal way of relating in the Western world. In Africa everything is done to maintain good personal and communal relationships and harmony at all costs. Anger and confrontation are looked down on.

Among the Kuria people in Kenya and Tanzania the greatest sin is to strike a parent.

For a story of African origin this "African parable" has interesting parallels with *The Parable of the Prodigal Son* (Luke 15:11-32). There is a mutual illumination and enrichment when African stories and biblical stories are used together.

Both these stories have three main characters: a father and two sons. At the end of each story the younger son gets the glory and the reward. But the African story has several different twists. Both sons go on a long journey. Then the father himself accompanies them on their second trips. The younger son does not waste his life, but in fact cleverly builds up personal relationships.

The biblical story has its own twist which brings a unique depth. The theme of the African story is "Good Personal Relationships" which is central to the African worldview. The theme of the biblical story is "Forgiveness" which is central to the Christian worldview.

In fact, forgiving love is the heart of God's relationship with humankind and the heart of Jesus Christ's teaching right up to and including his death on the cross.

The biblical story illuminates the African story by a dramatic reversal. The prodigal or bad son is rewarded. The wastrel is given the feast. "But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." (Luke 15:32).

An African interpretation of *The Parable of the Prodigal Son* offers an

additional insight related to the African values of community and unity.

Due to his wild and dissolute living, the younger son is outside the unity of his extended family circle. This creates separation and incompleteness.

When the older son complains that he has not been rewarded for being faithful, he fails to understand his father's explanation that he is already part of the extended family community, that he is already on the "inside." "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (Luke 15:31).

The love and compassion of the father is so great that he wants to immediately bring his marginalized younger son back inside the family circle.

An Oromo (Ethiopia) and Kipsigis (Kenya) proverb says *No matter how skinny, the son always belongs to the father*. Here the core values of community and forgiveness come together.

An added African touch is found in the painting of this prodigal son story in the *Life of Jesus Mafa Series* from Cameroon in West Africa. Against the background of traditional Mafa huts and hills, the whole family runs out to welcome the younger son when he returns.

Both the father and the mother warmly embrace the almost naked boy. The emotion-filled mother expresses special joy and excitement.

The son is welcomed back with "prodigal" love by both of his devoted parents. The family circle is complete again.

Through African stories, proverbs and art the African Church is enriching the World Church. Africans are writing a narrative theology of inculturation and liberation out of their own experiences and lives.

This speaks forcefully to the renewed interest in story-telling in America and the popularity of writers such as Megan McKenna, John Shea and others.