

# DEIVERBUM

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BULLETIN

## **Word of God – A Blessing for all Nations**

Sixth Plenary Assembly  
of the CBF



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CONTENTS

**Inauguration**

**Message of the President**

Vincenzo Paglia 4

**Letter from the Pope**

John Paul II 6

**Introduction**

**From Jerusalem to Antioch ... An Overview**

Alexander M. Schweitzer 7

**Opening Speech**

**Abraham – A Blessing for All Nations according to the Jewish, Christian and Islamic Traditions**

Adel Théodore Khoury 9

**Main Papers**

**Scenarios of Pluralism – A Sociological Analysis**

Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike 18

**The Pluralistic Experiences of the First Christian Communities according to the Acts of the Apostles**

Pablo Richard 24

**Religious Pluralism - A Theological Consideration**

Michael L. Fitzgerald 32

**Ecclesia in ...**

**The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "A New Hope for the Lebanon" and the Biblical Apostolate**

Cyrille Salim Bustros 40

**"Ecclesia in Africa" and the Biblical Pastoral Ministry**

Cornelius Fontem Esua 43

**The Biblical Apostolate and "Ecclesia in America"**

Francisco Javier Hernández Arnedo 46

**"Ecclesia in Asia" and the Challenges for Biblical Pastoral Ministry**

Jacob Theckanath 50

**Holy Scripture in the Life of the Churches in Europe now and in the Time Ahead**

Petr Chalupa 54

The pictures in this edition show - unless indicated otherwise - participants in plenum, during workshops or services. Our thanks to Petr Chalupa, Cecilia Chui, Anton Gessler, Theo Kersten, Thomas Osborne and Ferdinand Poswick for their photo material.



 EDITORIAL

**Dear Readers,**

“At the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the CBF I was able to experience in a wonderful way how many people in the whole world are actively engaged in the biblical pastoral ministry and how much the Word of God has become bread for Christians. When I got back home I was able to have many fruitful exchanges with my colleagues and seminary students and will continue to do so in the future”. – “The lectures, the reports, the meetings at the regional level and in smaller groups, the contacts with the oriental churches – everything that went on was so very enriching and brought new inspiration for our work in the service of the Word of God. I never cease to be overwhelmed by how many people I was able to get to know and from whose experiences I was able to benefit.” – “From the meeting in Lebanon we draw new strength for our day to day service in the biblical pastoral ministry, above all here, in our multicultural surroundings. The Final Statement is outstanding and inspirational, and it contains numerous concrete helps for our work.”

These and similar words were used by participants in the Sixth Plenary Assembly to express their impressions of and experiences made during this event of such importance in the life of the Catholic Biblical Federation. The fact that many of these comments were made only several weeks after the event makes it reasonable to hope that they reflect not merely a momentary euphoria but an enthusiasm that bids fair to endure.

Many an individual had expressed the hope, silently or out loud, that this first Plenary Assembly in the new millennium with its opportunities to pause, to evaluate and to plan for the future would mark a new point of departure for the Federation. That such a dynamic new thrust seems indeed to have emerged from the Plenary Assembly I personally take as a sign that our gathering was not only the work of those in charge and of the participants. The Spirit of God does seem to have been present among us – if not in the sound of a mighty wind, at least in the murmur of a gentle breeze. In bilateral exchanges, in workshops, in many a surprising situation and farsighted decision – in short, in the little things that

make no immediate headlines, but that in the end are what go to make up the whole.

For all those who had the opportunity by their presence to help shape the Sixth Plenary Assembly and who were able to experience this Spirit for themselves, and for all of you, dear readers, who have been following the preparations – and now the results – of this meeting, the Bulletin Dei Verbum, as present double issue, and the next issue, too, should be of interest. They will inform you of the basic texts, reports and decisions of the Sixth Plenary Assembly, but they will also supply graphic impressions from the meeting. The issue you are currently reading summarizes important texts: opening speeches, the main papers, commentaries on Church documents, etc. The next issue will concern itself with the decisions and changes made at the meeting, the planning for the coming years, and above all the Final Statement of the Plenary Assembly.

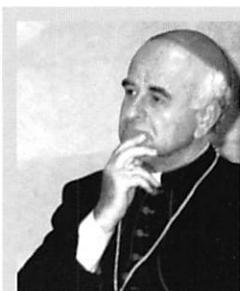
It is our hope that the letter (of the Bulletin) will not kill the spirit. And that this reading matter will enable you to sense something of the spirit of openness, of dialogue and of deep confidence in the power of the Word of God – the spirit of the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation.

Alexander M. Schweitzer



## Message of the President

Vincenzo Paglia



*Vincenzo Paglia is Bishop of Terni-Narni-Amelia, Italy, and President of the CBF since 2002*

*Beatitude, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:*

It is with a mixture of joy and fear that I extend a most respectful greeting to you all; joy, because of old friends rediscovered and new friends to be made, and at the same time fear, for the service of the presidency which I have been called to perform in the Catholic Biblical Federation which is conducting its Sixth Plenary Assembly here in Lebanon at this time. The words of Peter at the first Pentecost: "You have made known to me the ways of life" (Acts 2:28) have been chosen as the motto for these days of our Plenary.

These words sound particularly meaningful in these days, when the whole world is preparing to recall the tragic attack on the twin towers in New York. A year has passed since that event which remains dramatically emblematic of the extent to which the ways of life have collapsed in the contemporary world. That collapse has caused hopes and security to crumble as it were, changing the very history of the planet. It has been said that September 11 of 2001 marks the beginning of the third millennium. And it has begun with a great blemish. Some still maintain that the whole world is at war, even if it is a kind of war very different from those of the past. In any case, everyone is more uncertain than before, more insecure, more preoccupied, more full of anxiety regarding the dangers that tomorrow might bring. There is talk of new and terrible terrorist attacks, while, now that one war has ended, preparations are being made for another, while we continue to watch with a feeling of helplessness those other wars that are presently in course. And I am not thinking only of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The world as a

whole really does appear more insecure. And then there is hatred everywhere you look; anger in so many places; there are sinister powers; violence and terrorism are being carefully planned. And so many people there are who can exploit the pain and anger of so many.

It is urgent of course to combat and to eradicate terrorism. No one doubts this, and there is no need to treat this topic here at length. But there is a further risk to be avoided, and it is the danger of thinking only of one's own present situation and of little else. Already we had entered into the new millennium without any great dreams and without great visions of the future. The fall of the ideologies had contributed to a lowering and a reduction of life's horizons. Since September 11 the emergency of terrorism has made everyone lower their heads still further, become even more self-absorbed. It would not be inappropriate to ask ourselves the question: who today feels the drama of the most serious social, economic, cultural and political inequalities that assail the life of the entire planet? To stay with the case of Lebanon, who has any empathy any more with the problem of Lebanon, who sees it any longer as his own problem? People go on living their lives, oblivious of the tragedy of millions who continue to die of famine; the fact of the growth of inequality between the rich and the poor countries is simply accepted; with impotent realism we watch the masses of refugees who continue to abandon their countries for reasons of war and famine. And the list of tragedies in the world could be continued: from the plague of AIDS to that of the marginalization of millions of poor people in the Eastern countries, from expressions of prejudice towards gypsies to the solitude of the elderly, and so on. What can no longer continue is our indifference and that of the world. What can no longer continue is the exclusive absorption with our own interests, even if by that is meant our own ethnic or national interests.

Dear friends, to paraphrase the statement of Peter, we should be asking ourselves: who "will make known to the world the ways of life?" This is a question we cannot circumvent. The Christian communities are urgently requested to help the world find the ways of life. This enterprise goes far beyond the solution of problems of



the organizational level. It is a matter of a genuine spiritual revolution to be effected on the part of all, and with urgency. It is a spiritual revolution that should above all involve believers, whether Christian or of other religions, but also all men of good will. In his visit to Toronto for the youth rally John Paul II issued an ambitious invitation to the young people: do not fear to be the saints of the new millennium! Do not hesitate to cast the net of the Gospel out into the deep!

In a world divided and torn, in a world where forgiveness is rare and vengeance all too frequent, in a world where love is difficult and war is easy, Christians should once again take up the adventure of that sower of the gospel parable. It is necessary to emerge from our enclosures, it is urgent to come out from the closed quarters of our churches to accompany men and women on life's journey and to scatter more broadly the seed of the Word of God. What is needed is a new generosity and a new boldness in the mission of the Gospel. Only thus can we Christians help the world of today to know the ways of life and not those of death, the ways of love and not those of hatred, the ways of brotherhood and not those of war.

It is no mere accident that this Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation is taking place near Beirut, in Lebanon. It is also providential that we find ourselves here in this land that was privileged to hear the very preaching of Jesus. Not far from where we are, in Antioch of Syria, the disciples were for the first time called "Christians". It is from this "Orient" that the faith reached the West and the entire world. To return here, at the beginning of the new millennium, means not only to venerate this place and to express our warm friendship and our solidarity as neighbors to the Christian churches of Lebanon, as well as to the whole Lebanese people. Yes, dear Lebanese friends, we will not forget you! But for us returning here means also to find a new stimulus and a new boldness for communicating the Gospel to the new millennium. The exhortation of Jesus to Peter, "Duc in altum!", which John Paul II addressed to the whole Church, should be taken as addressed to us as well. The Catholic Biblical Federation should take them too as addressed to itself. What this invitation might mean for our Federation we will discover together in these days of work in plenary assembly.

What is absolutely certain is that in examining the perspectives and the contribution which the Catholic Biblical Federation can offer at the beginning of the third millennium we must keep in mind the horizon of the contemporary world. To borrow an old statement of Karl Barth, we too should live these days with a Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other; the point being that we

should be listening to the Scriptures in the context of the world of today with all its hopes and with all its anxieties. That is, we should be helping believers to listen to the Scriptures not with themselves, nor with their group and its questions, even their ecclesial questions in view, but in full view of the whole world which is presently experiencing a most difficult entrance into the millennium. In the present historical context Sacred Scripture can rightly be understood as the great educative book of all humanity. In fact, not only can the reading of the Bible help our communities to grow in faith and in love, but it can and should offer to the whole world those words of universal brotherhood and human wisdom of which it is so very much in need. This is a great challenge that we cannot fail to accept.

This is why this assembly of Beirut has its own extraordinary character: it requires us all to be more daring, to make every effort to insure that the sons and daughters of all the Christian churches acquire a greater familiarity with Holy Scripture. It is in fact this new familiarity that can nurture that spiritual revolution that will set peoples' hearts on fire, as happened to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. Listening to that stranger who accompanied them on the way they could feel the fire burning in their breasts. Dear friends, if we ask ourselves how many Christians feel that warmth in their own hearts, even just during a Sunday mass, we know only too well that the answer would not be very encouraging. And if it is true that Vatican II bore excellent fruits in the biblical field, we are all nevertheless aware of how far we still have to go.

The Catholic Biblical Federation, which is firmly rooted in the work of the Council, must extend its fruits still further. Cardinal Bea, who was among the promoters of the Dei Verbum, once had this to say regarding chapter VI of this Constitution: "I have the distinct impression that the first five chapters will be much discussed, but chapter VI will be neglected." The Catholic Biblical Federation has been doing good work and it can be said that partly through its efforts chapter VI of the Dei Verbum has not in fact been neglected; indeed, a love for the Scriptures has grown considerably in our Christian communities. But I believe that the Federation is called at this time, which has had a sad beginning, like that of the journey of the two disciples to Emmaus, to do everything in its power – I mean, with a creativity that only love can supply – to insure that the Scriptures speak anew to believers and non-believers alike, that they accompany men and women wherever they are in life, with the confidence that all who hear them will feel their hearts set on fire. And from this new millennium the very prayer of Peter will rise up to God: "You have made known, o Lord, the ways of life." ■



INAUGURA-  
TION

## Letter from the Pope John Paul II

*To the Most Reverend Vincenzo Paglia  
Bishop of Terni-Narni-Amelia  
President of the Catholic Biblical Federation*

*On the occasion of the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation taking place in Beirut on 3 - 12 September 2002, the theme of which is "You show me the ways of life" (Ps 16:11; cf. Acts 2:28), I extend warm greetings to the Delegates and Participants and assure them of my closeness in prayer during these days of work and reflection.*

*From East and West, from North and South you have gathered together to share your experiences and renew your commitment to the Biblical Apostolate under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in the conviction that the Word of God, the true source of life, is a blessing for all the nations. The very venue of your meeting is particularly significant: Lebanon is one of the lands of the Bible from which the Word, the fulfilment of the promise of blessing for all peoples, set out on its journey throughout a diversified and pluralistic world.*

*Trusting in the force and power of the Word of God, the Catholic Biblical Federation is given the great responsibility – one belonging to the whole Church – of making the Divine Word accessible to people in all parts of the world so that it can take root and thrive in their hearts. Indeed, "the Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord ... She has always regarded, and continues to regard the Scriptures, taken together with Sacred Tradition, as the supreme rule of her faith" (Dei Verbum, 21).*

*Your commitment to bringing about a renewed listening to the Word of God, which is a necessary element of the new evangelization, also reinforces the bonds of unity that already exist among all Christians. In the ecumenical dialogue itself the sacred Word is "a precious instrument in the mighty hand of God for attaining to that unity which the Saviour holds out to all human beings" (Unitatis Redintegratio, 21).*

*It is my prayer that the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation will provide you with a fruitful opportunity to evaluate what has been achieved so far and to determine what needs yet to be done to proclaim the Word of God in a world longing for truth.*

*May the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of our mission, who teaches the Church, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and makes it possible for all to accept and believe the divine truth, guide your work during these days.*

*In the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word made Flesh, I extend to all of you my Apostolic Blessing.*

*From Castel Gandolfo, 30 August 2002*

*Joannes Paulus II*





## From Jerusalem to Antioch ... You show me the Ways of Life.

### An Overview of the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the CBF

*Alexander M. Schweitzer, General Secretary*

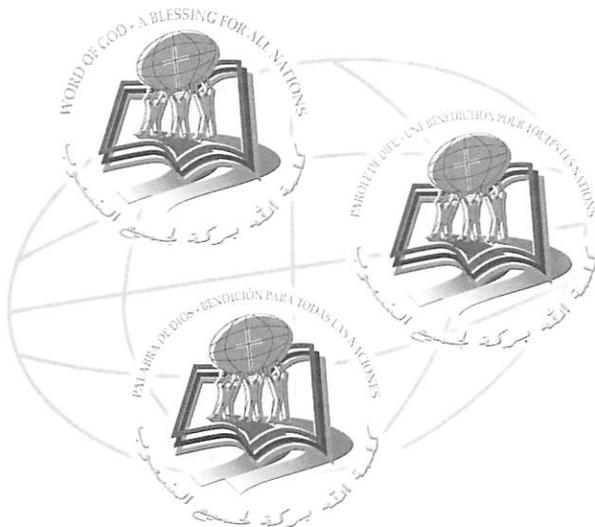
Six years after Hong Kong and almost three years after the start of work on the theme of the Sixth Plenary Assembly in the subregions of the Catholic Biblical Federation, about 160 members of the CBF, resource personnel and guests from about 70 different countries met in Lebanon to hold the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the CBF. As with former Plenary Assemblies of the CBF, this meeting combined the elements of a business meeting with the more content-based engagement with relevant themes of the biblical apostolate. At the root of the decision to maintain this format lies the conviction that reflection on content and the evaluation of past performance, the exchange of past experiences and concrete planning for the future belong together and provide a kind of mutual stimulation. The participants of the Sixth Plenary Assembly thus assembled in Lebanon to discuss and to reflect, to learn from each other, to pray together, to dream and to plan concretely for the coming years.

beginning of the new millennium, marked by rapid developments in the realms of communication, technology, financial markets and mobility. The world is becoming ever smaller and speedier, but also ever more fragmentary and insecure. Opportunities abound – but unfortunately they are far from being accessible to all. We stand in the time after September 11, 2001, a date that like none other represents the threat to our very existence and the terror that lurks in our globalized society. These conditions influence our every-day lives in a very direct way and it was clear to all that they would mark the Sixth Plenary Assembly as well.

#### The place

From a political standpoint, Lebanon and the countries of the Middle East are no easy place. The real problems of violence and anxiety, of devastation and hatred, nurtured and matured for decades, make it impossible to glorify pluralism in a naïve or simplistic way. At the same time, this part of the world yearns for peace and seeks it with earnestness and persistence. Time and again signs of reconciliation spring up like delicate plants from the parched ground. And at home in this place, in this part of the world, are the three great monotheistic religions whose God has promised them in their father Abraham that they would become a blessing for all nations.

Viewed in reference to our program, the place of our Plenary Assembly lies on the way from Jerusalem to Antioch. The way of early Christianity into a pluralistic world with foreign values and traditions and completely new challenges to one's own convictions and customs, to one's own self-understanding is vividly portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles. This same way can also stand for our own way today. The way to Antioch in Acts signifies the inculturation of Christianity into pluralistic, diversified surroundings. It signifies also the common search for God in the world, for the God who wants to be found, the God who has revealed himself. A reflection on the historical journey of early Christianity from Jerusalem to Antioch can help: there we find difficulties and pointers for solutions; there the Spirit of God is at work and it is this Spirit who grants far-sightedness, courage, freedom and apostolic zeal.



#### The time

Plenary Assemblies of the CBF take place every six years. This chronological rhythm gives us a necessary timeframe for planning, budgeting, and the implementation of ideas. Beyond this chronological-quantitative dimension, the Plenary Assembly also takes place in a particular – qualitative – time. We stand today at the



### The program

The Sixth Plenary Assembly focused thematically on these challenges to the biblical apostolate at the threshold of the third millennium; the challenges that result from a globalized and at the same time ever more diversified world. The main papers addressed first of all the concrete situations of different localities and the rapidly changing societal situations. As a document of early Christianity that deals with the questions posed by inculturation and the challenges that result from pluralistic surroundings, the biblical reference text of the Plenary Assembly, the Acts of the Apostles, was shown to contain inspiration and seminal solutions even for us today. Finally, theological reflection on the theme of religious pluralism touched on complex questions regarding the relationship between diversity and universality. A number of workshops provided an occasion to further develop these themes and bring them to bear on a variety of concrete situations.



*General Secretary Alexander M. Schweitzer*

The human situation in Lebanon, that tiny country in which 14 different Christian denominations and four different major religions live together, a country profoundly affected by the political and societal developments of the Middle East, set the theme of the Plenary Assembly in a concrete context. Our encounter with this context took place among other things in meetings with the local church, which involved spending an entire day, in smaller groups, in the various Christian communities in Lebanon.

An evaluation of the past six years, an analysis of the situation of the biblical pastoral ministry today, the results of the thematic work done in the various workshops and some concrete planning for the coming years all entered into the final document, which took shape after normal interplay between a work-group and the Plenum. All our reflections, our efforts and our plans

were brought before God in prayer and took place in communion with our sisters and brothers. The biblical texts read in common each morning, the daily expression of thanks in the Eucharistic, and a variety of other celebrations and socials were moments in which this community with God and men came to expression in a special way.

### Review and prospects

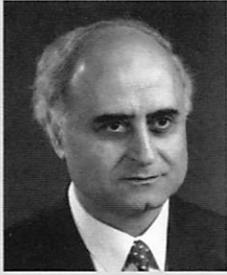
The Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation was an appropriate occasion for reflection on our past and for a pause on our way into the new millennium. At the same time, it invited us to direct our vision forward. Looking back, we were able to reflect on the origins of our faith, on the example of the earliest Christians. This history is an invitation to openness and sensitivity, a powerful stimulus to total trust in God. We also reflected on the original purposes of the Catholic Biblical Federation, as these are summarized in chapter 6 of the *Dei Verbum*. In the words of the encyclical *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* we asked ourselves, to what extent has the Word of God become more fully the soul of theology and the inspiration of the whole of Christian living, as *Dei Verbum* sought? (cf. TMA 36). Careful examination and evaluation of the priorities of the CBF in light of these fundamental objectives and against the background of the challenges of today gave us new direction and inspiration for the road that lies ahead.

And our Sixth Plenary Assembly helped us to look forward as well. Our world, so richly diverse and yet so small, so highly developed and yet so full of injustice and insecurity, is urgently in search of "ways of life". As Christians, as agents of the biblical pastoral ministry and as Catholic Biblical Federation, we cannot afford to shut our minds to this challenge. The biblical motto of our Plenary Assembly reads: "You show me the ways of life" (Ps 16:11; Acts 2:28). In the plural form "ways of life" - taken from the Pentecost sermon of Peter - the idea of diversity comes to expression: the manifold ways in which God reveals himself, in the Bible, in Christianity, in the world religions, throughout the world. Like the first Christians we are called to take God's Word into a diversified world. May the experiences and the results of this Plenary Assembly in Lebanon help us to perform our service in the biblical pastoral ministry in our local communities and as a world Federation. May they fill us with renewed energy, courageous openness, and confidence that God will indeed show us the ways of life, so that the Word of God may truly become a blessing for all nations. ■



## Abraham – A Blessing for All Nations according to the Jewish, Christian and Islamic Traditions

*Adel Théodore Khoury*



*Prof. Dr. Adel Théodore Khoury, a Lebanese Melkite priest, is professor of Religious Science at the University of Münster, Germany, and specialist in the field of Islamo-Christian dialogue.*

Jews, Christians and Moslems all lay claim to the patriarch Abraham. For different reasons, they consider themselves the legitimate heirs of Abraham, heirs of the divine covenant made with him, of the promises made by God on behalf of his descendants and of the blessing bestowed in him on all the nations of the world. But in varying degrees the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions have managed to go beyond the horizons of their particular communities to discover in their long histories the universal dimensions of the promises of salvation which God pronounced in the blessing accorded to Abraham and through him to all his descendants and to all peoples.

In the following presentation we intend to set forth the data of the three traditions concerning the blessing of Abraham, its conditions, its effects and its various dimensions. In the conclusion we will make a few comments on the role the figure of Abraham can play in the context of the relations between the three religions which are commonly referred to today as “the Abrahamic religions”, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

### THE BLESSING OF ABRAHAM IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

The figure of Abraham plays a predominant role in Jewish tradition. At each period of the peoples' history Abraham appears as the guarantor of identity, of prosperity or, in times of crisis, of the people's survival. Various speculations formed about his figure. These ideas, taken as a whole, oscillate between an exclusive particularism and an open universalism, in which the Jewish people, con-

scious of its belonging to Abraham, occupies an important position.

We cannot here expound every detail of this development. We will concentrate on the traits that concern the blessing of Abraham received on behalf of the nations. We will begin with the data of the Bible, in the Old Testament; then we will consult the texts of the late Jewish tradition and occasionally of certain Jewish thinkers down through history.

### Data of the Old Testament

#### 1. The texts of Genesis

The principal text is that which we read in Genesis. This passage links the blessings of God to the command he gave to Abraham to leave his country and his family to go and encounter the designs of God..

***The Lord said to Abraham: “Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.***

***I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you” (Gen 12:1-3).***

Nothing had prepared Abraham for the call God addresses to him or the blessing he generously bestows on him. The patriarch was living in a pagan environment; he did not yet know the law of God and had not yet shown absolute obedience to God's commands. It becomes clear because of this that the blessing and the promises of God to Abraham are in the first place a sign of God's free will and cannot be seen as conditioned by the faith and obedience of Abraham. Abraham's future and that of his descendants is in the hands of God who is at work in his life by virtue of his all-powerful might and his gratuitous goodness. But God expects Abraham to respond to this divine grace through an unshakable faith and an obedience ready for sacrifice.



God promises Abraham that he will be the father of numerous descendants. “I will make of you a great people” (Gen 2:12). This promise is the foundation of the story of the Hebrew people under the direction of God.

The belonging of the Jewish people to the posterity of Abraham will signify for this people at once a privilege and a duty down through history and in its relations with other nations. Abraham’s descendants draw inspiration from what the Word of God affirms in the text cited above, namely, that God blesses those who bless Abraham’s name, and curses those who curse it. If then Abraham is the mediator of the blessing and if his descendants inherit its benefits, then they too will perform the role of mediator between the nations and the blessings of God. (We will see a little further on in what sense the tradition understood this role).

Finally, God promises to Abraham that he will be a blessing for all the nations. A new era for the history of humanity is thus inaugurated, a history of blessing with reference to Abraham. This passage which comes from the Yahwist source of Genesis is located within the history of the people, in the context of a highly successful reign of Jewish kings — a kingdom which showed that this people had truly become a powerful nation, and that its royal rule could become a blessing and a promise of prosperity for the peoples who lived within its domain or within the remote reaches of its territory. Thus, the blessing of the Jewish people signified a blessing for all the nations. So God insists, after the story of the sacrifice of Isaac:

***I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants shall take possession of the gates of their enemies, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing — all this because you obeyed my command (Gen 22:17-18).***

And the text sees all of this as linked to the original promise of God to bless Abraham in his direct descendants and in all the nations of the earth.

The role of Abraham as a blessing for the nations reveals itself in the story of the destruction of the sinful towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the introduction to the story of the destruction of Sodom the text features the scene of Abraham’s intercession on behalf of the inhabitants of that town. This intercession is expressly linked by the Bible to the blessing of Abraham for the nations:

***The Lord reflected: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, now that he is to***

***become a great and populous nation, and all the nations of the earth are to find blessing in him?...” (Gen 18:17).***

Abraham receives the blessing from God for himself, for his immediate descendants, and for the people who will constitute his posterity. This blessing is granted to him through a free act of divine initiative, but Abraham proved capable of receiving it, in view of his faith and his obedience to the will and to the designs of God. And so we read: “Abraham put his faith in God, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness” (Gen 15:6).

The texts cited here already reveal the tension between two poles: Abraham-Israel and Abraham-the nations. The consequences of this tension will manifest themselves throughout the history of the Jewish tradition, as we will demonstrate shortly.

## **2. Various Old Testament texts**

The posterity of Abraham is occasionally seen as identical with belonging to the Jewish people. Psalm 47:10 names the Jews “the people of the God of Abraham”.

This posterity assumes the function of mediating the blessings of God for the nations and at the same time it acquires a very extensive dominion.

***For this reason, God promised him (Abraham) with an oath that in his descendants the nations would be blessed; that he would make him numerous as the grains of dust and exalt his posterity like the stars; that he would give them an inheritance from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth (Sirach 44:21).***

It is in this perspective that one should place the vision of deuterо-Isaiah (60:3-7), which describes the pilgrimage of the nations to Jerusalem, come to worship the God of Israel:

***Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance. Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you: Your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses...***

If the terms “your sons” and “your daughters” are taken as referring to members of the various peoples mentioned in the text, one can conclude that the passage has in view the non-Israelites, who belong to the posterity of Abraham no less than do his other descendants, those gathered in Jerusalem.



Moreover, one finds in Isaiah a passage in which two foreign nations, Egypt and Assyria, are mentioned as receiving the blessing of God together with Israel (Is 19:24-25).

Finally, the story of the prophet Jonah, sent to Niniveh to convert its non-Jewish inhabitants, shows that alongside the Jewish people another people is sometimes the object of God's mercy and salvation.

### **3. Data of the Jewish tradition**

The Jewish tradition oscillates between two poles. Sometimes it accentuates the close, particular - and exclusive - relationship between Abraham and the Jewish people, and sometimes it emphasizes rather the universalist relationship between Abraham and the nations of the earth.

#### ***The particularist line***

The struggle of the Maccabees against the rule of the Seleucids (from the middle of the second century before Christ) and against the temptation to assimilate to pagan culture illustrates the particularist line. The same can be said, at another level, of the ideology of the Qumran community, which withdraws from the contaminated society and seeks to preserve the identity of the Jewish people against the attraction of Greek culture. In the Book of Jubilees (chapter 18:16), the importance of Abraham for the other nations is mentioned, but the concern of the work is entirely directed toward the exclusivity of the blessings granted by God to Abraham and transmitted exclusively to Jacob.

After the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E., the Jewish tradition becomes concretized in an ever more exclusivist way in the Rabbinic tradition, which focuses on the Torah and the law. In this tradition Abraham appears as the almost exclusive property of the Jewish people. His legitimate descendants, heirs of the divine covenant and of the blessings of God are the descendants of Jacob and of the tribes, to the exclusion of other children and descendants of Abraham.

#### ***The universalist line***

Abraham is considered by Philo of Alexandria, for example, as the model of all converts. This, because he acknowledged the Creator and followed his commandments. This way is open to all non-Jews in the world. The Prophet Isaiah had already announced concerning Jacob and his posterity: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (49:6).

Abraham "the first convert" is viewed as the spiritual father of all men of good will who are in search of the one God. Salvation is therefore possible to non-Jews,

because all human beings are creatures of the one God. In the vision of God's messianic rule, his word addressed to the Jewish people is the same as that which is addressed to all peoples (Is 2:2-5; Micah 4:1-2).

**Conclusion:** The Jewish tradition thus views Abraham as a blessing for all peoples, but above all for the Jewish people who are the direct heirs of the covenant and of the promises of God. Descent from Abraham according to the flesh and in the line of Jacob plays a decisive role.

## **THE BLESSING OF ABRAHAM IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION**

### **1. Fundamental data**

Christian reflection centers around two main points: Who is the true descendant of Abraham, heir of his blessing. And what makes it possible for the pagan nations to receive this blessing?

#### ***1. The true posterity of Abraham***

Searching through the texts of the Bible, the Apostle Paul discovers the indispensable condition that accounts for the predestination of the Jews and, by the same token, transforms pagans, too, into members of Abraham's posterity.

Descent according to the flesh is not decisive. It is the faith of Abraham which was credited to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6; Gal 3:6). So, it is faith which is the foundation of the true belonging to the posterity of Abraham.

***So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In thee shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith (Gal 3:7-9).***

This faith of Abraham is manifested in his works, in his obedience to God's commands even when he is in the dark concerning God's designs for him and for his future. The Epistle to the Hebrews enumerates Abraham's acts of obedience: his departure for an unknown country; — the birth of Isaac ; — the sacrifice of Isaac (11:8-19).

It is not sufficient then to claim carnal descent from Abraham, in the way that the Jews make this their boast. John the Baptist said to the Pharisees and Sadducees who came out to be baptized by him: "Bear fruit that befits repentance, and do not presume to say to your-



selves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham (Matt 3:8-9; cf. Lk 3:8). — And Jesus in his turn, when confronted with Jews who refused to believe and who would confidently assert: "Abraham is our father", reproached them with the words: "If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did" (Jn 8:39).

Saint Paul argues on this point that Abraham received the blessing in view of his faith and before circumcision, that is to say, before he received the covenantal promise of God that made him in particular the father of the Jewish people. For this reason, Abraham became the father of the uncircumcised, pagan peoples in view of his faith (Rom 4:9-12).

### ***2. The Jewish people are not excluded, but they no longer have exclusive privileges***

Belonging to the Jewish people, whose father is Abraham, confers on its members the right granted by God to participate in his salvation.

Even the descendants of Abraham according to the flesh, however, are in danger of possible exclusion from the blessing of Abraham, if they do not fulfill the conditions for receiving this blessing. In the passage of Saint John, cited above, Jesus responds to his adversaries, who were boasting of having Abraham for their father, that this did not prevent them from becoming children of the devil, because they are willing to fulfill his desires (cf. Jn 8:44).

Still more severe is the warning directed against Jews who are sluggish in faith: After the healing of a Roman centurion's servant, Jesus proclaims: "Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness..." (Matt 8:10-12).

### ***3. Universal salvation through Jesus Christ***

The Christian witness centers around the person of Jesus Christ the Lord. All the promises of God once given to Abraham and to the Fathers are realized in him; the new and eternal covenant is sealed in his blood and confirmed by his resurrection from the dead; the blessings of Abraham for the Jewish people and for all the nations of the earth now rest on a direct or indirect belonging to Jesus Christ.

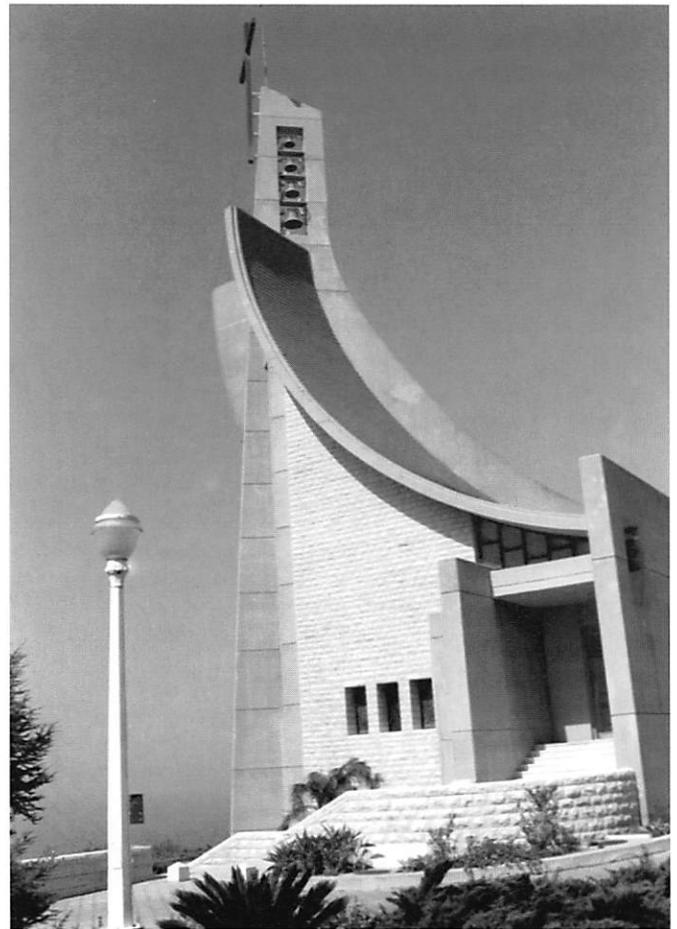
One can thus read in the Epistle to the Galatians:

***Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to his offsprings," referring to many; but, referring to one, "And to your offspring," which is Christ (Gal 3:16).***

And again, shortly before this passage: "that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal 3:14).

The whole of Abraham's hope is realized in Jesus Christ.

All who have been baptized in the name of Christ are one in Christ. There is no difference between Jews and Greeks, between men and women, slaves and free. "For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:28-29).



*Chapel of the venue Notre Dame du Mont*

## **2. Consequences**

Under the direction of the Holy Spirit the Christian community learned not only that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4), but also that the ways God chooses to effect this salvation harbor many surprises. Although the Jewish Christians were insisting that pagans would first have to become Jews in order to be able to



become Christians and so to take part in the salvation of Christ, God showed them that his free will does not allow itself to be bound by human constraints and that Israel is no longer, as some thought, the necessary mediator of the salvation of the pagans. The story of the conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius shows this in an extraordinarily instructive way. The Acts of the Apostles describes the event in chapter 10, and concludes:

***While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles... Then Peter declared: "Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:44-48).***

It should be noted that the gift of the Holy Spirit was granted to Cornelius and to his family before they were baptized, and that the baptism in this case served only to confirm what God had already effected in the lives of these new converts.

Salvation in Christ is not linked to biology, to a descent according to the flesh (Matt 3:9), nor to a geography, that is to say, to particular holy places. Jesus states this with great clarity in his conversation with the Samaritan woman: "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father...But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him" (Jn 4:21, 23).

Salvation is definitively linked to faith, at least in its fundamental form, as the Epistle to the Hebrews formulates it: "And without faith it is impossible to please God. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb 11:6).

Salvation is also linked to good works. In the narrative of the conversion of Cornelius, Peter declares: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:35).

Hence the necessity for a new orientation in relations with non-Christians.

### 3. Tension between particularism and universalism

#### 1. *Overcoming of particularism*

In the first phase of the development of the Christian community we find the effort to transcend Jewish particularism. A number of texts and hymns witness to this universal orientation and to the awareness of the cosmic role of Jesus Christ. We cite here a few examples of this.

After the descent of the Holy Spirit at the first Pentecost, the Apostle Peter declares before the groups of people gathered in Jerusalem: "The promise is for you, and for your children, and for all who are far away, as many as the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39).

In the Gospel of Saint John, Jesus himself declares: "I have other sheep who are not of this flock; them also must I lead; they will hear my voice; and there will be one sheepfold, one shepherd" (Jn 10:16-17).

Saint Peter defends himself in Jerusalem against the criticisms of the advocates of Jewish Christian particularism. He describes the experience he had at the time of the conversion of Cornelius: "If then God granted them the same gift as he gave to us who have believed in the Lord, Jesus Christ, who was I to stand in the way of God?" (Acts 11:17).

A similar witness was given before the assembly of the Apostles in Jerusalem, such that the door of salvation was opened wide to the pagans without imposing burdens on them which would have bound them to the Jewish Law (cf. Acts 15:4-19).

#### 2. *The Cosmic Christ*

The universalism of salvation and reconciliation in Christ acquired a cosmic dimension, such that not only Jews and pagans are called to participate directly in Christ's salvation, but the entire universe, too, is included in the mystery of Christ.

One reads in the hymn that serves as the overture to the Epistle to the Colossians:

***He is the image of the invisible God, the First Born of every creature, for it is in him that all things were created in heaven and on the earth... Everything was created by him and for him. He is before all things and all things hold together in him. For God was pleased to make the whole fulness dwell in him and through him to reconcile all things for him, on earth as well as in heaven, making peace through the blood of his cross (Col 1:15-20).***



### 3. *The only mediator of salvation is Jesus Christ*

We find in the New Testament texts which clearly show that the Church of the first generations was convinced that salvation is accomplished in Christ and in him alone. We could cite a few of these texts:

Jesus affirms clearly in the Gospel of Saint John: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14:6).

Saint Peter declares solemnly before the Sanhedrin: "There is no other name under heaven given to men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Finally, we read in Paul's first Letter to Timothy: "For God is one, one also is the mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ, himself a man" (1 Tim 2:5).

### 4. *Necessity of the Church for salvation?*

With time, one notes that the Church began to understand itself as the extension of Jesus Christ, as the place where the salvific mediation of Christ is accomplished. This gives rise to the insistence on the necessity of belonging to the Church in order to be able to participate in the salvation of Christ. This is likewise the origin of the formula: *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*; no salvation outside the Church. By interpreting this formula in an absolute way, certain theologians began to deny to non-Christians the possibility of taking part in the salvation of Christ, since they were not baptized and so integrated into the Christian community.

Christian faith affirmed: Jesus Christ is absolutely necessary for salvation. Now the statement arises: the Church is absolutely necessary for salvation.

Today people commonly interpret the formula cited above (*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*) in the following way: where the salvation of Christ is accomplished - and this in the manner in which God wills it and according to his own ways - there the Church is also present.

Thus the way is open to investigate the means God uses to accomplish his salvation, even among non-Christians. This is why Vatican II encourages Christians to seek to uncover among the non-Christian religions the elements of truth and holiness which they contain, to acknowledge and to promote these elements, because they constitute rays of Christ's truth and are an effect of the action of the Holy Spirit in the story of humanity.

Jesus Christ remains the center and the connecting point of the whole history of the salvation of humanity. But it is not always clear to our human eyes how the links are formed that bind together the saved of all nations, those who participate in the blessing and the promise of

Abraham, who are somehow united to Jesus Christ, who has saved them and reconciled them in the blood of his cross and the glory of his resurrection.

## ABRAHAM IN THE ISLAMIC TRADITION

The data of the Islamic tradition on the role of Abraham in the thought and religious practices of men and nations - above all in the Koran - unfold along lines parallel to those we have already traced in the Jewish and Christian traditions.

### 1. Abraham, the perfect believer and the perfect obedient servant

Abraham bears in the Koran (4:125) and in Islamic tradition the honorary title "friend of God" (*khalil Allah*). In view of his election, of his blessing and of the covenant of God, Abraham is a servant full of God's grace, a servant who, despite all obstacles in the eyes of men, marched forward on the path God had pointed out to him; and he proved faithful in spite of the great trials he had to endure. By virtue of his unshakable fidelity to faith in God Abraham is an example for Moslems.

Abraham is also the model of the person who is perfectly open to the calling of God. For he was endowed with a "pure heart" (37:84), capable of opening himself to the knowledge of God. And God led him to faith, in virtue of the particular knowledge that his father had not received (19:43). Then he was able to detach himself from the error of his fathers to turn to the One God.

And God did in fact guide him, granted him revelation (2:136; 4:163), and even a holy scripture, "the books of Abraham"<sup>1</sup>, cited alongside the Book of Moses (53:36-37; 87:19).

### 2. Abraham the Moslem

The Koran calls Abraham the first Moslem, the model of the believer who surrenders himself in all confidence to God. His fidelity to the commandments of God led him to observe the religious duties of a devout Moslem: he professed the monotheistic faith; he performed the required prayers; he gave the alms imposed by law (21:73); he fulfilled the pilgrimage obligation, including the entrance into the sacred state, the completion of the tours and the offering (22:26-29); and he also performed good works (21:73).

Finally, Abraham received from God the promise of a blessed posterity: Isaac, Jacob and the long line that extends to Jesus Christ, a posterity chosen by God and

<sup>1</sup> In the apocryphal literature several writings attributed to Abraham are known: the Apocalypse of Abraham, a Jewish writing of the first century after Jesus Christ; - the Testament of Abraham, a Jewish writing of unknown date. An unknown writing bearing the title Inquisition of Abraham is mentioned in Christian literature. Cf. the article Abraham, in: *Bibel-Lexikon*, ed. Herbert Haag, 3rd edition, Zürich-Einsiedeln-Köln 1982, p. 14, col.2 p. 15, col 1.



guided by him along a right path (6:84-87; cf. 19:49; 21:72; 29:27; 37:112). And God gave this "family of Abraham" "the book and Wisdom", and he granted it "an immense kingdom" (4:54).

In view of these gifts and the blessing with which God filled Abraham, he became the father of the followers of the true religion. And it is the Koran that gives the order to Mohammed: "Follow the faith of saintly Abraham" (16:123); and also to Moslems: "Allah has declared the truth. Follow the faith of Abraham. He was an upright man, no idolater" (3:95; cf. 4:125; 6:161).

### 3. Importance of Abraham for Islam

Belonging to the posterity of Abraham gained decisive importance for Islam when the latter undertook to define its identity vis-à-vis Judaism and Christianity. After the emigration from Mecca to Medina in 622, Mohammed, who was conscious of his links with the biblical tradition, attempted in vain to gain the alliance of the Jews in favor of his cause and of his interests against his Meccan adversaries. When his attempts remained unsuccessful, in 624 he made two moves that would assure Islam its religious independence and that would allow it to gain access to a properly political patrimony.

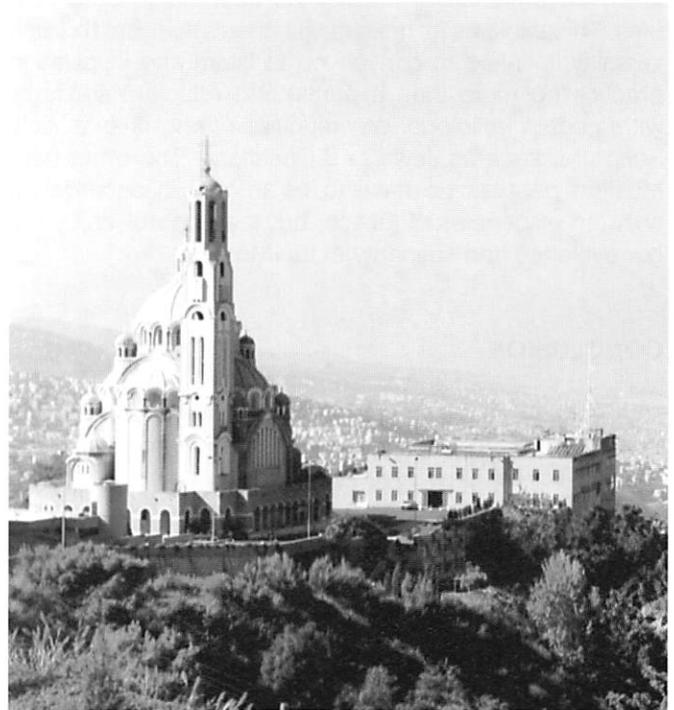
The first move is of a religious nature. Beyond the exclusive claims of Jews and Christians to be the heirs of Abraham and to possess the only saving faith, Mohammed claimed Abraham father of all believers for himself in a direct and definitive way. The faith of Abraham, he argues, was there before the arrival of Judaism and Christianity. Thus was sealed the independence of Islam with respect to Judaism and Christianity.

The second move is of a politico-religious nature. It was to underscore direct legitimate descent from Abraham and the Arab character of the Koranic revelation. The Koran proclaims that Kaaba, the central sanctuary of Arabia, was built by Abraham and his son Ishmael, and that it is therefore not a pagan temple, but a sanctuary dedicated to the worship of the one God (2:142-150). This is why the Koran from this time on orders Moslems to pray no longer facing Jerusalem, as they had hitherto done, but facing Kaaba. This helped to confirm the religious independence of Islam and at the same time its belonging to the biblical tradition that stemmed from Abraham. Moreover, Kaaba becomes the place of gathering of all the Arab tribes and the symbol of the religious and political unity of Islam.

On this new foundation, the Moslems were able henceforth to develop a sentiment of a particular belonging to Abraham and to claim him as their own in preference to

Jews and Christians. On this subject the Koran expresses itself quite clearly: "Surely the men who are nearest to Abraham are those who follow him, this Prophet (Mohammed), and the true believers." (3:68).

This preferential place in the posterity of Abraham is attested once again by the fact, as the Koran puts it, that Abraham, at the time of the construction of Kaaba, prayed to God with his son Ishmael to send a prophet to his descendants, taken from among them. This prophet is identified by Islamic exegesis as Mohammed (2:127-129).



*Cathedral in Harissa*

### 4. The importance of Abraham for the nations

Abraham is then the model of all those who submit to God through faith and good works. It is possible then, although the Islamic tradition is less explicit on this point, to draw certain conclusions regarding the salvation of the nations and the solidarity of Moslems with non-Moslems.

#### 1. *The salvation of non-Moslems*

Most Moslem theologians assert that only Moslems will have access to paradise, while non-Moslems, including Jews and Christians, are destined to hell for all eternity. But the Koran states the following: "Believers, Jews, Christians, Sabaeans - whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does what is right - shall be rewarded by their Lord; they have nothing to fear or to regret" (2:62; cf. 5:69). And he confirms that this is true in spite of the reluctance of Moslems and of the people of the book, Jews and Christians: "It shall not be in accordance with your



wishes, nor shall it be as the People of the Book wish. He that does evil shall be requited with evil: there shall be none to protect or help him. But the believers who do good works, whether men or women, shall enter the gardens of Paradise...". (4:123-124). In view of these verses, great Moslem theologians, such as Ghazzali, Mahmud Shaltut and Muhammad 'Abdul, assert that Jews and Christians, for example, can have access to the paradise of God<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. Solidarity of Moslems

Islam understands its mission as addressed to all peoples. This explains its universalist orientation. But this universality is linked to conversion to Islam and involves in practice no more than a partial and reluctant solidarity with certain religious communities who have a holy Scripture, such as Jews and Christians. The other non-Moslem peoples do have to be treated in accordance with the exigencies of justice, but they do not enjoy the benevolence and solidarity of the Moslems.

## CONCLUSION

Membership in the posterity of Abraham can foster an open encounter between the faithful of the three Abrahamic religions. By relating to his faith and to his obedience to the commands of God, even amidst trials and tribulations, one can find in him a common point of reference which embraces all men of good will, open to faith and disposed to embrace the good. This attitude is capable of broadening the horizons of believers so as to make room for all human beings and all peoples and to make them witnesses of the blessing God granted to Abraham and that he entrusted to him for all the nations of the earth.

Rather than being an object of dispute and wrangling between the three faiths that claim him, Abraham can become the initiator and the guarantor of a serious dialogue between them and of a fruitful cooperation for the good of all humanity.

For we live today in a world which, in the context of pervasive globalization, is no longer and can no longer be the world that some individuals can confiscate for their profit at the expense of others. Our present is the present of all of us together, and our future is the future of all of us together. We must finally stop treating one other like adversaries; we must succeed in making ourselves partners of one another; and we must strive to create between us an atmosphere of trust that will render us capable of becoming - if God wills it - one another's friends. This will lead us to practice a universal solidarity with each other and all of us together with respect to all human beings, the solidarity of all with respect to all.

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(Transl.: L. Maluf)

## Summary

*Jews, Christians and Moslems all lay claim to the patriarch Abraham. For different reasons, they consider themselves the legitimate heirs of Abraham, heirs of the divine covenant made with him, of the promises made by God on behalf of his descendants and of the blessing bestowed in him on all the nations of the world.*

*But in varying degrees the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions have managed to go beyond the horizons of their particular communities to discover in their long histories the universal dimensions of the promises of salvation which God pronounced in the blessing accorded to Abraham and through him to all his descendants and to all peoples.*

*The paper intends to set forth the data of the three traditions concerning the blessing of Abraham, its conditions, its effects and its various dimensions.*

*It comes to the conclusion that Abraham can serve as a foundation for an open encounter between the faithful of the three Abrahamic religions, but he has been – and he can continue to be – an object of dispute among these three religions.*

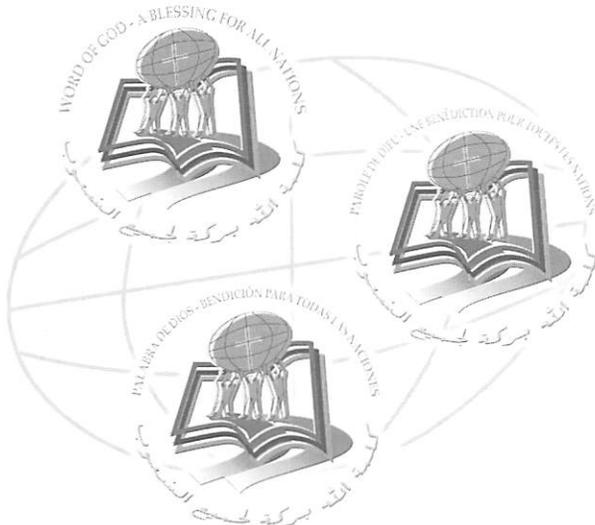
<sup>2</sup> See the data of the Koran and of Moslem exegesis and the position of Ghazzali, of Mohammad 'Abdul and of Mahmud Shaltut, in my book: Adel Théodore Khoury, *Der Koran. Übersetzung und wissenschaftlicher Kommentar*, I, Gütersloh 1990, p. 285-290. I refer there not only to the Moslem commentaries on the Koran but also to the works of Louis Gardet, *Dieu et la destinée de l'homme*, Paris 1967, p. 301-302, 390-392; Tafsir al-Manar, I, p. 336-338; Robert Caspar, *Le salut des non musulmans d'après Abu Hamid al-Ghazali*, in: *Islamochristiana* 3, Rome 1977, p. 47-49; Mahmud Shaltut, *al-Islam, 'aqida wa shari'a*, 8th edition, s.d., p. 19-20.



## MAIN PAPERS

### Main Papers

The first three workdays of the Sixth Plenary Assembly were entirely taken up with the theme: "Challenges posed by pluralism to biblical-pastoral ministry today". An attempt was made to approach the theme in three steps – to illuminate and reflect on its multiple facets from the sociological, biblical and theological points of view.



The lecture of Professor Anne Nasimiyu of Kenya first called attention to the sociological conditions in our societies. Using East Africa as an example, the speaker sketched the cultural, religious and economic complexity and synchronicity that mark our communities and that come to the fore sometimes through separation, sometimes through permeability and blending. She noted the implications of the globalization of financial markets and economies and pointed to the opportunities and challenges that result from this social reality. This sociological reflection was deepened in a number of short papers on the theme from the other regions of the CBF and in numerous afternoon workshops.

On the second day the participants of the Sixth Plenary Assembly dealt with the question of pluralism from a biblical perspective. In his paper "Pluralistic Experiences of the First Christian Communities accord-

ing to the Acts of the Apostles" Pablo Richard of Costa Rica made a strong case for the value of reading the pluralistic reality of our communities in a Christian-biblical light. A close reading of the New Testament can help us properly to evaluate the impact and implications of social diversity and to work out solutions for pluralism today in the light of ways in which the first Christians dealt with these same challenges. The common work in this area took place in regional groups, in workshops and in plenum.

Even if religious pluralism represents no new phenomenon, it has nevertheless taken on new aspects against the background of an ever more interconnected world and of a growing secularization. Mgr. Michael Fitzgerald, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, inaugurated the theological reflection with his lecture "Religious Pluralism – A Theological Consideration". He developed the important points of Catholic teaching in view of the new challenges of religious pluralism. His appeal to theological deepening of specific aspects of interreligious dialogue inspired the following discussions.

The stimulation and conclusions that emerged from these first three workdays on the challenges of pluralism to biblical-pastoral ministry had a formative influence on the entire Plenary Assembly, not least in the traces they left in the Final Statement. ■



## Scenarios of Pluralism – A Sociological Analysis

Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike



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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Before I begin, I would like to thank the Catholic Biblical Federation General Secretariat for the gracious invitation to me to be part of this Plenary Assembly. This paper is looking at the social context of Africa and in particular that of Eastern Africa – Kenya. Due to globalization, the revolution in the information communication technology and great mobility, religious pluralism in the world has become a topic of great interest and discourses. There is an endeavour to capture the various religious paths, their influence in the world today, their depths, attractiveness and beauty. There is also an effort to investigate how these world religions can form a harmonious rainbow effect on the human situation in the world today. Due to this experience of pluralism, Christianity has been forced to seek for a vital productive dialogue and collaboration with other religions.

All world religions have remained regional though stretching over many societies and cultures. African Religion was restricted to Africa. Hinduism was limited to the Indian sub-continent; Buddhism was localized mainly in South and East Asia; Islam was restricted to South Asia, North and East Africa while Christianity was localized in Europe and the Near East. After the 15th century Christianity expanded to the Americas and to the rest of the Third World countries following in the footsteps of colonial demographic and military victory. Today all religions are meeting everywhere in the world and last year 2001 a parliament of world religions was held in South Africa.

This paper will in the first place define pluralism; secondly it will look at the traditional African religious world-

view; thirdly it will reflect on the current social situation in relation to pluralism; and finally some concluding remarks.

### 2. DEFINITION OF PLURALISM

Pluralism could be understood in various ways. In the first place, it could be seen as a political consequence of moral and religious diversity in modern societies. In these modern societies groups of persons differ over their conception of the good, the purposes and the end of life here on earth. The question is how should social and political institutions accommodate themselves in this diversified world? Raymond Plant responds to this question by using the liberal pluralists' argument. The state should be neutral over questions of morality but be concerned in securing a framework of law and institutions within which persons and groups could be able to pursue their own good in their own way. This could only be interfered with if the pursuit causes harm to others in the society. There has to be a substantive moral agreement over and above a basic agreement on the importance of mutual toleration of diversity.

From the philosophical perspective pluralism takes moral diversity as an inpredicable feature of the nature of moral concepts. Moral concepts are embedded in more general metaphysical theories about the self, its relation to other selves and humanity's place in the universe. This understanding of pluralism is closely related to the first one, because there is "no single, true, objective way of combining values into a rationally grounded, coherent whole". (Raymond Plant 1986:480). This also calls for mutual toleration of diversity.

### 3. AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW

African Religion is part of the African traditional heritage. In traditional Africa humanity was seen at the very center of existence and religion was part and parcel of the African way of being in the universe. Religion was found in every aspect of life. Religion for the Africans was the



normal way of looking at the world and experiencing life itself. African Religion was/is integrated so much into different areas of life (John S. Mbiti 1975:12). Laurenti Magesa defines African Religion as the sum total of people's beliefs, wisdom ritual practices and institutions. Its worldview is that everything in existence has actual or potential religious significance and that there is no dichotomy between sacred and profane, religious and secular, spiritual and material realities (Magesa 2000:4). African Religion was/is community-centred in its origin and orientation. African Religion does not convert foreigners. It is not preached from one group of people to another. An individual must be born in a particular African ethnic group in order to be able to follow African Religion in that group. Hence religion takes on different forms according to the different ethnic settings. African Religion has a strong hold on the people even if converted to Christianity and Islam, they do not abandon their traditional religion. It continues to remain with the people for several generations and for centuries.

African Religion gives a sense of security to its members and it is an essential part of the way of life for any given ethnic group. Its influence covers the whole of life from before birth to way after death. African Religion has no written doctrine but is passed on from one generation to another through conversations, religious activities, ceremonies, festivals, rituals, proverbs, wise sayings, myths and practical lived examples (John Mbiti 1995:14).

African Religion is not missionary oriented religion and it does not go out to win converts whereas Christianity and Islam are missionary oriented and they seek to win those who are outside to their allegiance. Islam, Christianity and African Religion are the most dominant religions in Africa. Others are Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Bahaim but these claim only small numbers. Although Christianity and Islam have a large following in Africa, these religions' penetration in the identity and in the core of the African person has remained shallow. The African persons, their historical cultural roots, their social dimensions, their self-consciousness and their expectations and hopes are still very much influenced, inspired and rooted in the African Religion (Mbiti: 1969:263).

Before we go on, it is good to look at what kind of package missions Christianity brought to Africa. Christianity was represented by every sect and denomination that existed in Western Europe and America. This resulted in presenting Africa with various images of Christianity. African Christians inherited different church structures and traditions imported from Western Europe and America. The denominations sought to produce perfect Anglicans, Lutherans, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists,

Quakers, Presbyterians, Methodists and Roman Catholics, and so on, instead of making their followers good converts to Jesus Christ. This denominationalism is one of the worst religious divisive elements in Africa (Mbiti 1969:232). Denominations have used homiletical propaganda and some times even used physical fights to compete for converts. The missionary workers were more concerned with practical evangelism than with encounter and dialogue with African Religion and philosophy.

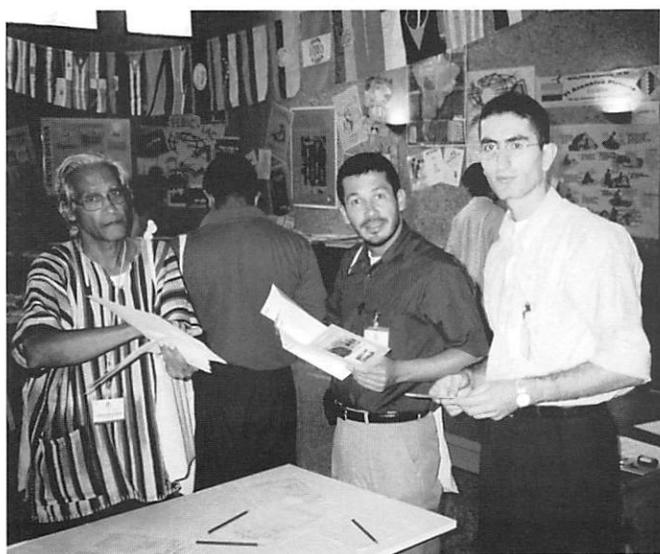


Christianity in Africa is faced with the growth of African instituted churches or independent or separatist churches. These are small sects that have broken away from mission churches and from one another. There are various reasons which caused the break off from the mission churches. In the first place the Euro-American mission churches divisions gave a scandalous example of divisions as a way of life in different mission churches (denominations). Secondly, the Euro-American missionary control of the African converts portrayed that the Africans were to be ruled in both political and ecclesial matters. The African converts sought to start their own churches free from missionary domination, paternalism, to seek for church freedom and to integrate Christianity in African Religiosity. (F.B. Welbourn and A.B. Ogot 1966:20).

The Africans were also greatly affected by the religious social-cultural and political changes. These changes to a large scale disturbed traditional solidarity, and the African instituted churches sought to build places where Africans could feel at home and to rebuild the disintegrated traditional solidarity (Mbiti 1969:234). The African churches also sought to realize the eschatological vision or at least to make it partially realized in their hope for heaven or paradise. The emphasis in African instituted churches was/is placed on revelation and healing and on the place and work of the Holy Spirit in individuals and in the community.



There are some countries in Africa which are predominantly Muslim with over ninety percent of the population adherents of Islam e.g. Egypt, Libya. Other states which have over fifty percent of Muslim population are Niger, Senegal, Mauritania, Gambia, Chad, Sudan and Northern Nigeria, and along the East Coast. Muslims have their factions, which have originated outside Africa. Islam adapted religious beliefs and rituals in African Religion that were similar, for example the concept of one universal God, in the area of spiritual beings, including angels, jinns and devils, and practices in matters of divination and magic. In fact, Islamic practice encourages divination and the use of good magic. (Lewis 1966:58-65).



Christianity and Islam have continued to expand in East Africa pushing African Traditional Religion on the defensive. In fact, African Religion was ignored as non-existent and Christianity and Islam employed all kinds of methods to reduce African Traditional Religion to total annihilation. Surprisingly, African Traditional Religion still lives on and new movements are emerging in search of meaning and security among the people, for example, the Mungiki sect of Kenya which has sought to recapture the traditional religious rituals and practices. They believe that the laxity in Christian religious morals is what is leading to the fast rate of HIV/AIDS infection among the youth.

#### 4. THE CURRENT SOCIAL SITUATION

Conversion is taking place constantly; David Barrett observes that the rate of Christian expansion in Kenya and the rest of Africa is very fast and dazzling (Barrett: 1973:157). People are converting from African Religion to different denominations of Christianity, to Islam,

Bahaim and also from Christianity to Islam, and from one Christian denomination to another Christian denomination. These conversions are a process which is dynamic and it affects the people and their environment. There are also reconversions, which show that the African people are searching for religious situations which fit them and into which they can find integral holistic being.

Sometimes in one family a number of religions may be found. For example, if there are five brothers in a family, one may belong to the Islamic faith, one to Catholic faith, one to Anglican faith, one to African instituted church and another to African Religion faith. Often these members find peace, collaboration and harmony because of their shared African Religious foundation.

African social, economical, cultural and political reality is one that is experiencing numerous hardships. Statistics spell out these realities. This situation is well described by Elochukwu E. Uzukwu as follows: Africa is seen today in the world community as a continent of misery. Many statistics trumpet this reality. Ecological disasters - warring groups - economic depression of unparalleled proportions making existent authoritarian regimes more repressive - dictatorships and civil war - (Uzukwu 1996:1). Civil wars and ethnic strifes uproot men, women and children from their homes to neighbouring countries as refugees. Africa has over 7 million refugees; this is more than 50 percent of the world refugees. Disease plagues the people. Malaria is still a great killer in Africa, infant mortality is high, and HIV/AIDS pandemic and claiming many lives. In Kenya seven hundred persons are dying every day. It is said that one out of every forty Africans is an HIV/AIDS carrier (Uzukwu 1996:2). This portrays a very dark picture of Africa.

The establishment of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1947 was intended to be one way of avoiding harmful future devaluations; the IMF would lend foreign currency to deficit countries. Today the IMF loans are aimed towards less developed countries (East African Standard, the Big Issue 2002:6). Conditional lending which required the borrowing country to mend its ways, balance the budget and stop granting loans for unsound projects has gradually become "structural adjustment". In addition to balancing the budgets and valuing their currencies realistically, they also had to sell off bloated, "unprofitable state industries, slow down or stop their crony-lending, and fire many bureaucrats holding sinecures" (East African Standard Big Issue 2002:6). The attempts to shift from a distorted economy to a healthy economy have caused untold suffering, worsened poverty and undermined prospects for eco-



conomic growth. The policies are biased against labour and favour corporate interests.

The IMF and World Bank structural adjustment packages emphasized trade liberalization orienting the countries' economies to export and cutbacks in government spending. They also required reduction of the size of government, and privatization of some public services. IMF/WB institutions believed that the private sector does a better job in delivering services even to the very poor than the public sector, forgetting that the poor cannot have access to those services unless they can pay.



The second argument of IMF and WB for shrinking government was that this would facilitate the elimination of government deficits. In the Third World countries which have poorly developed private sectors, the government has played a dominant role in the nation's economy. Therefore the massive cuts in government spending throws tens or hundreds of thousands out of work and contributes to a surge in unemployment, and this leads to a reduction in the bargaining power of workers (East African Standard: The Big Issue 2002 March 25:7). This World Bank and International Monetary Fund strategy calls for civil services downsizing or, in other words, rightsizing; privatisation of government-owned enterprises, with layoffs required prior to privatization; promotion of labour flexibility by deregulation, and removal of restrictions on the ability of government and private employers to hire and lay

off workers. It also calls for reductions of mandated pay rates and minimum wages, and spreading the wage gap between government workers and managers by slashing government workers salaries. Finally it requires the revamping of the pension system by cutting back on benefits for retired workers and also by cutting the social security benefits for workers. The IMF and WB believed that these policies would cause some short-term pain and suffering but would lead to creating conditions for long-term economic growth and job creation. Unfortunately, since the implementation of structural adjustment programs no country has recorded a success story, the reports have only noted needless suffering, worsened poverty, stagnation of economic growth, high unemployment, weakening of legal protection for workers and the devaluation of the weak currencies making life very expensive for the poor. In Kenya today over 60% of the population live below the poverty line. Foreign aid comes to Third World countries as transfer of wealth from rich nations to poor nations, but not transfer of wealth from rich to poor individual. The foreign aid is transferred from government to government. This implies centralisation of government power over the economic affairs of the beneficiary country. The question of who runs the government becomes crucial, especially in multi-ethnic or racial societies. Hence foreign aid contributes to the politicization of economic life in Third World countries. It has been noted that more money leaves Africa each year than comes to it in form of aid. This capital is illegally shipped abroad by the ruling elites. Foreign aid gives the Third World ruling-class an incentive to perpetuate the poverty of their subjects. What is needed is not the transfer of wealth but rather the transfer of the ability to produce adequate amounts of real income, which depends on the participation of the private sector.

In fact, foreign aid has been responsible for the pauperization of large segments of the population in the Third World nations. Aid destroys the possibility for sustained economic growth by driving local producers out of business. This is the case in Kenya and many sub-Saharan countries. Traditionally, Africa was a food exporter but today it has lost the power to feed itself. Hence the infusion of aid to Third World countries has not stimulated self-sustaining economic growth or improved the plight of the poorest people in the recipient countries.

This image of Africa gives an apparent reflection of hopelessness. This calls for the different religions in Africa to take seriously the situation of misery and oppression. They have to go beyond giving simplistic responses and merely denouncing the perpetrators of the evil (Uzokuwu 1996:2).



## 5. CONCLUSION

In 1973 there were 224 Christian Churches in Kenya, and by April 1987 they had increased to 908 Christian Churches (Nasimiyu 1991:86). Since every ethnic community has got its own African Religion, in Kenya there are 42 different ones. There are also different sects in Islamic faith. All these different religious groups are seeking for wholeness, for a place of sharing, sympathizing and sensitive understanding in depth between equals (Barrett 1971:153). Religious pluralism is a trait or feature of today's world which will continue into the future. This factor is both positive and negative for the Christian Church. On a positive note religious pluralism is a manifestation of God's superabundant generosity to humankind in various ways which calls for pluriform human beings' response to the divine self-disclosure. This is what has been done in diverse cultures (Jacques Dupuis 2000:386). Dupuis states that "multiplicity of religions is not an evil which needs to be removed, but rather a wealth which is to be welcomed and enjoyed by all" (Dupuis 2000:387). The Divine plan for humanity is multifaceted. God communicated intrinsically in many and various ways before speaking through Jesus Christ. God's universal presence and action of the word and spirit has always been in all religions but the outward manifestation in Jesus is only in Christianity.



In religious pluralism human liberation and social justice ought to be stressed. There is need to denounce injustice, stand up for human rights and proclaim the demands for justice apart from the religious affiliation of the victims. There is need also for the various religions to join together in solving the problems facing society and the world (Dupuis 2000:374). In Kenya there have been attempts by religious bodies to give a common response to serious issues. For example, the religious leaders of the main churches, the Muslim and the African instituted churches gave a strong statement on

the ethnic clashes and on the Constitutional Review of Kenya. Members of different religious traditions have to collaborate in the struggle for human liberation.



*Glass windows in the chapel of Notre Dame du Mont*

They have to unite in action on behalf of human rights and justice for all. As Dupuis states, that interfaith liberative praxis is an urgent task of evangelization. "Human liberation as well as the well-being of creation require today the shared commitment of members of all the religious traditions" (Dupuis 2000:377). Correlational dialogue of religions in a common concern is capable of transcending religious differences.

Africa has experienced political, social and economic crises but the solutions to these crises must come from African resources. As Uzuoku reflects, a journey back to the African roots must be made with a rigorous socio-historical and comparative study which favours the emergence, flowering and eclipse of African societies and culture (Uzuoku 1996:7). Pluralism in Africa must speak of a commitment to the poor, marginalized and exploited. It has also to be committed to eradication of structural injustices. This will save it from degenerating into mere tolerance of different faiths.

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### Summary

*This paper looks at the social context of Africa and in particular that of East Africa – Kenya. Due to globalization, the revolution in information-communication technology and due to great mobility, people of different faiths have been brought together in the global village. Efforts have to be made towards collaboration and co-existence in an atmosphere of plurality. Despite conversion of the African people to Christianity and Islam, the African people, their self-consciousness, their expectations and hopes are still very much influenced, inspired and rooted in African Religion.*

*The paper also looks at the social economic scene and how this is interweaved and used by the political powers. Instead of bringing prosperity and hope to the people, this has only added to the misery and suffering of most of them. These people are turning to religion and sometimes shifting from one religion to another in search of meaning and integral wholeness in life.*

*The paper concludes by stating that religious pluralism is a feature of today's world which will continue in the future. This calls for pluriform human response to the Divine Self Disclosure. Religious pluralism ought to stress human liberation and a keen sense of social justice. Pluralism in Africa has to initiate a commitment to the poor, marginalized and the exploited.*





## The Pluralistic Experiences of the First Christian Communities according to the Acts of the Apostles

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### I. THE FOUNDING ROOTS OF PLURALISM IN THE CHURCHES: JESUS' TESTAMENT AND PENTECOST: ACTS 1:1-2:41 (YEAR 30)

**1. The testament of the risen Christ:** *"to all the nations, all people, all cultures, to the ends of the earth". (Luke 24: 47, Acts 1:8)*

Shortly before his ascension, the risen Christ left us his last Will and Testament:

***you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth.***

At the end of the Luke's gospel, Jesus also leaves us a Testament to preach "to all the nations beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24, 47). The promise of the Holy Spirit is given for mission and that mission has its starting point in Jerusalem; its arrival point is to all the nations, to the ends of the earth. The term "nations" (ta ethne) also includes all cultures and peoples. This Testament will also be the program of the entire book of The Acts of the Apostles: it is the dynamics of the Holy Spirit that breaks down cultural and geographical barriers.

Jesus' Testament will not be fulfilled without considerable difficulties. First of all, it will confront the Davidic messianism that is implied in the question: "Lord, has the time come for you establish the Kingdom of Israel?" The Kingdom of Israel is the Davidic Kingdom whose

reestablishment would signify the restoration of the Jewish monarchy and a confrontation with the Romans. Jesus never identified the Kingdom of God with this Davidic Kingdom. The disciples pose a similar question to the pilgrim on the road to Emmaus: "Our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free." (Lk 24: 21) The Holy Spirit begins in this way to break down the Davidic nationalism and Jewish ethnocentricity present among his own disciples, in order to be able to reach out to all nations and cultures.

**2. Pentecost:** *"How does it happen that each of us hears them in his own native language?" (2:1-41)*

Luke states in his Pentecost narrative that: "...there were devout men living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven," Then he enumerates these nations, peoples and cultures: to the east: Parthians, Medes and Elamites; to the center, Judea; to the north: Cappadocia, Pontus, Phrygia and Pamphylia; to the south, Egypt. Then three other regions are also enumerated (these are distinguished by use of the article.); to the east Mesopotamia; to the north, Asia and south of Libya. Then come the Roman foreigners (the peoples inhabiting the Roman "oikoumene." These foreigners are separated into four different groups: the Jews, the proselytes (circumcised gentiles), the Cretans (the sea peoples) and the Arabs (possibly Nabatean Arabs who lived between the Red Sea and the Euphrates River. They had considerable power under Arethas IV between 9 BC and 40 AD).

The apostles are Galileans who speak Aramaic. The marvel of Pentecost is that all the peoples and cultures that were present there are able to hear the apostles in their own language. This fact is confirmed three times, verses 6, 8 and 11 (in Acts there are two different accounts; the more basic one: 2:1-4 and 2:12-15, where the apostles speak in other tongues; and another more elaborate account 2:5-11, where the apostles speak Aramaic and everyone hears them speak in their own language). The miracle of Pentecost (in the second account) is not the gift of tongues but the fact that all peoples hear the apostles in their own language and culture.



### 3. Peter's speech in Pentecost: "You have made known ways of life to me" (2:14-36).

Here we wish to highlight only the two long quotes from the Hebrew Bible; Luke uses them to attempt to interpret the act of Pentecost.

First: **Joel 3:1-5** (2:17-21). It is a radically inclusive text: The Spirit of God will be poured out upon all flesh, sons and daughters, young and old, servants and maid-servants, heaven and earth and, above all, upon those who call upon the name of the Lord.

Second: **Psalms 16:8-11** (2:25-28). The psalmist reminds us of a vision of God going before us and at our right hand so that we do not stumble; God is the joy of our heart and the hope of our life, we are certain that God will not abandon us to the world of death. Finally, the verse that is the motto of our VI assembly:

***You have made known ways of life to me  
(Ps. 16:11; Ac. 2:28).***

In the Lucan work (Gospel and Acts), two paradigmatic images emerge: the "way" and the "table;"

Jesus sets out on the way from Galilee to Jerusalem and his disciples will pave the way from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. In Acts, the Jesus' movement itself is called "the way." Paul persecutes in Damascus "some of the followers of that way, men and women alike" (9:2). Apollo "had been instructed in the way of the Lord". Aquila and Priscilla "explained the way more accurately to them." (18:25, 26). Some unbelieving Jews "talked despisingly of the way before the people" (19:9). Then "not a small riot was produced in Ephesus because of the way" (19, 23). Paul says: "I persecuted the way unto death" (22:4) and "according to the way, they called a sect, I worship God" (24:14). "Felix was well-informed as to the way." (24:22).

For Luke, Christianity was simply a Way, and Christians, the followers the Way. It is a Way that goes from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth; a Way that goes from death to life.

Peter ends his discourse proclaiming the universality of the Spirit:

"for you and your children" (referring to the Jews)

"for all those who are distant" (the gentiles) and

"for those who call upon the Lord our God" (the universal call) (Ac 2:38-39).

## II. THE TWELVE APOSTLES' TESTIMONY IN JERUSALEM: ACTS 2:42-5:42 (YEARS 30-32)

Luke gives us a wonderful global vision of the communities in Jerusalem: all followed the Teachings of the apostles (didache), the fellowship (Koinonia: a single spirit, all things in common, there were no poor among them), in the breaking of the bread (the Eucharist) and they performed wonders and signs (martyria). We have these in the summaries: 2:42-42, expanded in 2:44-47/4:32-35/5:12-16.

The apostles give courageous testimony of the resurrection before the religious and political authorities of Jerusalem "We cannot keep ourselves from speaking of what we have seen and heard" (4:20). The space for the Christian community is the Temple and the house: "they went to the temple everyday... and they broke bread at the homes:" These previous points correspond to the first part of the Testament left to them by Jesus: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem" (1:8). The problem is that the second part still not begin: "You will be my witnesses in the region of Judea, Samaria and even unto the ends of the earth." Moreover, Gamaliel's intervention before the Sanhedrin brought about a certain agreement to leave the Twelve apostles alone (5:34-39). For this reason this section ends by saying that the apostles "did not cease to teach and announce the good news of Christ each day at the temple and at the homes" (5:42). Others will be the ones to carry the gospel outside of Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

## III. FROM JERUSALEM TO ANTIOCH: FROM THE JEWISH WORLD TO THE GENTILES: ACTS 6-15 (YEARS 32-48)

This part begins with a conflict, a dispute that is settled in the assembly of the disciples in Jerusalem (6:1-7), and also ends with a conflict, which is likewise resolved in the assembly of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (15:1-35). In both conflicts plurality and the mission of the Jesus movement is what is at stake.

There are three moments in this section:

First, the foundation of the church of Antioch (chapters 6-12).

Second, the mission of the church of Antioch to the gentiles (chapters 13-14).

Third, the Council of Jerusalem: the legitimization of the church of Antioch (15:1-35).



## 1. The Foundation of the church of Antioch: chapters 6-12

### a) The cry of the Hellenist widows (6:1-7)

Two Judeo-Christian groups appear in the Christian community of Jerusalem: The "Hebrews" of Aramaic tongue and culture, and the Hellenists of Greek tongue and culture. The most important thing that separates them is their theological difference: the Christian Hebrews loyally follow the Law and the Temple, while the Hellenists are critical of this tradition (this is deduced from the whole context, especially from Steven's speech).



One day a problem arises in the daily distribution of goods: the Hellenists complain about the fact that their widows are being neglected. The cry of the widows makes evident this issue of discrimination against the Hellenist group. The Twelve then summon the Assembly and say: "It does not seem right that we give up the Word of God by serving the distribution at the tables: everyone agreed and then went on to elect seven men full of the Holy Spirit and Wisdom for the distribution at the tables, so that the Twelve might devote themselves to the 'distribution' of the Word." The Twelve here represent the Judeo-Christian Hebrews, and the Seven, the Hellenistic Judeo-Christians.

### b) The Acts of the Hellenists: Steven, Philip and others: mission to the gentiles and the foundation of the church of Antioch (6:8-11:30).

The distribution at the tables, which was really service to the poor, led the seven Hellenists to a greater witness role among the people: "Steven filled with grace and power began to work miracles and great signs among the people." We can read the acts of Steven (6:8— 8:3) where we are told about the day of his death when a bitter persecution started against the church in Jerusalem and everyone except the apostles fled to the country districts of Judea and Samaria.

Luke allows us to understand that the Twelve and the Hebrew group are not persecuted and continue on in Jerusalem. The group dispersed were the Hellenists who are now responding to the second part of the Testament of Jesus, to go beyond Jerusalem "to the country districts of Judea and Samaria"(8:1).

In 8:4-40, we have the acts of Philip (the second of the Hellenists) who preaches to the Samaritans and then to an Ethiopian eunuch. In 11:19-30, we have the acts of other anonymous Hellenists, also a part of the Dispersion. Some of them went to Antioch where they started preaching to the Greeks proclaiming the Good News of the Lord Jesus to them as well." (11:20). Barnabas and Paul, from Jerusalem and Tarsus respectively, come to confirm the work of the church of Antioch "where they were first called Christians." The church of Antioch was so solid a foundation that, in solidarity, they could even send resources to alleviate the suffering of the church of Jerusalem during their time of hunger.

In these acts of the Hellenists (6:1—8:30) that follows upon the Acts of the Apostles in Jerusalem (2:42—5:42) show a growing pluralism in the Jesus' Movement. There are now two completely legitimate groups of Christians: the Hebrews and the Hellenists. Christian communities among the Samaritans and Gentiles also rise up and perhaps even one in Ethiopia, founded by the Ethiopian eunuch. The Jesus Movement now has two centers: Jerusalem where the majority are Christian Jews with a Hebrew tongue, culture and theology, and Antioch whose greatest number are Christian gentiles, with a Hellenistic language, culture and theology. This pluralism has allowed Jesus' testament to become a reality: setting out from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, in order to reach out to all nations, people and cultures.

### c) The Acts of Peter (10:1-11:18): The conversion of Cornelius, the centurion; the conversion of Peter and the conversion of the church of Jerusalem.

In the middle of the Acts of the Hellenists, Luke introduces the Acts of Peter for the purpose of legitimizing and reinforcing the movement of the Spirit discovered in the mission to the gentiles already begun by the Hellenists. The novelty now is that not only does the



Spirit convert Cornelius, but also Peter and the church of Jerusalem. Cornelius is a Roman centurion who lives in Caesarea and is a commander in the Roman occupation forces in Palestine. He and his family were “God-fearing”; that is, gentiles who seek God according to the Jewish tradition. Throughout the narrative of the Acts of Peter, the main character is the Holy Spirit who acts simultaneously in both Peter and Cornelius. Peter appears on the scene as a faithful Jew and observer of the Law: “he does not eat anything profane or unclean” (10:14). The first thing he says upon entering Cornelius’ house is that, as a Jew he “is forbidden to mix with people of another race and to visit them” (10:28). The Judeo-Christian church of Jerusalem, which shares that same mentality, will reproach Peter: “So you have been visiting the uncircumcised and eating with them, have you?” (11:3). The Holy Spirit, besides acting in Cornelius, must have acted almost violently with Peter and the church of Jerusalem, bringing about the conversion of Cornelius, Peter and the church of Jerusalem. The conclusion that they all reach is wonderful: “God” they said, “can evidently grant the pagans the repentance that leads to life.” (11:18).

Luke here develops a missionary model that will be valid for all times: first, the Holy Spirit not only acts in the missionaries and the Church, but also in the peoples that seek God even before they are preached to; and second, the conversion of other peoples also demands the conversion of the Church.

## **2. The Mission of the Church of Antioch to the Gentiles:** chapters 13-14

### **a) A church of Prophets and Teachers (13:1)**

The church of Jerusalem (chapters 1 to 5) was led by TWELVE apostles; SEVEN men filled with the Holy Spirit and Wisdom propelled forward the Hellenistic movement (chapters 6-12). Next the church of Antioch is presided over by FIVE prophets and teachers (13:1). Luke begins by delineating both the diversity and the cultural, ethnic and social pluralism of these five: Barnabas, a Jewish Levite from Cyprus who lives in Jerusalem (Acts 4:36-37); Simeon called Niger, an Aramaic name with a Latin surname, identifying him as ethnically black. Lucius, (a Latin name), from Cirenaica in the north of Africa. Manaen, a Hebrew name written in Greek, was raised as an infant with the tetrarch Herod; and Saul, a Pharisee from the Diaspora and a persecutor of the church, who later becomes a disciple.

### **b) Rejected by the Jews and open towards the Gentiles (13:2-14:27)**

We have here the first mission of the church of Antioch

(to call this Paul’s first missionary journey is really inaccurate). It is the mission to Cyprus, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. The mission is inspired by the Holy Spirit who says: “I want Barnabas and Saul set apart for the work to which I have called them... So these two, sent out on their mission by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia...” (13:2-4).

The climax of the mission is Antioch of Pisidia. Here Luke introduces a missiological paradigm: the mission begins in the synagogue with the Jews and the “God-fearers” (those gentiles who sympathize with the Jewish religion). The mission enjoys an initial success: “The next Sabbath almost the whole town assembled to hear the word of God,” but this success prompts the jealousy of the Jewish leaders who contradict Paul with blasphemies. Then Paul makes a solemn decision:

***We had to proclaim the word of God to you first, but since you have rejected it... we must turn to the pagans (ta ethne). For this is what the Lord commanded us to do: I have made you a light for the nations so that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth.***

This is motive for joy among the pagans; they glorify the Word of God which now spreads throughout the region. The Jews then ally themselves with the powerful of the city to expel the missionaries. In short, the paradigm is: first, to the Jews, then to the gentiles. This paradigm will repeat itself in Corinth (18:5-7) and Ephesus (19:8-9). The same scheme is also found in Luke 4:16-30, the scene of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth: at first it goes well for him, but afterwards they try to kill him when he announces the universal character of his message. At the conclusion of Acts this paradigm will be radically questioned and another substituted in its place.

The missionaries finally return to the church of Antioch from where they set out and tell the community “how God had opened the door of faith to the pagans (to non-Jewish peoples and cultures: all included under the Greek term *ta ethne*),” (14:26-28).

## **3. The Council of Jerusalem (15:1-35):** plurality at stake

Some brothers from Judea come to Antioch and make this demand upon the gentiles in the Christian community: “Unless you have yourselves circumcised in the tradition of Moses, you cannot be saved.” The same was happening in Jerusalem, where some Pharisees who had embraced the faith held: “that the pagans should be circumcised and instructed to abide by the Law of



Moses' Accession to this demand would mean the religious, cultural and social integration of the gentiles into the Jewish world. It would be the end of diversity and plurality already won through a missionary practice inspired by the Holy Spirit. The apostles and the elders of Jerusalem call an assembly to deal with this conflict.

Two positions develop in this assembly, Peter's and that of James and the elders. They are two positions based on different theological visions, though at the end they fundamentally come to an agreement. Gentile Christians should not be forced to be circumcised.

Peter's speech (15:7-12) is based upon his experience of the Spirit in Cornelius' conversion. He draws two conclusions from this experience. First, that God communicated this Spirit to the gentiles in the same way as he did to the apostles. Second, even more radically, we are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as the gentiles. In other words, the salvation of the Jews serves as a model for the salvation of the gentiles: by grace and not by fulfillment of the Law.

James's speech is very different (15:13-21). He concedes not to bother the gentiles about circumcision but decides that in general the Christian gentiles should observe four laws when living in Jewish territory. James sees Jesus' church as universally Judeo-Christian. Christian gentiles live within its confines and therefore must respect the laws of community life of the Judeo-Christians. James still has an ethno-centric view of the church.

The assembly's final agreement in not demanding the circumcision of the Christian gentiles legitimized the existence of a gentile church with its non-Jewish culture and its theological vision. On the other hand, the Judeo-Christian church of Jerusalem kept its identity, even with its ethnic-centered vision of the church and the world.

#### IV. FROM ANTIOCH TO ROME: ACTS 15 - 28 (YEARS 48-60), THE ACTS OF PAUL

##### 1. Paul's Missionary Journeys: 15:36-19:20 (years 48-55)

###### a) The Holy Spirit does violence to Paul and shatters his ethnocentricity (Acts 15:36-16:10)

Paul (according to Luke), at the conclusion of the Jerusalem Council, still does not have a mission to the gentiles in mind, but rather a journey to consolidate the churches that were already founded in southern Galatia.

That is why it is not surprising that Paul circumcises Timothy and takes upon himself the task of spreading the ethnocentric decisions made by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem: The Holy Spirit struggles with Paul (almost in a physical way) to prevent him from going to the regions of Asia and Bithynia, but rather, to go to Troas after the vision of a Macedonian begs him to come to his land. Paul thus feels obliged by the Spirit to go to Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, and then on to Athens, Corinth and Ephesus. Paul's initially ethnically centered attitude causes a break up with Mark and Barnabas, who go directly to the gentiles.

###### b) Paul in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea: teaching the gospel to the "God-fearing" Greeks (16:11-17; 15)

In the province of Macedonia, Paul first seeks out the Jews but has little success with them. His greatest success is with the "God-fearing gentiles". They attended synagogue, especially in the Diaspora, to listen to the word of God. That is where Paul finds them and brings about many conversions. In Thessalonica, it is explicitly stated that "a few Jews were converted and a great many Greeks who adored God." (17:4). Among these "God-worshipping" Greeks, Luke highlights the strong presence of socially prominent women (Lydia in 16:4 and some others in 17:4 and 12). Paul also, while in prison, experiences the conversion of a Roman jailer and his whole family during the wonderful night of his liberation (16:25-34).

###### c) Paul in Athens: His speech to the Greek philosophers (Acts 17:16-34).

In Macedonia, Paul was circulating in a fundamentally Jewish environment. In Athens, he is definitely in a gentile city, the center of the dominant Greek culture and philosophy; the city of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle; the city that imposed the Attic dialect, the basis of the Hellenist language called common or "koine" Greek. "Paul was innerly indignant at the sight of the city filled with idols". Paul held daily discussions in the public square, especially with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Finally, Paul is taken to Areopagus, the southern hill where the supreme council of the city is gathered, to make a speech. This speech is a paradigm adopted from the first missionaries' preaching to the Greek world. Luke might be the author of this speech, but he gleans the words from the experiences all of Paul and the first missionaries.

Paul's point of departure (17:22b-23) is the Athenian respect for divinity. This is demonstrated by the inscription on their altar: "Dedicated to the unknown god." Paul announces to the Athenians who the God is that they unknowingly worship.



This is followed by another narration (17:24-29). Even if Paul should be relying upon his knowledge of the Bible, he does not quote it in any way. The only explicit quote he uses is one by the Greek philosophers who said “we are all his children.” Paul takes as his starting point concepts and ideas found in Greek philosophy. In verses 24-25, Paul resorts to their ideas about the Creator God to show the senselessness of idolatry. Then in verses 26-29 he reminds them about the creation of humanity, in order to inhabit the earth and seek God, to see if, through our groping, we manage to find him, for in him we live, we move and exist.

After this presentation in which Paul readily avails himself of known Greek thought, he goes on to his argumentation (17:30-31). Paul directly confronts Greek thought with the gospel. He announces conversion, justice and resurrection. The gospel demands conversion to put an end to ignorance (moral, not intellectual ignorance) and to judge the world according to the justice brought about by a man (he does not mention Jesus), who is risen from the dead. The resurrection is the guarantee that judgment will be just.

Paul is rejected but does not totally fail, for a small Christian community is born in Athens among Dionysius, Damaris and some others (17:32-34).

**d) Paul in Corinth and Ephesus: massive conversions and fruitful evangelization among the Gentiles: God’s Word grows and gains strength (18:1-19:20)**

Paul, as is his custom, begins his mission in Corinth in the synagogue. It is only when Paul is rejected by the Jews that he tells them: “From now on I can go to the pagans with a clear conscience...” (18:6) The same scheme is repeated in Antioch in Pisidia (13:46). Paul sees God’s will in preaching the word of God first to the Jews; they are the priority. That is why he feels guilty about addressing the gentiles. The rejection by the Jews now allows Paul to discover Jesus’ will to go to the gentiles. For over a year and a half he will teach the gentiles the word of God in the house of a Justus, one “who adored God” (18:5-8). Paul is so reluctant about this mission to the gentiles that Jesus himself will appear to him in a vision to say to him: “Do not be afraid to speak out, nor allow yourself to be silenced; I am with you. I have so many people on my side in this city that no one will even attempt to hurt you.”(18:9-10).

In Ephesus, a similar scheme emerges. Paul begins in the synagogue. After three months of teaching there, he is rejected, he breaks off from them and forms a separate group with his disciples, and daily he would speak with them in the school of Tirana. This lasted for two

years. These were the developments that allowed all the inhabitants of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, to hear the word of God.



What was new in Ephesus and Corinth is not so much the rejection by the Jews, but Paul’s option to devote himself not only to the “God-fearing” Greeks, but to the Greeks in general. This, by the way happened in two large and important cities, utterly Greek in their culture and religion and over a long period of time (a year and a half in Corinth and two years in Ephesus).

Luke sums up Paul’s total mission result, from the Jerusalem Council up to now, with these words: “In this impressive way the word of the Lord spread more and more widely and successfully”(19:20). This same expression is found in 6:7 and 12:24.

**2. Paul’s journey of suffering to Jerusalem and Rome (19:21-22; years 56-60)**

**a) Paul decides to go to Jerusalem and from there, to Rome (19:21-22)**

It is very difficult to understand Acts 19:21-22, if not complemented by Romans 15:17-33. Paul’s letter makes the geographical horizon is clear: Paul wants to go from Jerusalem to Rome and then on to Spain from Rome. For the mentality of that time, Spain was, in its western position, regarded as the ends of the earth. Beyond that, there was the great sea and the abyss. Luke sees Paul’s journey to Rome (Acts



19:21) as his starting point for the journey to Spain. With this journey Paul would be fulfilling Jesus' testament of being "witnesses unto the ends of the earth." (1: 6).

**b) Paul's testament in Troas and Miletus (20:1-21,15)**

In Troas, on the first day of the week, Paul spends all night preaching to the community and celebrates Eucharist with them. It is a farewell celebration (20:7-12). In Miletus, Paul makes a farewell speech to the elders of the church of Ephesus. This is Paul's authentic spiritual last will and testament. (20:17-38).

**c) Paul's judgment and passion in Jerusalem, Caesarea and Rome (21:16-28:16)**

Paul's missionary group arrives at Jerusalem and gathers at James' home, joined by the brothers and sisters of the Jerusalem church. There is deep misunderstanding among them. Let us look at this directly in the words of the speakers:

Paul: "he gave a detailed account of all that God had done among the pagans through his ministry" (21:19).

James and the elders of Jerusalem: "But you see, brother," they said, "how thousands of Jews have now become believers, all of them staunch upholders of the Law, and they have heard that you instruct all Jews living among the pagans to break away from Moses, authorizing them not to circumcise their children or to follow the customary practices" (21:21).

What the church of Jerusalem is saying is really untrue, but, to avoid breaking the unity of the church, Paul submits to James' view; in spite of it all, he is arrested and will have to undergo a long trial and passion in Jerusalem, Caesarea and Rome. Paul defends himself in this trial with three apologetic speeches (again, it is uncertain whether Paul is defending himself or is it Luke defending Paul).

The first defense is made before the Jewish nation, 22:1-21.

The second defense is before Felix, the Roman governor in Caesarea, 24:10-21.

The third is made before King Agrippa in Caesarea (26:1-23).

In 25:8, we find a summary of this defense: "I have committed no offense whatsoever against either Jewish law or the temple or Caesar." Since the Jews want to kill him, Paul appeals to Caesar and is sent to Rome. The journey to Rome is one of a martyr for Jesus (27-28, 16).

**V. PAUL'S DEFINITE BREAK WITH JEWISH ETHNOCENTRICITY AND THE UNIVERSAL TRIUMPH OF THE GOSPEL (28:16-31; YEAR 60).**

The first part tells us of Paul's arrival at Rome (28:16-22), of his house imprisonment and of his meeting with prominent Jews. Paul recounts his whole trial to them. But the leading Jews are rather uninterested in this matter and prefer to listen directly to what Paul has to say.

In the second part (28:23-28) we have Paul's break with Jewish ethnocentricity and his definite conversion to the Holy Spirit. This is the climactic point of the entire Acts of Paul (chapters 15-28).

Let us look at this text, point by point:

- 1) A great number of leading Jews enter the house where Paul is staying.
- 2) Paul makes a thorough, from early morning until evening, and emotional proclamation of the Kingdom of God, based on the law and the prophets, giving witness and trying to persuade them with regard to Jesus.
- 3) Some believe but others remain incredulous.
- 4) They disagree among themselves and leave Paul's house.
- 5) As they leave, Paul makes this one statement:

***How aptly the Holy Spirit spoke when he told YOUR ancestors through the prophet Isaiah: 'Go to this nation and say: You will hear and hear again but not understand See and see again, but will not perceive. For the heart of this nation has grown coarse, Their ears are dull of hearing and they have shut their eyes, For fear they should see with their eyes, hear with their ears, Understand with their heart, and be converted And be healed by me.'***

Paul has finally come to understand that the Holy Spirit is right. Isaiah's text (Is 6:9-10) allows him to realize that the Holy Spirit was right the whole time. This text is used in the same sense throughout the whole of apostolic tradition: in Mark (4:12), Matthew (13:13-15), Luke (8:10) and John (12:39-40). Paul says that the Holy Spirit spoke to "your" ancestors, not "our" ances-



tors, thus demonstrating the clear break with the Jewish community.

A similar situation can be seen in Antioch, Pisidia (13:44-49), in Corinth (18:5-7) and in Ephesus (19:8-9). Paul was still hoping to see in these cities a massive and significant conversion of Jews as the initial stage of the mission to the pagans (gentiles). His pastoral priority was: first the Jews, then the gentiles. When the Jews rejected him, he then went to the gentiles, but kept on working for the conversion of the Jewish nation as a nation. He comes to question and replace his former scheme; Paul becomes aware of the fact that the conversion of the Jewish nation as a nation will not become a reality at that moment. Salvation now is not for them, but for the gentiles. Paul, therefore, can devote himself entirely and with good conscience to the mission to the gentiles. That is what the Holy Spirit willed from the very beginning, but Paul resisted, reluctant to accept it. Now he finally realizes that the Holy Spirit is right and he bases this fact on the Isaiah text. The Jews are not necessarily a permanently excluded priority for the spreading of the gospel; it is a temporary pastoral exclusion, so that the church might be able to break away from Jewish ethnocentricity and open up to the gentiles, nations, cultures and religions, to the ends of the earth. This does not mean that individual Jews may not come to believe in the gospel.

In the last part (28:30-31), we have the conclusion to the whole book of Acts:

**Paul proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ with all courage and without hindrance from anyone.**

“Courage (parrhesía)” was necessary to be able to withstand the external persecutions and harassments of the Roman and Jewish authorities. “Without hindrance from anyone” refers internally to the missionaries whose mistaken theologies and choices were impeding the missionary action of the Holy Spirit. Courageous and unhindered by any obstacles, Jesus’ Testament could now ultimately be fulfilled (1:8). That is why Luke closes his book on the Acts of the Apostles at this point. Luke does not tell us whether Paul was freed or sentenced because this book is not a biography of the missionaries, but rather, a biography of the word of God. The Acts of the Apostles has clearly shown to us the WAY that leads to LIFE. The challenge is that we today walk along that same way.

(Transl.: R.M. Pedrazza / G. Banks)

## Summary

1. *The basic root of pluralism found in the first communities is introduced by Luke at the beginning of Acts; it appears a second time in the Pentecost story. The complete program of Jesus’ movement is introduced by Luke in these two texts in Acts.*
2. *The Holy Spirit gives impulse to Jesus’ movement along the long road that starts from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The road is paved by the constant rupture of the cultural, ethnic, social and religious barriers. These are the ruptures that make possible the creation of a different community among other peoples, nations and cultures. It is the “violence” of the Spirit that makes these ruptures possible, this mission for all people and the creation of Christianity, at one time pluralistic and diversified.*
3. *The Spirit also changes the priorities, schemes or missionary paradigms in a sequential manner. First of all, the Jews possess exclusivity inside Jerusalem. Secondly, the mission is opened to the Samaritans and to an Ethiopian eunuch. Thirdly, the mission seeks the Jews in the synagogue of the dispersed but is guided inside of it especially towards those gentiles “fearful of God”. Fourthly, the mission is addressed to the gentiles though keeping within the scheme of “first the Jews and then the gentiles.” Finally, the ethnocentric scheme that gave the Jews priority is given up and the mission is definitely addressed to the gentiles of every town and nation.*
4. *The breaking of barriers, the changes in pastoral strategies and the creation of new communities in the different cultures and peoples is not the work of a single missionary group, but of different people chosen by the Holy Spirit.*
5. *The mission to all people always demands the conversion of the missionaries and churches. The conversion of Cornelius would not have been possible were it not for Paul’s own conversion. The mission to all people was made possible only when Paul gave priority to the mission to the gentiles and when there was a significant change in the mentality of the mother church of Jerusalem.*



## Religious Pluralism - A Theological Consideration

Michael L. Fitzgerald



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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary discussion with regard to the plurality of religions and interreligious relations has taken a more practical turn. The question that is being asked is whether religions, or civilizations marked by religions, must necessarily be in conflict. Are the different religions and the cultures that they help to shape like so many celestial bodies on paths that will inevitably collide? If the answer to such a question is positive – with obvious negative results – then the further question arises as to the best way of ensuring damage limitation. If the answer is negative, or at least dubitative rather than positive, then again further questions arise: how can the projected clash of religiously influenced cultures be avoided? What would be the role of interreligious dialogue in these preventive measures?

This contemporary context is evoked, not so much to evaluate it for its own sake – and it could be demonstrated that the theory of a necessary civilization clash involves some serious over-simplifications – but rather to show that theological reflection would not appear to be a primary concern.

This does not mean that such theological reflection has not taken place. For proof to the contrary it is sufficient to glance through the fifty or so pages of bibliography in Jacques Dupuis work *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 1997). Moreover there would be a practical advantage in pursuing this reflection, since it could help to reveal the complexities inherent in the question of the encounter of religions and thus demonstrate the inadvisability of quick and superficial answers.

The intention of the paper is not to evaluate all the different theological positions regarding religious pluralism, but to present some reflections based on traditional Catholic teaching.

First a word should be said about religious pluralism as a phenomenon both ancient and modern. After emphasizing the need for a Christian, and indeed Catholic, theological reflection, some propositions will be presented regarding the centrality of the mission of the Incarnate Word and the role of the Holy Spirit. A warning will be added about a naive and over-positive attitude towards existing religious traditions. The conclusion will be open-ended, indicating that all questions are not yet answered, and therefore further theological reflection will be required.

### 2. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

#### 2.1 Not a new phenomenon

The Declaration *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council, in its introductory paragraph states:

***Men look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence. The problems that weigh heavily on the hearts of men are the same today as in the past. What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of life? (NA, 1).***

Other questions are added. The point is not so much the questions as the fact that answers have been sought from religions (in the plural), and surely one could say in the past just as today.

If we look at the Scriptures, we see that the Jewish people, chosen by God to bear witness to monotheism, had to accomplish their mission in a religiously pluralistic environment. That the relationship was largely conflictual can be considered irrelevant. What is of interest is that Judaism cannot ignore the religious reality with which it is surrounded.



Christianity, too, soon becomes aware of religious pluralism. There is the growing consciousness, painful perhaps, of the early community that it is distinct from Judaism, with the theologically founded but very practical consequence that observance of the full Jewish law is not required of Christians. Then comes the encounter with polytheism, as symbolised by the shock sustained by Paul in Athens. The Christian Church will be confronted also by emperor worship, and will be seen to be in rivalry with Eastern cults such as Mithraism. As Christianity spreads from the Mediterranean area to other parts of the world it will meet with other religious expressions. It will find itself also face to face with a new religion, Islam.

Islam did not set out to be a new religion. Indeed according to its own self-perception it is the original religion, indeed *the* religion, that God willed for humankind. Yet Islam was born in a religiously plural environment, where Jews and Christians did not accept the message and remained as distinct communities. Other groups, too, were recognized as having a legitimate status, Sabaeans (Mandaeans) and Majus, or Magians (Zoroastrians). In its later expansion Islam will meet with other religions, for instance Hinduism, with its temples and its rites so foreign to the Islamic spirit. Islam in a sense will have to come to terms with this reality. Hinduism itself experienced, long before the rise of Islam, religious differentiation. Though Hinduism is not a unified religion, but rather a conglomeration of different traditions, there grew up some traditions which proved to be completely distinct, such as Jainism and Buddhism.

Later history will see the formation of new religious groups, or new religions, such as Sikhism in India, the Baha'i religion in Iran, and Tenrikyo, in Japan, to give just a few examples from former centuries. The religious map of the world has always been subject to change.

## 2.2 Pluralism today

If even regarding the past it would be incorrect to see the world divided into religious 'blocs': Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, with only the Jews, because of their dispersal, scattered to various regions, this would reflect even less present reality. With the increased mobility of the modern world, the religions are brought into contact more than ever.

John Paul II, in his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, stated that the Second Vatican Council had presented to the Church "a view of the terrestrial globe as a map of various religions". He noted a further complication insofar as this map

***has superimposed on it, in previously unknown layers typical of our time, the phenomenon of atheism in its various forms, beginning with the atheism that is programmed, organized and structured as a political system (RH 11).***

In a later encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II added another aspect:

***Our times are both momentous and fascinating. While on the one hand people seem to be pursuing material prosperity and to be sinking ever deeper into consumerism and materialism, on the other hand we are witnessing a desperate search for meaning, the need for an inner life, and a desire to learn new forms and methods of meditation and prayers. Not only in cultures with strong religious elements, but also in secularized societies, the spiritual dimension of life is being sought after as an antidote to dehumanization (RM 38).***

This search for meaning has given rise to a new type of pluralism. Margins are moving, borders are becoming blurred. Some people are looking to more than one tradition and, in a post-modern spirit, are building up their own religion as it were "à la carte". Here would come the nebulous New Age, which covers a multitude of realities. Others, while professing to belong to one tradition (usually Christian), become simultaneously practitioners of another tradition. This parallel practice, with a sense of double belonging, is not without presenting new theological and pastoral problems.

## 3. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

If theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, what is to be understood in the light of faith is reality "out there", and not any idealized version of reality. So faith has to try to come to grips with the reality of religious pluralism, and attempt to make some sense of it. The light of revelation is thrown on this reality, revelation which has come down to us in various ways, but finally in the Son, concretized in the Scriptures and received through tradition. Theological reflection will attempt to produce a satisfying synthesis. Since some elements may be difficult to fit into the theological framework chosen, this can be subject to challenge. New approaches will be tried, and a new synthesis proposed. This is the nature of the developing science of theology.

It is important to note that theology, since it starts from faith, is always particularized. There will be a Buddhist



explanation of reality (avoiding the term theology, since Buddhists do not usually speak of God), an Islamic theology, a Christian (perhaps even a Catholic) theology. To try to develop a "world theology" which would be acceptable to all would be an impossible task. Attempting to suit everyone would result in satisfying no one. The reflections which follow will therefore be resolutely Catholic.

This does not mean that the underlying universality should be overlooked by particular theologies. One of my predecessors, Piero Rossano, used to emphasize the need to pay attention to *homo religiosus*. If similar phenomena are found in different religious traditions, is not this because the human being is naturally inclined to offer cultic expression to belief in the Transcendent? Theological reflection should be aware of both the similarities and the differences, the latter coming from particular frameworks of reference.

For Christians the particular framework is provided by the fulness of revelation given in Jesus Christ. For Catholic theology this remains central.

It does not seem necessary here to go over the different approaches to the theology of religions, particularly as regards their salvific role (see my article *Teologia delle religioni: panoramica*, in *Il Regno* N.786 {1 febbraio 1997}). The classification into *exclusivism*, *inclusivism* and *pluralism*, has often been given (as for example in the document of the International Theological Commission *Christianity and World Religions*). It is well known, and therefore a detailed discussion does not have to be carried out. Moreover the value of these distinctions has been contested. Gavin D'Costa, for instance, has argued that different forms of pluralism really collapse into exclusivism, and he would say the same too of inclusivism (cf. Gavin D'Costa, *The Meaning of Religions and the Trinity*, New York, Orbis Books, 2000). While I do not agree with all D'Costa's arguments, I will to some extent follow his method by concentrating on essential points of Catholic doctrine.

#### 4. JESUS CHRIST, THE WAY

A fundamental dogma of the Catholic faith, one which has been re-stated forcefully by the Second Vatican Council and to which Pope John Paul II constantly returns, is the universal dimension of the Incarnation. *Gaudium et Spes* states that "by his incarnation, he, the son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man" (GS 22). The whole of humanity has been affected, from the beginning of time to its end, extending to all geographical areas. So the Son of Man identifies himself with the person in need:

"I tell you solemnly in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40). No time limit is indicated for this identification. It would appear to hold good for the period before the Incarnation as much as after it. As the Divine Word takes flesh and comes into time, so the divinity which is beyond time or outside of time allows its influence to be felt throughout the whole of time.



To this must be added that the Incarnate Word opens up the way of salvation for all. As *Gaudium et Spes* says also:

**for since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery (GS 22).**

("partners" is perhaps not the best translation; another version suggests "being associated with". The *Catholic Catechism of the Church* (CCC) has "partakers").

The paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Jesus, is indicated as the way to salvation, and a way open to all. The whole teaching of Paul is to be borne in mind. It is through death to self, and this implies death to sin, that the human person comes to true life in Jesus Christ. This personal re-enactment of the paschal mystery is operated through baptism, the foundation of the Christian life. The continuous living of this mystery which baptism demands is sustained particularly by the Eucharist through which the paschal mystery is made present.

Now we should remember, too, the traditional teaching of the Church that salvation is not confined only to those who have received the sacrament of baptism. There is the



possibility of the *baptism of blood*. There is also the possibility of the *baptism of desire*. "Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved." (CCC 1260). The Catechism adds: "It may be supposed that such persons would have *desired Baptism explicitly*, if they had known its necessity" (*Ibid.*).

This teaching does of course raise problems. How is ignorance of the Gospel and of the Church to be understood? In today's pluralistic world it might be imagined that everyone has the opportunity of coming into contact with the Church and hearing the Gospel. In point of fact, though, and some of my own confreres can bear witness to this, there are people who never in their lives have met with a Christian. Moreover, the mere encounter with a Christian does not imply necessarily that there is an opportunity to know and understand the Gospel message and to appreciate the importance of the Church. A Muslim, who will know something of Jesus from the Qur'an, may not feel impelled to seek further knowledge from the Christian Scriptures. This should not be categorized immediately as *culpable* ignorance. The *Catechism*, when treating of the stages of revelation, speaks of the Covenant with Noah. It states that this covenant "remains in force during the times of the Gentiles, until the universal proclamation of the Gospel" (CCC 58). It does not make explicit when this universal proclamation will have been completed.

Before attempting to show what role the religions may play in this way to salvation, one further question needs to be clarified. It has been suggested that there can be a real diversity of actual religious ends. In other words, that different religions aim to bring people to distinct goals, not just as intermediate ends, but for their final destination. Thus it would be legitimate to speak about salvations in the plural (cf. S. Mark Heim, *Salvations. Truth and Difference in Religion*, Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis Books, 1995). This would seem difficult to accept. Surely from the Christian point of view, and this is the point of view adopted in Christian theology, there can be only one salvation. The concept is expressed in the following simple way in the glossary appended to the second English edition of the Catechism: "The forgiveness of sins and restoration of friendship with God, which can be done by God alone". It is the idea of friendship with God which is to be noted. In fact the Scriptures go further and speak about sharing in divine life as the ultimate reward for human beings who live in friendship with God.

It is Jesus who is the Way to this divine life. How then can the religions play any role?

According to our Christian faith, Jesus is certainly the Way, and the way he has followed himself leads through the narrow gate of death to resurrection to new life. The human person is invited to enter, with the assistance of divine grace, into this way of dying and rising.

The different religions can help in this process, for they contain elements that are true and holy. They enshrine precepts and doctrines which "often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men" (NA 2). They may inculcate a manner of life and conduct which is to be highly regarded. As Paul VI said, the religions possess "a splendid patrimony of religious writings" and they "have taught generations of men how to pray" (*Evangellii Nuntiandi* 53). Such are the elements which allow the followers of the different religions to enter into the paschal mystery. It may be through turning the mind away from self and towards God in prayer. It may be through the practice of right thinking and right speaking. It may be through the service of one's fellow human beings. In such a way the religions provide the possibility for developing a life of friendship with God, though they themselves would not necessarily express what they are doing in these terms.

What has been said should not be taken to mean that the different religions are all perfect, and that it does not matter to which religion one belongs. Vatican II teaches us to recognize elements of truth and holiness in the religions. It never puts them on a par with the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. The religions can provide help along the way of salvation, but they are not independent ways of salvation. As the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* says:

***Concretely, it will be in the sincere practice of what is Good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize him as their Saviour (DP 29).***

So, it states further:

***the mystery of salvation reaches out to them, in a way known to God, through the invisible action of the Holy Spirit" (Ibid.).***

## 5. THE ROLE OF THE SPIRIT

Can anything more be said about this "invisible action" of the Holy Spirit? Attention can be paid to



both the individual and the collective dimensions of this action.

Building on the teaching of Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and of John Paul II in *Dominum et Vivificantem*, the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* pays particular attention to the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is present both in the one who proclaims the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ and in the one who responds to this proclamation. To the one the Holy Spirit will suggest the words necessary for the right presentation of the message. To the other the Spirit will give the necessary predisposition to be open and receptive to the Good News (cf DP 64). It must therefore always be borne in mind that the presentation of the Gospel message is not carried out in a vacuum,

***for the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is present and active among the hearers of the Good News even before the Church's missionary action comes into operation (DP 68; cf RM 12; DV 53).***

The recipients may well have been influenced by authentic values in their own religious traditions. This brings us to the collective dimension of the Spirit's action.

One of the goals of interreligious dialogue is to "acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral good found among non-Christians, as well as their social and cultural values" (NA 2). The presence of these values is attributed to the work of the Spirit who, as Vatican II teaches, was "at work in the world before Christ was glorified" (AG 4). Perhaps this is why Paul, while exhorting the Philippians to let their tolerance be evident to everyone, including presumably those around them who did not share their faith, could exhort them to fill their minds with

***everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honour, and everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise (Phil 4:8).***

Such goodness can exist not only in individuals but also "in the rites and customs of people" (LG 17). As John Paul II states in *Redemptoris Missio*:

***The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, people, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of noble ideas and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history (RM 28).***

We are put in mind of the powerful passage in Romans

where Paul speaks of the work of the Spirit. He says first of all that "the Spirit himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God" (Rm 8:16). He then speaks of creation's eager expectation for the mystery of divine sonship to be fully revealed. This is put in a striking way: "From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth" (Rm 8:22). Can it not be said that the Spirit is present in this groaning, as in the united witness? It may be difficult at times to distinguish what is purely human and what is of the Spirit, precisely because the Spirit unites himself to the human spirit.

We are treading on delicate ground here, connected with the distinction between nature and grace. Fr. Georges Cottier, reflecting on the theological questions raised by the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, drew attention to this:

***It is disastrous (ruineux) to ignore the resources proper to nature. The religious dimension, however, belongs to human nature as such. So it can produce fruits which are authentically religious. Certainly the Holy Spirit can make use of these after having purified them, but that is another problem. Yet the present tendency towards a sort of pan-pneumatism mixes things up and leads to confusion (Georges Cottier, Quelques noeuds théologiques, in PATH 1 (2002/1), p. 57).***

One may question nevertheless whether this distinction, important in theory, always holds good in practice. It is a doctrine of the Church that God can be known by the natural light of human reason. In fact, however, there is difficulty in achieving this knowledge by unaided reason. The help of revelation is therefore needed, with the corresponding grace to accept this revelation through faith. So in these circumstances nature and grace are not neatly divided, but rather cooperate.

A further point has to be made regarding the action of the Spirit. It is not to be separated from that of the Word made flesh. Rather it is the Spirit that gives effect to that potentially salvific contact with the whole of humanity established by the Word precisely in becoming incarnate and entering into humanity. This is true for those who lived prior to the historical event of the Incarnation as it is for those who have come into existence after this event. The declaration *Dominus Jesus* concludes its section on the Holy Spirit with the following clear statement:

***In conclusion, the action of the Spirit is not outside or parallel to the action of Christ. There is only one salvific economy of the one and triune God, realized in the mystery of the***



***incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son of God, actualized with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit and extended in its salvific value to all humanity and to the entire universe (Dominus Jesus 12).***

## 6. RELIGIOUS AMBIGUITY

To attribute what is good and noble in religious traditions to the action of the Spirit is not equivalent to giving blanket approval to these traditions. Reflecting on the Day of Prayer for Peace, held in Assisi in October 1986, John Paul II spoke of unity and diversity. The order of unity, in creation and redemption, he presented as of divine origin, whereas divergences, even in the religious field, would go back to a "human fact". He was referring to differences "in which are revealed the limitation, the evolution and the falls of the human spirit which is undermined by the spirit of evil in history" (*Discourse to the Roman Curia*, 22 December 1986 n. 5).

It must be admitted, of course, that such an observation applies also to Christianity, since the Christian faith is lived out by people who are weak and sinful. This is stated clearly in the Decree on Ecumenism of Vatican II:

***Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is an institution of men here on earth. Consequently, if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in Church discipline, or even in the way the Church teaching has been formulated – to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself – these should be set right at the opportune moment and in the proper way (UR 6).***

These two aspects are brought together in a paragraph of *Dialogue and Proclamation*:

***This means that, while entering with an open mind into dialogue with the followers of other religious traditions, Christians may have also to challenge them in a peaceful spirit with regard to the content of their belief. But Christians, too, must allow themselves to be questioned. Notwithstanding the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, the way Christians sometimes understand their religion and practise it may be in need of purification (DP 32).***

This very recognition of weakness leads to a deepening of interreligious dialogue. It sharpens consciousness that

dialogue is not simply about living in harmony and cooperating for the benefit of humankind, important though these goals may be, but rather is called to go deeper. There is a constant invitation to Christians and people of other religious traditions to live out to the full their religious commitment, to respond with greater fidelity to God's personal call. In this way relations between people of different religions can become truly a dialogue of salvation (cf. DP 39-40).



*Ceiling fresco in the Harissa Cathedral*

It can be said therefore that dialogue aims at conversion. Does this mean conversion to Christianity? The passage of *Dialogue and Proclamation* just referred to says that, according to our Christian faith, God's personal and gracious self-gift always passes through the mediation of Jesus Christ and the action of his Spirit (DP 40). This of course will not always be recognized. If it is recognized, it may well lead someone to seek baptism and entry into the community of Christ's disciples. Although in dialogue there must always be an insistence on the freedom of persons to change their religion according to the principles of religious liberty taught by Vatican II in its declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* and enshrined in the Universal Charter of Human Rights, it must be made clear that conversion in this sense is not the aim, whether overt or hidden, of interreligious dialogue. What dialogue aims at is conversion in the biblical sense, namely "the humble and penitent return of the heart to God in the desire to submit one's life more generously to him" (*Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions* 37).

Conversion in this sense is open to all, to whatever religious tradition they belong. It is moreover a call addressed to all of us, insofar as we belong to a pilgrim people who have not yet reached their permanent dwelling.



## 7. OPEN QUESTIONS

Recognition of the fact that there are very different ways of appreciating reality and of understanding salvation, and the role of religions in achieving this salvation, may give the impression that questions are being begged. Should not more attention be given to the question of truth?

The document of the International Theological Commission *Christianity and the World Religions* has a whole section dedicated to this problem (93-104). It refers to the "ecumenical" strategy of theologians who propose a radical religious pluralism. The desire to promote the unity of religions would lead them to a levelling down, eliminating religious differences, and in fact denying them any particular value (*cf. ibid.* 97). This is different from a Christian theology of religions, grounded in the truth claim of Christianity, which provides a basis for understanding diversity (*cf. ibid.* 101).

It is as well to remember here some observations made by the document Dialogue and Proclamation. It states that

***the fullness of truth received in Jesus Christ does not give individuals the guarantee that they have grasped the truth fully. In the last analysis, truth is not a thing we possess, but a Person by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed. This is an unending process (DP 49).***

Now this applies not only to individuals but also to the Church itself. The Constitution *Dei Verbum* states that there is progress in the understanding of revelation. "There is growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on", so the Church "is always advancing towards the plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in her" (DV 8).

It is not surprising therefore that questions remain open for theological investigation. The declaration *Dominus Jesus*, understood by some as a closing of the door, actually indicates fields where there is need for further reflection. The first of these regards the role of historical figures and the positive elements of religions within the divine plan of salvation (DJ 14). This is connected with the question of possible participation in the unique mediation of Christ. *Lumen Gentium* teaches that "the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source" (LG 62). This statement was made with the role of Mary

in mind; how far it could apply to others, including the founders of religions, is a question open for investigation.

Similarly with regard to the manner in which salvific grace is communicated to people outside the visible boundaries of the Church – Vatican II simply says "in ways known to himself" (i.e. to God) (GS 22) – there is an encouragement to theologians to try to understand this more fully (DJ 21).

I feel inclined, therefore, at the end of this presentation to repeat something I have said on a previous occasion:

***In today's world the increase in interreligious relations makes it necessary for reflection to be renewed. It is unlikely that any synthesis will be found fully satisfactory, so that there will be a need for new attempts to produce a synthesis, there will be a need to try out new approaches, to write new articles and books, which will in the end make a new survey necessary (Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism by Fr. Jacques Dupuis, in Pro Dialogo 108 (2001/3 p. 341).***

## Summary

*After a brief recognition that religious pluralism, though not a new phenomenon, has taken on new aspects, the paper attempts to present a Catholic theological reflection on this reality. It concentrates on essential points of doctrine. Jesus Christ is the Way to salvation – particular reference being made to the paschal mystery – yet this allows the religions a role insofar as they help people to enter into the paschal mystery. The action of the Holy Spirit is to be acknowledged, both with regard to individuals and as regards cultures and religions. This action is not separate from that of the Word but rather an enactment of it. The fact that the action of the Holy Spirit is embedded in human reality calls for a constant exercise of discernment. Attention is called to certain areas where further theological reflection is required.*



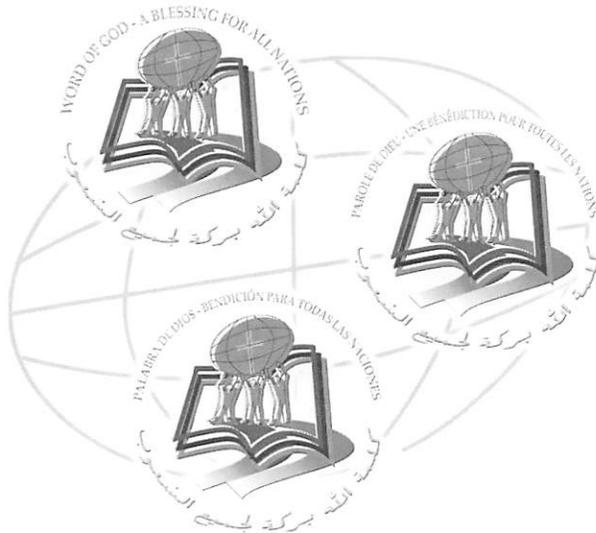
## ECCLESIA IN ...

### Ecclesia in ...

In the aftermath of the regional synods of the past years and in the context of the Church's preparations for the third millennium, important papal encyclicals appeared on the life of the local churches and of the Church as a whole. The Sixth Plenary Assembly of the CBF devoted half a day to these documents. The papers and discussions focused primarily on their statements concerning the biblical-pastoral ministry.

"Ecclesia in Oceania", "New Hope for Lebanon", and "Holy Scripture in the Life of the Churches in Europe today and tomorrow". The last of these texts does not quite fall into the same category as the rest, since it is not a post-synodal papal document, but the Final Statement of the biblical pastoral meeting of the European bishops in Freising, in 1994, organized by the CCEE and the CBF.

A basic thread runs through all these texts, giving them a cohesive message: the Word of God is the soul of Christian life. Required are a new hearing and a new preaching of the Word of God in these new times. The Bible can become the great "educative book" of the third millennium. The biblical-pastoral ministry faces enormous challenges on the threshold of the third millennium. ■



In his opening address, the new President of the CBF, Bishop Vincenzo Paglia, pointed out how much the papal document on the new millennium "Novo Millennio Ineunte" is itself inspired by biblical themes. He also noted how forcefully this document highlights the significance of Holy Scripture as a source of nourishment for the lives of Christians. Only a good knowledge of the Bible will enable Christians to face the challenges of the new millennium, which the document lists as: ecumenical dialogue, interreligious dialogue and intercultural dialogue. This speech will be published in the next issue of the BDV.

Representatives of the various regions then read papers on the following documents: "Ecclesia in Africa", "Ecclesia in America", "Ecclesia in Asia",



# The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “A New Hope for the Lebanon” and the Biblical Apostolate

Cyrille Salim Bustros

*Cyrille Salim Bustros is Archbishop of Baalbek, Lebanon and President of the Commission Biblique et Théologique du Liban.*

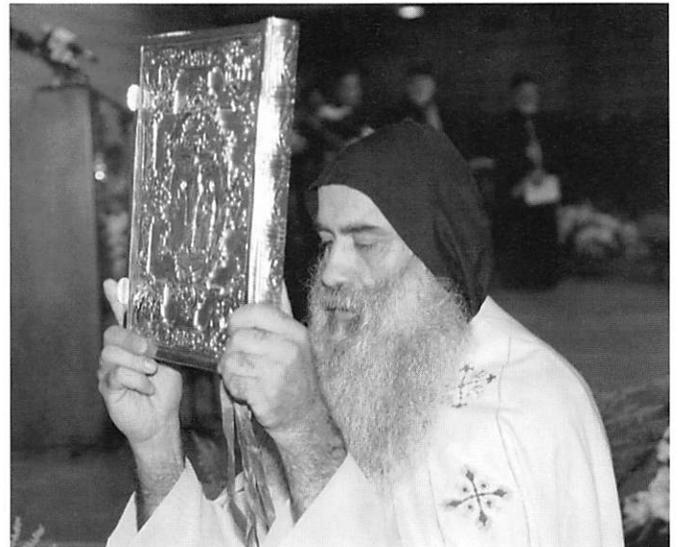
## INTRODUCTION

The special Assembly of the Synod of bishops for Lebanon was given the title: “*Christ is our hope. Renewed by his Spirit, in solidarity, we bear witness to his love*”. In the introduction to the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation “A New Hope for Lebanon”, Pope John Paul II specifies the circumstances in which he had convoked the Synod for Lebanon. He writes: “When, on June 12, 1991, I convoked a special Assembly of the Synod of bishops for Lebanon, the country was in a state of crisis. Lebanon had been profoundly shattered in all its components. I invited the Catholics present in this land to undertake a path of prayer, repentance and conversion, which would allow them to question themselves, in the Lord’s presence, on their fidelity to the Gospel and on their effective commitment to the following of Christ. By a clear-headed return to self, accomplished in faith, the pastors and the faithful should be able better to discern and to clarify the spiritual, pastoral and apostolic priorities they should be promoting in the present context of crisis in the country” (2). In a country torn by 16 years of war (the war began in 1975), the Pope invites Catholics to “question themselves, in the Lord’s presence, on their fidelity to the Gospel and on their effective commitment to the following of Christ”. Because *Christ is our hope*. The whole Synod then took place on a biblical foundation.

## 1. THE PLAN OF THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION

As for the plan of this Apostolic Exhortation, it contains 6 chapters: the *first chapter* takes a look at the present situation of the Catholic Church in Lebanon; the *second chapter* outlines the theological reflection that undergirds all of the directives that will be spelled out later in concrete terms; the *third chapter* assembles

everything that concerns the internal renewal of the Catholic Church in Lebanon; the *fourth chapter* concerns the communion between the different patriarchal Churches of Lebanon and even in the surrounding countries; the *fifth chapter* treats of the place of the Church in Lebanon today; the *sixth chapter* touches on the social and the national dimensions.



*Bible procession during the opening ceremony*

## 2. THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE IN THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION

The biblical perspective undergirds and supports the whole Apostolic Exhortation and does so in a special way in the second chapter.

In the second chapter which outlines the theological reflection, biblical themes return almost at every paragraph:

- In speaking of *the Church, mystery of communion*, the text bases this mystery of diversity of functions and unity of the Spirit on the text of 1 Cor 12:1-11 (20).
- In speaking of *communion in the Holy Spirit*, divine breath of unity in diversity, the Pope cites numerous texts of the Gospel of St. John, the Acts of the



Apostles, and the Epistles of Saint Paul, to describe the mystery of the Church, a mystery accomplished by the sending of the Son to mankind, and made perfect by the gift of the Spirit to the Church (22-26).

- In developing the theme of Christ *the hope of Christians*, he bases his reflection on a variety of biblical themes: *Christ the Good Shepherd of his people* (27-28); *Christ, the true light of the world* (29-34); *Christ, the Power of God* (35-36). Then he concludes the second chapter with these words: "All of this the Church has learned from Christ the Good Shepherd, and it receives from him the strength to live by them, so that people might believe in him and might enter into the new life. Like John the Baptist, it is there "to render testimony to the light" (Jn 1:7), for the Spirit revealed to it that "the Word was the true light that enlightens every man" (Jn 1:9), and that he is the unique "Power of God and Wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24). In him and through him, human beings come to know themselves, discover the meaning of life and acquire the capacity to become engaged in the true life and to draw others to it" (36).

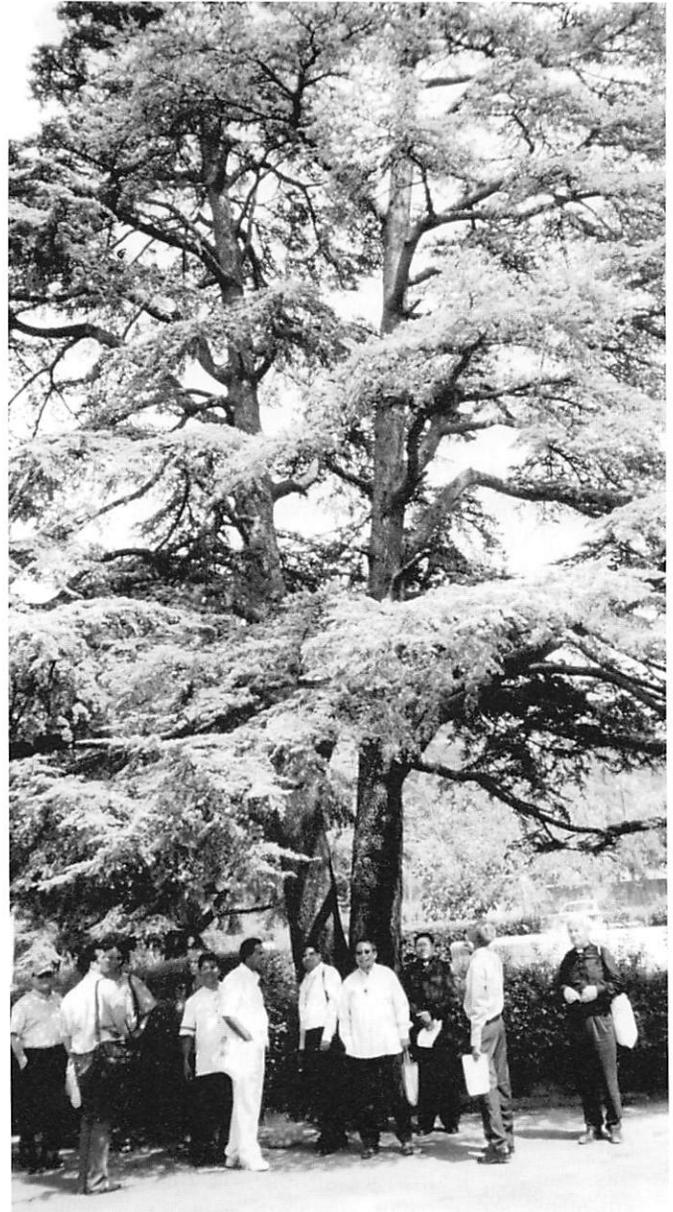
### 3. THE BIBLICAL APOSTOLATE

The biblical apostolate is above all developed in the third chapter under the title: "*the sources and the fruits of renewal*". The primary source of the renewal of the Church is "the Word of God".

**a) The Word of God, the Church's food:** The first topic developed is the Word of God, the Church's food: "In the course of its pilgrimage toward the kingdom, of which it constitutes the seed and the beginning on earth, The Church receives its nourishment from the living Word of God through the Spirit, who also inspired their sacred authors, thereby endowing God's people each day with the ability to attain the full sense of this Word and to contemplate the Word of God who 'made himself bearer of the flesh so that we might become bearers of the Spirit (St. Athanasius of Alexandria) (39). Then he cites a passage of Vatican II: "In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them. And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigor, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life" (*Dei Verbum*, 21).

Then the Pope continues: "Following the Fathers of the Synod, I therefore invite all the faithful to a renewed listening to God who, in the Word made flesh, has given

everything to the world, and "Holy Scripture is the privileged, faithful and true witness of this' (Lineamenta, 22)". Taking up the warning of Saint Jerome, the Second Vatican Council did not fail to draw the attention of Christians to the place that should be accorded the Word of God, because 'ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ' (*Dei Verbum*, 25)" (39).



*Participants under one of the famous Lebanon cedars*

**b) Lectio divina in the oriental Churches:** Then the text develops the idea of the tradition of *lectio divina* in the Churches of the East: "In the course of their history, the oriental Churches have developed the reading of the Word of God, for 'each according to his needs, learns from the inspired Scripture' (St. Basil of Caesarea), especially through *lectio divina* which



enables one to discover with certitude 'that there exists in the holy Scriptures a kind of force which suffices, even without explanation, to one who reads it (Origen). Following the example of the Fathers, the Christian East has made a wonderful reading of Scripture, through a sapiential mode of interpretation which maintains a close bond between theology and the spiritual life" (39).

**c) The bond between the Word of God and the Church:** The text then highlights the bond that exists between the Word of God and the Church, "in the mystery of Christ, dead and risen, Bread of Life for those who believe in Him (cf. Jn 6). It is Christ, the Word of God, who is proclaimed in the Church and it is He who nourishes it at the two tables of the Word and of his Body, and so builds it up. 'We have the food supplied by the Apostles [the Word of God]; eat it and you will not falter. Eat this food first so as that you will then be able to approach the food that is Christ, the food that is the Lord's Body' (St. Ambrose)".

**d) The Word of God in the ministry of priests:** Finally, the text insists on how important it is for the Church of Lebanon to welcome the Word of God, to proclaim it and to put it into practice. And it gives concrete pastoral directives to priests:

- Priests should first of all take great care that they give the people *solid instruction on the Christian mystery*: "Also, in the ministry of priests, the teaching of the Christian mystery should occupy a predominant place and should be the object of extremely careful preparation. In fact, confronted as they are with cultures and sciences that pose important questions with respect to the faith, our contemporaries need a structured formation, a serious religious culture and a strong spiritual life if they wish to follow Christ" (39).
- Particular attention should be given to the Sunday homilies: "In particular I draw the attention of pastors to the Sunday homilies, which should be prepared for with great care, by prayer and by study. In this respect, I strongly encourage the initiative of supplying priests with dossiers containing exegetical analyses that give helpful suggestions for personal meditation and that will enable them to prepare their homilies with greater fervor. These homilies have as their primary aim to help the faithful to live their faith in their daily lives and to enter into dialogue with their brothers" (39).
- Finally, the text stresses the need to *make the Bible more widely available* and to organize *exegetical for-*

*mation sessions*: "Likewise, the diffusion of the printed Bible and the opportunity for lay people to participate in exegetical formation sessions will enable 'many more people to read the Word of God, to meditate on it, to pray it and to live it' (*Report of the Synod after the discussion, I,1*)" (39).



*Encounter with the local churches*

## CONCLUSION

The Synod makes frequent reference to a Gospel text that summarizes the biblical apostolate — that of the meeting of Christ with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. And this text is also cited in the conclusion of the Apostolic Exhortation. For the biblical apostolate has no other aim than to help the Christian to enter into a direct relationship with Christ, to walk with him on the paths of life: "Like the encounter on the road to Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-35), the time of preparation and the synodal Assembly itself have been a walk with Christ. Re-reading the past, with its periods of suffering, its difficulties, its failures in understanding, its joys, its hopes and its moments of fraternal solidarity, the pastors and the faithful have been able to recognize that the Lord is present in their midst and accompanies them on their journey. They are able to leave the meeting strengthened and transformed, to become a leaven of new life at the heart of the world" (117). ■



## “Ecclesia in Africa” and the Biblical Pastoral Ministry

*Cornelius Fontem Esua*



*Cornelius Fontem Esua, Bishop of Kumbo, Cameroon, was member of the Executive Committee of the CBF from 1990-2002 and served as its moderator in 2002.*

Speaking about the place of Sacred Scripture in the life of the Church and the necessity to translate the Scriptures into the local languages, the Second Vatican Council underlined the fact that “it is for the Bishops, ‘whom the apostolic doctrine resides’ suitably to instruct the faithful entrusted to them in the correct use of the divine books. Thus the children of the church can familiarize themselves safely and profitably with the Sacred Scriptures and become steeped in their spirit” (Dei Verbum n. 25). Since Vatican II the Bishops of Africa have been seeking to give the Bible a prominent place in the life of the Church in Africa. The late Cardinal Paul Zoungrana, one of the founders of the Symposium of the Episcopal conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) as well as one of the early Presidents of the World Catholic Federation of the Biblical Apostolate (now the Catholic Biblical Federation) observed that the young Churches of Africa were deeply marked at the time of their foundation by a pastoral practice and a catechetical method based on the Catechism. In this method Christian life was presented “as a doctrine to be believed and a morality to be put into practice, forgetting that Christian life is also a permanent appeal of the Spirit, heard in the word of God, read in the signs of the times”. (Address during the 1978 Plenary Assembly of the WCFBA). Consequently the African Episcopate has consistently endeavoured to give catechesis a biblical foundation and to make the Biblical Pastoral Ministry a reality in their respective local Churches.

This endeavour is very evident in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* of Pope John Paul II after the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod

of Bishops which took place in Rome from 10th April to 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1994. This special Assembly has the theme: “The Church in Africa and its Evangelising Mission towards the Year 2000. “You shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1,8). This Synod was being held at a time when human events seemed to be tempting Africa to discouragement and despair due to the absence of peace caused by political instability and fratricidal wars (Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, the two Congos, etc.), sickness (malaria and AIDS), poverty and misery caused by social injustice and mismanagement of available scarce resource, etc. Africa was compared to the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, fell among robbers and was stripped, beaten and left to die (cf. Lk.10,30-37). The people of Africa left on the edge of the highway of humanity sick, injured, disabled, marginalized and abandoned in various ways are in dire need of a Good Samaritan who would come to their rescue (cf. AE n. 41).

Nevertheless the African Synod was described by the Synod Fathers as a Synod of hope and resurrection, a moment of grace. This hope of resurrection laid in faith in the risen Christ and in the power of the Word of God, which liberates and transforms in all respects. The Synod saw the urgency of proclaiming the Good News, the necessity of a more profound evangelization and a true and balanced unculturation of the Word of God as the only answer to the people’s thirst for God and as the source of hope in the midst of all these challenges.

In chapter 3, which is dedicated to Evangelization and Inculturation, the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, treats explicitly about the Biblical Pastoral Ministry and brings into relief its place and role in the work of evangelization and inculturation. In n. 57 it recalls the fact that “to evangelize is to proclaim by word and witness of life the Good News of Jesus Christ, crucified, died and risen, the Way, The Truth and the Life” and that “To Africa, which is menaced on all sides by outbreaks of hatred and by conflicts and wars, evangelizers must proclaim the hope of life rooted in the Paschal Mystery.” And in order that the Word of God may be a source of hope “Evangelization must reach

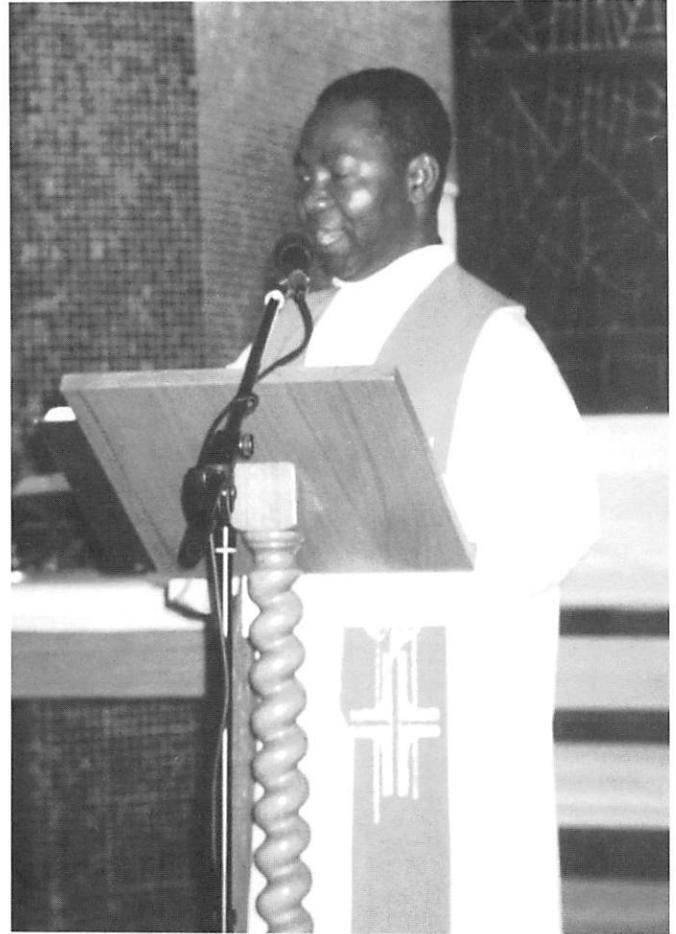


individual human beings and society in every aspect of their existence" (EA n. 57 *passim*).

In no. 58, it presents what can be described as the Charter of the biblical pastoral ministry of Africa. It starts by highlighting the power of the Word of God. "The Word that comes from the mouth of God is living and active, and never returns to him in vain (cf. Is 55, 11; Hebr. 4, 12-13). We must therefore proclaim that Word tirelessly, exhorting "in season and out of season, unfailing in patience and in teaching" (2 Tim 4,2)": In order that this word may produce its effect, it must be "known, loved, pondered and preserved in the hearts of the faithful (cf. Lk 2,19.51)". And it reiterates the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in *Dei Verbum* that easy access to the Word of God should be provided to the faithful.

It goes on to outline how the pastors of the Church in Africa should make greater efforts in order to provide the faithful easy access to the Sacred Scriptures. This should be done "especially through full or partial translations of the Bible, prepared as far as possible in cooperation with other Churches and Ecclesial Communities and accompanied by study-guides for use in prayer and for study in the family and community. "Also to be encouraged is the scriptural formation of clergy, religious, catechists and the laity in general; careful preparation of the celebrations of the Word; promotion of the biblical apostolate with the help of the Biblical Centre of Africa and Madagascar and the encouragement of other similar structures at all levels. In brief, efforts must be made to try to put the Sacred Scriptures in the hands of all the faithful right from their earliest years". This is a beautiful and succinct résumé of the important domains of the Biblical Pastoral Ministry.

Already in the preparatory document (*Lineamenta*) of the Synod it was emphasized that The Word of God should be given a place of pride as the centre of the work of evangelization and the Biblical Apostolate was mentioned as one of the privileged means of the religious formation of the laity in order to enable them assume their responsibilities as agents of evangelization (*Lineamenta* no. 40-43). The Post-Synodal Exhortation re-emphasizes the importance of the scriptural formation of all the agents of evangelization: priests, religious, catechists and all the laity in general because they are "the most important resource after the grace of Christ" (EA no. 53). Their training should be done "through suitable centres and schools of biblical and pastoral formation" (EA n. 90). It is through such training that the whole community is "motivated and empowered for evangelization, each according to his or her specific role within the church" (EA n. 53).



Another aspect of the Biblical Pastoral ministry which the Exhortation recommends is the production of "study-guides for use in prayer and for study in the family and community" (EA n. 58). One of the important contributions of the African Synod, from the ecclesiological point of view, was the emphasis it laid on the idea of the Church as the Family of God. In fact, it took "the Church as God's Family as its guiding idea for the evangelization of Africa" (EA n. 63). This image is particularly appropriate for Africa because it "emphasizes care for others, solidarity and warmth in human relations, acceptance, dialogue and trust" (EA n. 63). The evangelization of Africa should aim at building up the church as Family, centred on the Word of God and the Eucharist.

All this should start in the first place with the Christian family which is the domestic church, because "the future of the world and of the church passes through the family" (*Familiaris Consortio* n. 75). The Synod "considered the evangelization of the African family a major priority, if the family is to assume in its turn the role of active subject in view of the evangelization of families through families" (EA n. 80). Like the Holy Family of Nazareth which is the prototype and example for all



Christian families, the Christian family should become, in the words of Pope Paul VI, "the school of the Gospel" (*Familiaris Consortio* n. 86) that is, a place where the Gospel is prayed, studied, known, loved, pondered and preserved in the heart. Similarly the Gospel should be at the centre of the Small Christian Communities and other Christian organizations. The Synod strongly recommended the building up of Small Christian Communities because it recognized that "the Church as Family cannot reach her full potential as Church unless she is divided into communities small enough to foster close human relationships". These communities should "pray and listen to God's Word, encourage the members themselves to take on responsibility, learn to live an ecclesial life, and reflect on different human problems in the light of the Gospel" (EA n.89).

The translation of the Bible fully or partially into the local African languages is considered by the Synod as one of the primary ways of making the Sacred Scriptures easily accessible to the faithful. This should be accompanied by study-guides. It should be done as far as possible in cooperation with other Churches and Ecclesial communities. There are many of such ecumenical translations of the Bible going on in Africa and very often they are the first and only concrete ground of ecumenical dialogue (EA b, 58,65). They are equally a means of inculturation which the Synod considered "an urgent priority in the life of the particular Churches for a firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa" (EA n. 59). The translation of the Bible into the local languages is the first insertion of the Gospel message into the African cultures. Through these translations the Word "takes flesh" in Africa. Talking about the communication of the Good News, the Synod further recommends the use of African traditional forms of social communication which includes songs and music, mimes and the theatre, proverbs and fables. These must never be underestimated because they are "the vehicles of the wisdom and the soul of the People" (EA n. 123).

The Synod saw the need of adequate and appropriate structures for the promotion and the coordination of the Biblical Pastoral Ministry. Such structures must form an official and integral part of the organization of each particular Church if the Biblical Pastoral Ministry is to be taken seriously as recommended by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in Chapter six of *Dei Verbum*. The Synod, therefore, recommended that the promotion of the biblical apostolate should be done "with the help of the Biblical Centre of Africa and Madagascar and the encouragement of other similar structures at all levels" (EA n. 58). The need of such a Centre was already felt by the African Episcopate as far back as 1978 when during the 5th General Assembly of the Symposium of the

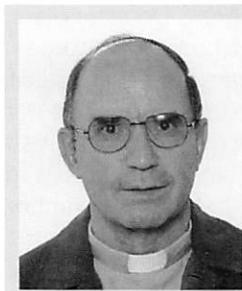
Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), it was recommended that a feasibility study be made for setting up an Institute in Africa for biblical and pastoral formation in order to fulfil the mandate of Chapter 6 of *Dei Verbum*. This recommendation was actualized in 1981 with the creation of the Biblical Centre for Africa and Madagascar (BICAM) with seat in Nairobi, Kenya. The Centre was entrusted with the task of the promotion and coordination of the biblical apostolate in the entire continent and the islands. This Centre is the Regional Coordinating Office of the Catholic Biblical Federation in the Africa Region. Unfortunately, because of the lack of material and human resources, the Centre has not been able to carry out its mission properly. Nevertheless the fact that the Synod has not only renewed the mandate that was given to it but also recommended the establishment of similar structures at all levels is a reason to hope for a better and brighter future both for the Centre and for the Biblical Pastoral Ministry in Africa.

In his Apostolic letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, on the preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000, Pope John Paul II asked the following question: "To what extent has the Word of God become more fully the soul of theology and the inspiration of the whole of Christian living as *Dei Verbum* sought?" (TMA n. 39). He went on to state that Christians "should turn with renewed interest to the Bible, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose and other aids" (TMA n. 40). The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, does not only answer to this appeal but it also considers the Biblical Pastoral Evangelization in Africa in order that it may draw new life from attentiveness to the Word of God (TMA n. 39). It is hoped that following these recommendations of *Ecclesia in Africa*, the respective local churches would give the BPM an official place in their programme of evangelization, so that the Word of God which is "living and active" can "become more fully the soul of theology and the inspiration of the whole of Christian living" (TMA n. 36) and it "can serve the Church as her support and vigor, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life" (*Dei Verbum* n. 21). ■



## The Biblical Apostolate and “Ecclesia in America”

*Francisco Javier Hernandez Arnedo*



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### I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was an historical signpost of incalculable value for renewal. Its most fundamental documents (LG, GS, SC, DV, AG) help to redefine the identity of the Church and its mission of evangelization in the contemporary world, marked by profound and accelerated scientific, technological, political, economic, cultural and religious transformations. Abandoning her accustomed inertia, the Church took the bold step of confronting her faith with the challenging realities of the world of today. She fearlessly undertook a critical reading of the signs of the times, while at the same time returning to the sources of the tradition to find therein the purest deposits of the values that sustain her identity.
2. The “*Dei Verbum*” represents one of the most important witnesses to the conciliar renewal. By exalting the centrality of the Sacred Scriptures in the Christian life it reinstated the Word as the revitalizing source of the Christian project, both for the individual and the community. We know that our Catholic tradition was somewhat remiss with regard to the use of God’s Word in evangelization, in catechesis, in the cultivation of the spiritual life and in the exercise of the apostolate itself. It is true that the DV reminds us of the fact that the Sacred Scriptures have always been honored by the Church with the same veneration as that with which she treats the Body and Blood of the Lord (DV 21). However, it urges pastors to make the Sacred Scriptures ever more accessible to the faithful (DV), as a support for their faith and their spiritual life.
3. This strong stance of the Council cleared the way for the biblical apostolate. In practice, however, forward progress was slow and not without tensions. In Latin America, the conference of Medellin (1968) communicated to the Churches of the Continent the Council’s impulse of renewal. Its analysis of the political situation revealed a framework of injustice so strident that it was to influence the way in which the Bible would be read and interpreted. Thus, as the people of the base communities approached the Word of God, new emphasis was given to the liberating experience of the Exodus, to the prophetic focus on social justice, to the Messianic project of Jesus (Lk 4:13-17) and to the priority given by the Lord to the poor (Matt 25:31-46). The reading of the Bible thus took on a distinctly “liberation” quality in this context.
4. Confronting the Word of God with the suffering life of the people, the Biblical apostolate took on a new life, nourishing and confirming the convictions of a good portion of the faithful and their pastors who made frequent and effective use of the Bible. In this work, the biblical circles and movements that helped the people to have readier access to the sacred text deserve particular recognition, as does the whole systematic biblical formation which was offered to young people and adults alike in the Biblical Schools.

The accomplishments were positive. The Holy Father himself confirms this in the “*Novo Millennio Ineunte*”, where he says: “Ever since the Second Vatican Council underlined the preeminent role of the Word of God in the life of the Church, great progress has certainly been made in devout listening to Sacred Scripture ... Individuals and communities now make extensive use of the Bible, and among lay people there are many who devote themselves to Scripture with the valuable help of theological and biblical studies. But it is above all the work of evangelization and catechesis which is drawing new life from attentiveness to the word of God ... [T]his development needs to be consolidated and deepened ..” (NMI 39).



## II. BIBLICAL REFERENCES IN THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION "ECCLESIA IN AMERICA"

### 1. Encountering Christ

The recent special assembly of the Synod of Bishops for America (Rome 1997) proposes to us as a central theme: "Encounter with the Living Jesus Christ: the Way to Conversion, Communion and Solidarity (in America)". In his Apostolic Letter "Ecclesia in America" the Holy Father expresses the clear and firm conviction that the living presence of Christ is what sustains the dynamism of the Church's life, as well as its missionary undertaking. We are likewise certain, faithful and pastors alike, that it is the Lord Jesus who unites us in fellowship so as to open our hearts, thereafter, to the practice of solidarity with all human beings. The Churches should be attentive to the Lord's mandate to evangelize. However, they should not forget that this mission will not endure without the presence of the Lord himself, who is the one who effects the work of salvation in the here and now of the history of humanity. It is he who comes to be with us and who sustains our communion with one another.

The Word of God takes on an important role in helping us to understand this "encounter" and to uncover the sense of the "mission". The biblical accounts cited by the EA (8-10) seek to demonstrate that the Church is born of the encounter with Christ and that the mission itself leads the disciples to an ever renewed encounter with their Lord. This all happens in very concrete situations. The document speaks of "places of encounter". One of the most privileged of these meeting places is Holy Scripture. When "read in the light of Tradition, the Fathers and the Magisterium, and more deeply understood through meditation and prayer" (12) it produces fruits of conversion, elevating the faith of believers to new levels of conviction and effective maturity.

The liturgy and the poor are two other excellent places of the encounter with Christ. In the liturgy, the encounter takes on the form of a dialogue, beginning with the Word proclaimed and the real presence of Christ in the consecrated Eucharistic. On the other hand, love and compassion are the touchstone for discovering the face of Christ in the poor. We can say that the charitable concern of the faithful for the poor and the outcasts is the most effective sign of the preferential love the Church nourishes for them. The word and the gestures of Jesus invite us not to a merely philanthropic and sentimental approach, but to undertake, as he did, a true "identification with the poor", to the point of accepting their social status (18; cf. Matt 25:31-46).

### 2. *Lectio divina* and conversion

If the Christian vocation is truly a call to encounter and communion, conversion is the genuine path that makes this possible. Sacred Scripture witnesses to the clear call addressed by Jesus to individuals so that their attitudes, sentiments and decisions might be transformed by the Good News of the Kingdom. "The encounter with the living Jesus impels us to conversion" (26). This is what the Gospels refer to as metanoia, the complete change of mentality that effects a thoroughgoing revision of our own vital convictions in the light of the evangelical criteria. In this process of conversion the touchstone will be "the prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture" (26). It is not a matter of a dehumanizing reading, but one that is open to life and that, for this reason, builds community and inspires solidarity. "Conversion, therefore, fosters a new life in which there is no separation between faith and works" (26). Pastors find themselves challenged by their very call to this ongoing conversion. It should call forth "a genuine identification with the personal style of Jesus Christ", simple, poor and dispossessed, to the point where no advantage is sought, except that "we may draw from the strength of the Holy Spirit and of the Word all the power of the Gospel" (28).

The goal of conversion is sanctity and Jesus Christ is the path that leads there (31). Moreover, what offers us the knowledge of this path (itinerary) that must be followed is the Word of God, the center of the Church's preaching. The EA goes on to recommend that prayerful reflection on Holy Scripture be made a clear priority for the Church all over America. The practice of this form of prayer should be held in high esteem by the faithful, and in the case of priests it should constitute a fundamental feature in the preparation of their homilies (n. 31). It is indeed true that those who welcome the Word of God, meditate on it and put it into practice experience a powerful stimulus to follow Jesus. And following him means "living as he lived, accepting his message, adopting his way of thinking, embracing his destiny and sharing his project, which is the plan of the Father: it involves inviting everyone to communion with the Trinity and to communion among ourselves in a just and fraternal society" (68).

Conversion is a grace which requires a response of fidelity and growth in our commitment to love God and our brothers. This means that hand in hand with an effective access to the Word of God (*Lectio Divina*) should go an effective path of formation in the faith (catechesis), one that "shapes the mind and touches the heart, leading the person to embrace Christ fully and completely" (69). Initial proclamation and catechesis together constitute the new evangelization. In the



American continent today this evangelization is an urgent necessity since "faith cannot be taken for granted, but must be explicitly proposed in all its breadth and richness" (ibid.). It is only right, then, that there be an intimate collaboration between the biblical apostolate and catechesis.

### 3. The Word, source of communion

The Apostolic Exhortation reminds us that the Word of God is an indispensable place of communion. In line with the thinking of the Second Vatican Council it presents the Church as a sacrament of communion. The conciliar Fathers made it quite clear that the Trinitarian communion is always the source that gives rise to the exigency that the Church be a sign and instrument of communion in the world. The parable of the vine (John 15) offers us a suggestive image of how this vital communion circulates in the body of the Church. It is the sacraments of initiation that prepare the faithful to live this mysterious spiritual symbiosis with Christ and with our Christian brothers. For this reason, the preparation for Christian initiation offers an excellent opportunity to dispense an effective evangelization and catechesis to the faithful (n. 34).

For the rest, the Chapter on "the path for communion" does not offer major biblical references. The text stays within the proper framework of an ecclesiology of communion: Petrine ministry of unity, Episcopal ministry, importance of particular churches, communion among the Churches and, naturally, the Eucharist as the principal center of unity of the Christian community, gathered around its Lord. The parish is referred to as the "privileged place where the faithful concretely experience the Church" (n. 41). It is a "Eucharistic community" and as such a center and source of the ecclesial construction that should manifest itself in a multiplicity of minor groups and smaller communities. Multiplying the centers of communion should make possible a greater and better access of the faithful to the "word of God, to reflect on the range of human problems in the light of this word, and gradually to make responsible decisions inspired by the all-embracing love of Christ" (n. 41). The lived practice of some base ecclesial communities is an authentic proof of how valid this statement is in our case.

### 4. The laity and the ministry of the Word

The document reminds us, however, that according to the teachings of the Council, "Baptism confers upon all who receive it a dignity which includes the imitation and following of Christ, communion with one another and the missionary mandate". The laity need to acquire an

awareness of their dignity as baptized persons and pastors should respect the capacity of the laity for witness and evangelical commitment. In the sphere of worldly realities, their mission is to bring the Gospel into the structures of the world. And in the "intra-ecclesial" sphere, they contribute their talents and charisms "to the building of the ecclesial community as delegates of the word, catechists, visitors to the sick and the imprisoned, group leaders..." (44). It would be useful for the Churches to endorse some of these tasks as genuine lay ministries, conferring on them a level of recognition and stability. The Holy Father does not become involved with definitive instructions in this area which he judges to be vast and complex; he leaves such details in the hands of a special commission. Moreover, the experience of many in our Churches confirms the fact that numerous lay persons become involved with the ministry of the Word, for example, as catechists, leaders of Sunday worship, evangelizers, animators of biblical circles. All of these vigorously pursue the objective of the "Dei Verbum" to bring the Word to the People of God.

The family too, sanctuary of life and place of encounter where Christian fathers exercise their important function of being "the first announcers of the faith" to their children, will itself be richly enhanced by the hearing of the Word of God. It is certain that "[t]he word of God, faithfully read in the family, gradually builds it up as a domestic church and makes it fruitful in human and Christian virtues" (46).

The Word of God is the place of encounter for the Christians of all the various Churches (n. 49). For this reason, EA urges that "Pastors and faithful foster cooperation between Christians of the different confessions, in the name of the Gospel, in response to the cry of the poor, by the promotion of justice, by common prayer for unity and by sharing in the word of God and the experience of faith in the living Christ" (49). Similarly, it would be well to establish forms of collaboration with the Jewish communities of America, since "[a] great part of the Holy Scriptures, which we Christians read as the word of God, constitute a spiritual patrimony which we share with Jews" (50). The Word will always be a point of support and a good reason for the Church to cultivate ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.

### 5. Word of God and solidarity

Access to the Word which converts us to Jesus Christ and makes us his disciples obliges us, however, to live the love of solidarity that liberates. The Pope tells us in the EA that conversion inspires a person to minister to his neighbor in all his needs, material as well as spiritual, because in such a human being the face of Christ



shines forth. It is on the basis of the Gospel that “a culture of solidarity needs to be promoted, capable of inspiring timely initiatives in support of the poor and the outcast” (52). It is the Word that inspires us to make the mutual commitment of solidarity and to share our goods among the faithful and among the Churches.



The problems that weigh down the lives of our peoples are many and distressing. It is social justice that should govern the way we achieve the common good; and this is true at the international level as well. “The Church in America is called...to create an authentic globalized culture of solidarity” (55), and it will do so on the basis of the Gospel (56).

### III. SOME CONCLUSIONS

1. In the EA we encounter an excellent outline for understanding the Christian life as a following of Jesus Christ. The Word of God holds its proper place in all of this.
2. In the Apostolic Exhortation we do not find, properly speaking, a direct reference to the biblical apostolate. But the document nevertheless offers important indications on how the use of the Word can serve as a fundamental instrument of the new evangelization.
3. In the document, the ecclesial base communities remain somewhat in the shadow, in spite of their

presence in the proposals offered by the bishops. In my opinion we cannot forget that in the course of these post-conciliar years the biblical apostolate has been actively engaged primarily in the sphere of small ecclesial groups and communities. We know that ecclesial base communities and biblical circles, the celebration of Word and community, the Bible and the concrete lives of the people of God, are realities that go very much together, producing stupendous fruits of conversion, fraternal communion and social commitment. The small communities manage to have a kind of capillary evangelization, of biblical inspiration, which the earlier tradition never managed to achieve in this way. This cannot but remain something of indisputable value in our countries.

4. In treating the theme of evangelization, references to the Bible could be richer in the document. The Word of God should nourish the kerygma and the initiation above all of adults. Holy Scripture must be the point of departure for the initial proclamation as well as for catechesis.
5. The traditional “Lectio Divina” gained greater prominence in this document, which can only be viewed as very important since it continues to occupy an ever greater place in the spiritual and pastoral lives of our Christian leaders. We miss, however, any reference to contextualized readings that are well in use in Latin America and that were endorsed by the document on “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (Biblical Commission, 1993).

For us who took part in the Federation it is wonderful to see how the Dei Verbum continues to influence the life of the Church. This is a joy. We must, however, confess that we have a long way to go to reach the goal enunciated by the Council, namely that the Sacred Scriptures should come to fully illuminate the life and pastoral engagement of the Church. The objectives of the Federation remain relevant and we should support them. May God grant that we keep them fresh in our memory as well as in our action.

(Transl.: L. Maluf) ■



## “Ecclesia in Asia” and the Challenges for Biblical Pastoral Ministry

Jacob Theckanath



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### 1. THE BACKGROUND OF THE SYNOD FOR ASIA

The special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Asia, as all other continental synods, was part of the wider project known as the New Evangelisation, which Pope John Paul II has been placing before the whole church for the past more than one decade. His special concern with regard to Asia was already indicated in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (TMA) as “the issue of the encounter of Christianity with the ancient local cultures and religions of Asia.” (TMA 30) The specific objective set out there for the Asian Synod was to “illustrate and explain more fully the truth that Christ is the one Mediator between God and man and the sole Redeemer of the world, to be clearly distinguished from the founders of other great religions”. (TMA 30)

### 2. THE CONCERNS OF THE ASIAN CHURCHES

It might be of help, in view of situating EA within the wider context of the mission of local churches in Asia, to identify the concerns expressed by the Bishops of Asia during the synod. For they brought to the synod the experiences and agenda of the local churches in this vast continent. The following statistics reveal the priorities of the Asian churches.

Total Number of interventions: 191  
Seventy six percent (76%) of them focused on *four major Asian concerns*:

Dialogue with other religions : 43 interventions (22.5%)

Dialogue with cultures: 41 interventions (21.4%)  
Dialogue with the poor: 33 interventions (17.2%)  
Becoming a church of the laity: 29 interventions (15.2%)

This makes it abundantly clear that the Asian churches have the “The Triple Dialogue” as the single great concern with regard to their mission in Asia. Ever since the Second Vatican Council, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) have been consistently upholding this “triple dialogue” as the major thrust of mission in Asia. In the “Message of the Synod for Asia”, prepared by the Synod itself, we find that the triple Dialogue is the new way of being Church in Asia. “In the Asian context of a multiethnic, multireligious and multicultural situation, interreligious dialogue has clearly become a necessity... Interreligious dialogue is a respectful and sincere meeting in which the encountering parties want to know each other, to learn from one another, as Christians and Muslims are trying to do in Lebanon, where their mutual relationship augurs well for the future...The Church in Asia is called upon to enter a triple dialogue: dialogue with the cultures of Asia, a dialogue with religions of Asia and a dialogue with the peoples of Asia, especially the poor.” (Osservatore Romano, N.20-20May,1998). The doctrinal question of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the context of other religions was not their preoccupation. This further underlines the fact that in the heart of the Asian Churches, the “how” of mission is the crucial concern and not the “what” of mission. It is in this background of Ecclesia in Asia that we seek to discover the challenges for the Biblical pastoral ministry in Asia.

### 3. EA AND THE BIBLICAL PASTORAL MINISTRY IN ASIA

In EA, the explicit reflection on our ministry comes in chapter IV “Jesus the Saviour: Proclaiming the Gift”, in the section, “The Challenge of Inculturation” (nos. 21-22). Among the key areas of inculturation, priority is given to theological inculturation: “The Synod expressed encouragement to *theologians* in their delicate work of developing an inculturated theology, espe-



cially in the area of Christology.” (EA 22) This is to be undertaken *“with courage and faithfulness”*. The thrust of the document in this section is on the inculturation of the Good News. The word inculturation, culture and related words appear one hundred and one times in the document.

#### 4. THE MAIN HIGHLIGHTS (EA 22)

- a) E.A first highlights the paramount importance of the Biblical Word in sharing the Good News of salvation. For in Asia, “the transmitted word is so important in preserving *and communicating religious experience*.” The ministry of the word leading to religious experience is an important pastoral concern for Asia. Therefore the priority in Asia cannot be doctrinal affirmations and comparisons. Biblical ministry should facilitate the encounter with God. A national survey organized by the National Biblical Centre, (NBCLC) among the Indian Catholics who joined Pentecostal movements revealed that the most important reason for their exodus was lack of God-experience resulting from an ineffective and non-experiential proclamation of the word in the Church.
- b) Therefore, “...an effective Biblical Apostolate needs to be developed in order to ensure that the sacred text be more widely diffused and more intensively and prayerfully used among the members of the Church in Asia”.
- c) The Word of God should “be made the basis for all missionary proclamation, catechesis preaching and styles of spirituality”
- d) Biblical translations are to be encouraged and supported
- e) Biblical formation of all sections of the people is to be intensified
- f) Pastorally oriented courses on the Bible in the context of the complex realities of Asia are needed
- g) Making the scriptures known among the followers of other religions and unleashing its power to touch the hearts of people

#### 5. ASIAN APPROACH IN BIBLICAL PASTORAL MINISTRY

What is said about the proclamation of Christ in Asia can be viewed from the perspective of our present concern

in this Plenary Assembly of the CBF and for the orientation of our ministry for the coming years, particularly in Asia. This has some reference to the question: How can we make the Word of a Blessing for all? Or how are we to journey with the people of other religions in this religiously pluralistic world?

Quoting his own speech given at Delhi in 1986, the Pope says in EA: “While visiting India in 1986, I stated clearly that “the Church’s approach to other religions is one of genuine respect... This respect is twofold: respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life and respect for the action of the Spirit in man” (EA 20).



Taking cue from The Acts of the Apostles, the book on which we focus our attention in this Plenary Assembly, the Pope encourages evangelizers in the following words: “Evangelizers can take heart from the experience of Saint Paul who engaged in dialogue with the philosophical, cultural and religious values of his listeners (cf. Acts14:13-17; 17:22-31)” (EA 20).

A Biblical pastoral ministry that relates itself to the cultural and religious realities of Asia will be able to render a major service and thus contribute in a big way for changing the face of the Church in Asia and therefore of Jesus himself in this continent of his earthly ministry. For as EA says:

***Jesus is often perceived as foreign to Asia. It is paradoxical that most Asians tend to regard Jesus – born on Asian soil- as a Western rather than an Asian figure (EA 20).***



The following vision from EA will, if implemented, contribute towards a renewal of the Biblical pastoral ministry and the proclamation of Christ in Asia:

***In general, narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms are to be preferred. In fact, the proclamation of Jesus Christ can most effectively be made by narrating his story as the Gospels do. The ontological notions involved... can be complemented by more relational, historical and even cosmic perspectives. The Church, the Synod Fathers noted, must be open to the new and surprising ways in which the face of Jesus might be presented in Asia (EA 20).***

The new and surprising ways are not spelt out. It is going to be like walking through untrodden path. My hope is that this Plenary will give us that vision and impetus.

The following 'Propositio' of the synod that did not find a place in the post-Synodal Apostolic exhortation itself is very much pertinent to our discussions here: "theological research on an understanding of the Bible *in an Asian context* be encouraged." This was the theme of the last Plenary Assembly of the CBF. In order to journey with the peoples of Asia in its pluralistic context such a process is a necessary condition. In other words, we cannot have a dialogic approach for the Biblical Pastoral ministry unless we prepare ourselves seriously with deeper inculturation of the word in Asia. "...The Synod Fathers were well aware of the pressing need of the local Churches in Asia to present the mystery of Christ to their peoples according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking. They pointed out that such an inculturation ..involves rediscovering the Asian countenance of Jesus..." (EA 20) For us here at Lebanon is that *kairos* to commit ourselves to that rediscovery of face of Jesus the pilgrim in our continents. To be co-pilgrims, to



journey with the word in the pluralist context of our continents should become the major thrust of the Biblical pastoral ministry in this new millennium.



## 6. VOICES OF ASIAN BISHOPS

It would be inspiring for us now to hear some of the voices at the Synod: Msgr. Armando Bortolaso, Apostolic Vicar of Aleppo (Syria) expressed the need to relearn the Gospel in the context of dialogue and quoted John of the Cross: "Where there is no love, plant love; and you will reap love".

Bishop Leo Laba Ladjar of Jayapura (Indonesia) said "We need to accept ourselves as a minority. We cannot walk alone or do big things alone while confronting the majority. Competition does not help to create peace and harmony. Whatever we do to promote human dignity we must do as an honest transparent service to humankind and not to gain strength and power for our own religious group".

Bishop Bunluen Mansap of Ubon Ratchatahani (Thailand): Speaking about Buddhists said "I feel inspired by their simplicity of life, their openness, their humane relationships, their understanding ways; these are values I recognize as values of the kingdom or of the Gospel"... Could it be said that this is the Good News that the Buddhist can offer us?"

An ecumenical delegate Augustina Lumentut (Indonesia) said: "There is a 'syn-odos', a 'walking together' with women from the same religion, but also from other religions. These shared experiences

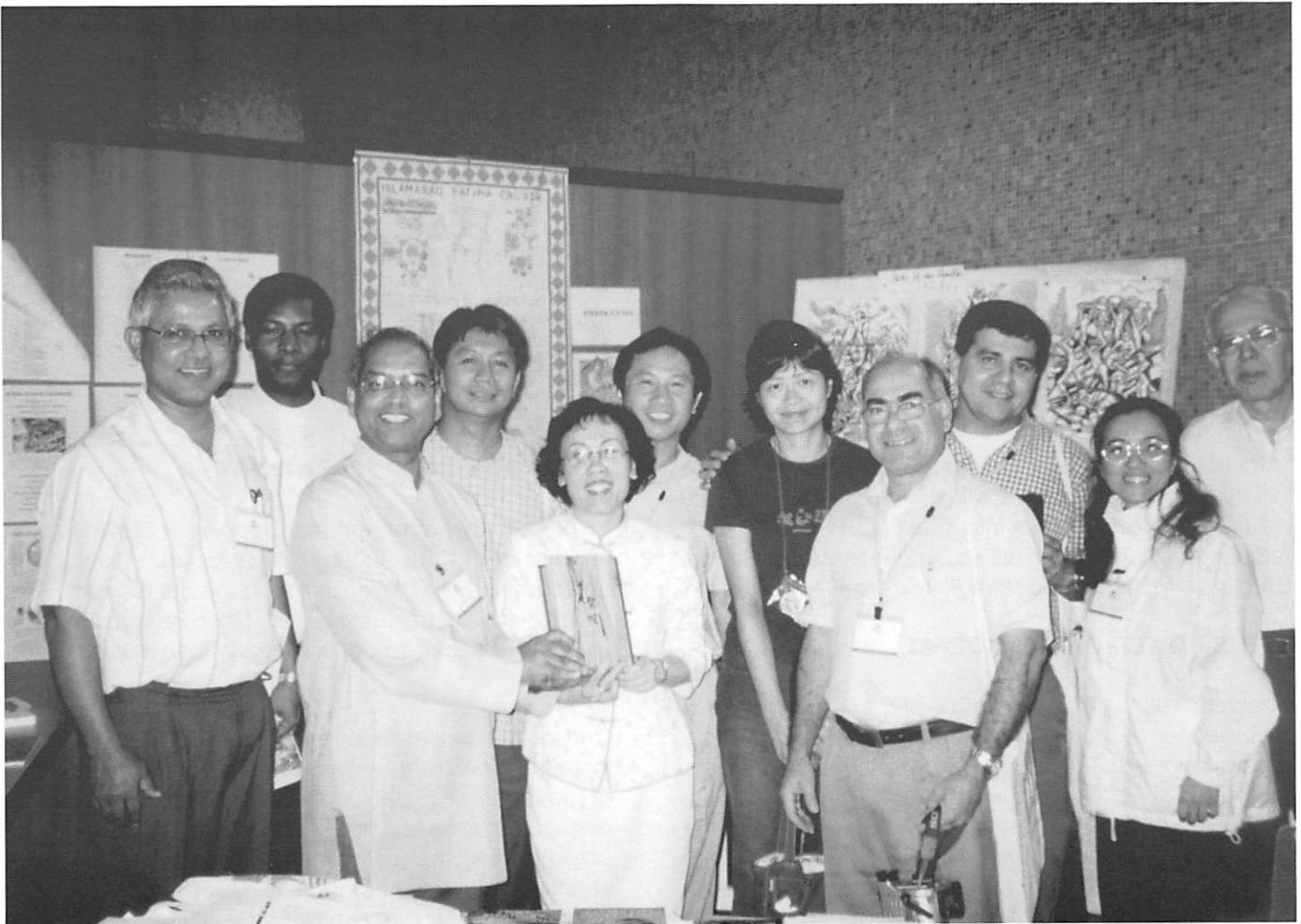


become a primary source for theological reflection, for re-reading the Scripture..." (see "A Tale of Two Synods: Observations on the Special Assembly for Asia", John Mansford Prior, [www.sedos.org](http://www.sedos.org)) Bishop Patrick D'Souza (India) "The Liturgy of the Word, whether in the daily Breviary or in the Eucharist should positively nurture the continuity of God's providence, with well-selected passages from Hindu literature. It is difficult to produce any theological reason against this procedure. It would affirm effectively the working of the Spirit even outside the Church ..."

Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja (Indonesia) – the President delegate of the Asian Synod, in his concluding remarks at the end of the ceremony of releasing the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation by the Pope in New Delhi, said that efforts "to reshape the concrete form of a New Presence of the Churches in Asia [is] a constitutive part of the Evangelization of Asia"... New precisely because it increasingly takes on the face of Asia and is therefore increasingly communicable.

## CONCLUSION

What the Pontifical Biblical Commission says about the actualization of the Bible is valid for a dialogic approach to biblical pastoral ministry. "In any case, the risk of error does not constitute a valid objection against performing what is a necessary task that of bringing the message of the Bible to the ears and hearts of the people of our time" (Interpretation of the Bible in Church, p.117). A dialogic proclamation of the word is not a clearly defined task. It is a venture of hope. It will become an adventure of the Church in Asia. Today we are here to plant the seeds of a future visioning. Our task is greet from distance that future and to keep sowing the seeds and nurture the their growth. May this PA strengthen us for such a mission. ■





ECCLESIA  
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## Holy Scripture in the Life of the Churches in Europe now and in the Time Ahead

*Petr Chalupa*



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From 16-19 February 1994 the Bishops from most of the European countries met in Freising, Germany, at the invitation of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences, to reflect on the pastoral application of the Word of God in the life of the Church. The meeting was originally proposed, and in part organized, by the General Secretariat of the Catholic Biblical Federation. It was moderated by Bishops Wilhelm Egger – since the PA of 1996 President of the CBF — and Henryk Muszynski of Poland. One outcome of the meeting was a joint parting letter to all Bishops' Conferences and Bishops and to all those responsible for biblical-pastoral ministry. The letter bore the title: **Holy Scripture in the Life of the Churches in Europe now and in the time ahead.**

Now, 8 years later, allow me, please, not only to share with you the contents of those deliberations, but to briefly report on some ways in which the recommended tasks have been put into practice. I apologize for focusing in particular on experiences from Central Europe, coming as I do from the Czech Republic.

### 1. THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

The year 1994 was characterized by deep divisions, a resurgence of nationalism and of violent conflicts among peoples. The need to experience again the saving power of God's Word was urgent.

At the subregional conference of 1995 in Slovenia, the head of the Slovenian Biblical Institute, Rudi Koncilja, made a presentation in which he outlined a special Slovenian method of Bible reading: "The Word of God

as a power for positive thinking". This method has proven to be a relevant approach to the Bible in the difficult conditions following the Balcan war.

In 1994, in a world becoming ever more fragmented, God's Word could serve as a much needed and unifying power – a power that could reach across religious, social and other boundaries.

As a leader of the Czech Catholic Biblical Institute since 1997 I can testify to the impact of the unifying power of God's Word. Within the Central European Subregion there are many differences among the members. Every meeting of the regional leaders confirms the fact that the unifying power of God's Word is a live reality that overcomes all possible problems.

1994 was also a time of cultural upheaval when many people searching for religious orientation were beset by insecurity and many were being drawn to religious sects and similar groups. There was a great need for the clarifying power and wisdom of God's Word.

The Austrian Biblical Institute in Linz has played a unique role in developing effective methods of informing people regarding the danger of the sects and of similar groups. The methods range from printed materials to the telephone info-line.

### 2. THE TREASURES OF SCRIPTURE CAN BE DISCOVERED IN DIFFERENT WAYS

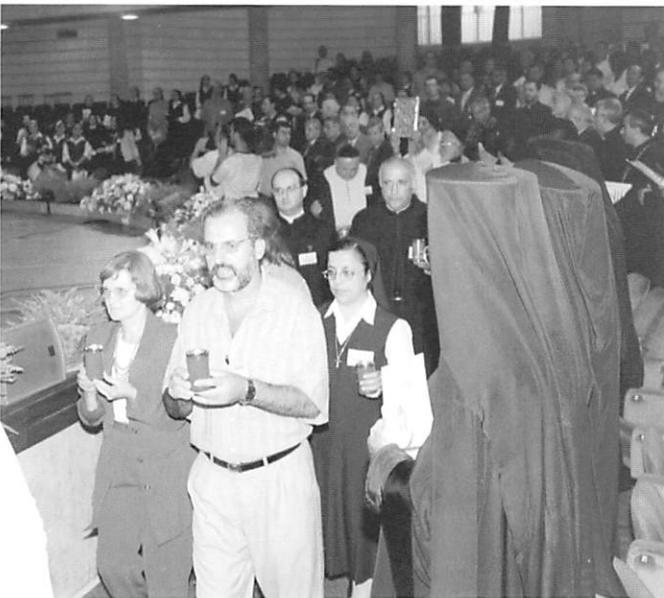
In 1994 it was important that people be provided with an initiation to the Scriptures that would dovetail with and complement their initiation to the Sacraments. This initiation could be provided at different levels and in a variety of pastoral contexts, e.g. in catechesis, in liturgy, etc.

One of the diocesan delegates of the Czech Biblical Institute, a permanent deacon, who works in a number of parishes in South Bohemia, conducts marriage-preparation sessions and classes for pre-baptismal catechesis using the Bible as a basic text. This technique enables spouses and parents to discover an approach to Holy Scripture that can last for a lifetime.



There are different ways of reading the Bible that can lead to a direct encounter with God's Word. The practice of *Lectio Divina* is one useful procedure - allowing the Word of God to respond in a living way to peoples' different hopes and aspirations. This direct encounter with the Word of God takes place at three levels:

- 1) In parish groups, in the form of Bible Sundays and Bible Years. German-speaking countries have proclaimed the year 2003 a Bible Year. A variety of activities are planned in connection with this year, e.g. the ecumenical Bible exhibition.
- 2) In small group discussions about the Bible and its message. Bible reading becomes an important part of the life of many families and Bible circles.
- 3) Through personal reading of the Word of God in faith. This personal contact with the Bible can perhaps also be helpful in other contexts. A Catholic layman from south Moravia is a three-time winner of a national competition in Bible trivia, organized by Protestant denominations in the Czech Republic.



For the Catholic faithful, contact with the Scriptures through the liturgy of the Church is of prime importance. The Plenary Assembly of the CBF in Hong Kong in 1996 requested the production of a new Mass lectionary. Particularly from the viewpoint of Old Testament exegesis it would still be highly relevant today to renew this request.

In the formerly Communist countries of Eastern Europe there was at this time – in 1994 - a pressing need to make the Bible available in annotated editions and at

affordable prices. This request is currently being realized in most of these countries; however, the people are still in need of introductory manuals on how to read the sacred text.

We welcome with gratitude the most recent document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission: "The Hebrew People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible", which, in light of an anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism that is once again on the rise, represents a theologically well-balanced approach to the Hebrew Scriptures for Christians.

### 3. COMPETENCE IN THE SERVICE OF GOD'S WORD

A great service is rendered by sharing the various methods of Bible reading with others – without consideration of national borders. Many ministers of God's Word have been transformed into personal witnesses who take part in international courses that receive financial support from the Western countries. Those who attend such courses are generally able to treat biblical texts in a responsible and fruitful way.

### 4. THE NEED FOR ALL PASTORAL ACTIVITY TO BE INSPIRED BY THE WORD OF GOD

The Catholic Biblical Federation is an extraordinarily valuable institution which supports the work of the biblical apostolate on a national level in an international context. In the formerly Communist countries of Eastern Europe, biblical institutes and institutions that publish biblical materials have already been established. One of the most important tasks of these institutions is to train and provide ongoing formation for those who are involved in the biblical apostolate.

It would be helpful to reiterate the last request from 1994: To strengthen the Church's consciousness of the need to anchor Christian life ever more firmly in the Word of God we are proposing that in the foreseeable future a synod of Bishops be devoted to this topic of the Word of God and discuss in depth the ways in which Scripture can find fruitful pastoral application in the life of the Church.

On behalf of the leaders in the biblical apostolate from Central and Eastern Europe I can say that our shared concern that the Bible be given its due place in the Church and in society throughout a unified Europe now and in the future binds us into a unity that transcends borders and boundaries. It is our hope that this PA will be a positive step towards ensuring that all pastoral activity around the world "is healthy way and flourishes in a holy way" (DV 24). ■



The Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) is a world-wide association of Catholic organizations committed to the ministry of the Word of God. At the present time, the CBF membership includes 90 full members and 228 associate members coming from a total of 126 countries.

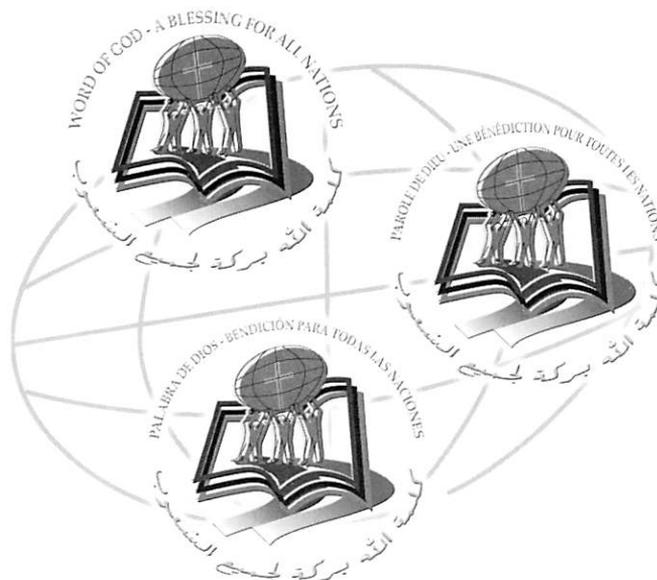
The activities of these organizations include the preparation of Catholic and interconfessional Bible translations, the propagation of Bibles and in general the promotion of a deeper understanding of Holy Scripture.

The CBF promotes the biblical-pastoral activities of these organizations, provides a forum for the world-wide sharing of experiences in this field, searches for new ways of bringing the joy of God's Word to the faithful throughout the world. It seeks collaboration with the representatives of biblical scholarship as well as with Bible Societies of various confessions.

In particular, the CBF works towards the promotion of the reading of the Bible within the context of concrete life situations and the training of ministers of the Word in this direction.

At the beginning of the third millennium Holy Scripture can be viewed as the great textbook of humanity. Especially in times like this the reading of the Bible not only helps the Christian community to grow in faith and love, but it can and should also offer to the whole world those words of brotherhood and of human wisdom that it so desperately needs. This is the great challenge that the Catholic Biblical Federation sets for itself.

**Vincenzo Paglia, Bishop of Terni-Narni-Amelia, Italy, President of the CBF**



Important documents and interesting contributions on the PA can be found on the CBF website under  
**[www.c-b-f.org](http://www.c-b-f.org)**