

DEI VERBUM

Catholic Biblical Federation

BULLETIN

40 Years of Dei Verbum

The Dogmatic Constitution and
Its Impact

In Memoriam Pope John Paul II

Yahweh, Our Guard

Catechesis on Psalm 121 by
Pope Benedict XVI



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Dear Readers:



“Go and take that open scroll ... Take it and eat it; it will turn your stomach sour, but it will taste as sweet as honey.” So I took the little scroll out of the angel's hand, and I ate it and it tasted sweet as honey, but when I had eaten it my stomach turned sour. Then I was told, “You are to prophesy again ...”

At first glance it is an unusual image which, in Revelation, serves to describe the impact and significance of the Word of God. With the symbolic act of consuming a scroll the seer John receives the renewed commission to prophesy (cf. Rev 10:8-11). From the hands of an angel he receives a little, open scroll and eats it. And so it is: the word does indeed taste sweet in his mouth, but turns sour in his stomach.

This image of the sweet-sour message of Revelation, which is found in similar form already in Ezek 2-3, could be interpreted symbolically with reference to our own relationship to God's revelation as well: God's Word is not something we can stand looking at from a safe distance; rather, we can (and must) take it in our hands; it touches us in our innermost being. God's Word wants to be swallowed and received in every conceivable sense. But at the same time it is no easily digestible fare, no prepared food; it must be well chewed and digested, actively consumed and interiorized. Even if at first it appears to be comprehensible and easily understandable – when we have finally taken it in, it can jolt us bitterly, destroy our inner tranquility. Its message does not leave us indifferent; rather it occupies and involves us. It can pose unpleasant questions and challenge us to action. *You are to prophesy again* God's Word is at once nourishment and challenge.

This present issue of the *Bulletin Dei Verbum* has two main focal points: firstly, as announced, we are continuing to concern ourselves with the conciliar Constitution *Dei Verbum*. You will thus find articles here on the significance and the historical impact of this document from the perspective of the different regions of the Federation. They show how intensively and creatively, but also with

what remarkably different emphases the impulses of the *Dei Verbum* have been received and further developed in the last four decades on the individual continents. This overview will be complemented by excerpts from the still authoritative commentary on *Dei Verbum* by then professor of dogmatic theology, Joseph Ratzinger, which appeared already shortly after the Council in 1967. As a young Council theologian the present Pope Benedict XVI was at that time an active participant in the lively discussions and preparations that preceded this Council text.

Our second major emphasis in this issue is to recall the great Pope John Paul II who died on April 2 of this year. As a memorial to this impressive man and Church leader we have put together some of his central statements on the significance of Holy Scripture. These are intended to serve not only as documentation and recollection, but also as legacy and mandate for the future.

In his apostolic letter *Ecclesia in Europa* John Paul II picks up the image of the swallowing of the scroll with which we began our introduction. It is the challenge to each one of us not to keep our distance with respect to the Word of God, but to take it in, allow it to touch and transform our innermost being. And: to live according to this Word, even at precisely those times when it can taste not only sweet but also bitter.

Let us take up this book! Let us receive it from the Lord who continually offers it to us through his Church. Let us devour it, so that it can become our very life. Let us savour it deeply: it will make demands of us, but it will give us joy because it is sweet as honey. Filled with hope, we will be able to share it with every man and woman whom we encounter on our way. (Ecclesia in Europa 65)

With best wishes for a “nourishing” – perhaps in some places even a challenging – reading and warm greetings from the General Secretariat,

Claudio Ettl



The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation

A Commentary*

Joseph Ratzinger (1967)

There were three factors that came together to inspire a Constitution on Divine Revelation. The first was the new understanding of the phenomenon of Tradition, which, for a variety of reasons, had begun to develop already since the beginning of the previous century (...). The second concern that led to the Constitution can be seen in the theological problem, as that came to be seen ever more clearly through the application of the historical critical method to the interpretation of Holy Scripture (...). The third driving force behind the Constitution on Revelation is also the most positive of the three: it is to be seen in the Bible movement, which had been gaining strength since the turn of the century and which, in large segments of Catholic Christianity, had already fashioned a new fundamental attitude toward Holy Scripture, unleashed a new familiarity with it and an increasingly decisive reliance on Scripture in both theology and piety. As with the case of the liturgical movement, in the decades before the Council a new spiritual fact had become a reality in the Church, which the Council had only to pick up, to deepen and to extend to the whole Church (to the extent that it is within the power of a council to do so.) (...)



Joseph Ratzinger in the 1960's

So it was that on November 18, 1965, in the eighth official session of the Council, the final vote could be taken, which looked as follows: 2350 votes, 2344 Placet, 6 Non placet. A decisive piece of conciliar history had thus found a conciliatory conclusion. The text, which was solemnly proclaimed by the Pope on this very day, naturally carries the traces of its belabored history: it is the result of many compromises. But the basic compromise which carries this text is more than a compromise; it is a synthesis of enormous significance: the text binds together loyalty to Church tradition with the yes to critical science, and thereby once again opens the way for faith into the world of today. It does not surrender the substance of Trent or Vatican I, but it also does not mummify the past either, because it knows that fidelity in spiritual matters can only be realized through a process of ongoing vital appropriation. Looking at what the Council achieved as a whole, it is fairly safe to say that the efforts of a struggle that lasted four years were not in vain. (...)

Article 22

The challenge issued by *Dei Verbum* to open wide the gates to Holy Scripture for all the faithful is particularly weighty when seen against the background of history. The fences that had been erected with respect to the vernacular Bible and to Bible reading by non-theologians ever since the 13th and especially the 15th century are here decisively torn down. (...)

The following statements pick up again in the same spirit the decree of Trent on the Vulgate and alter it in a twofold way by setting it within a new, and this time truly ecumenical context:

a) Instead of the misleading statement that the Vulgate "is to be regarded as authentic", a simpler and clearer formulation is chosen, namely, that the Vulgate will always be held in honor by the Church. But this observation is now no longer made merely with respect to the classical Bible translation of the Latin West; rather it is extended to the great translations of the partial churches – Oriental as well as Latin – whereby particular account is taken of the weight the Septuagint possessed for the early Church and already for the the Greek New Testament and its Christian re-reading (*relecture*) of the Old Testament. In the formula "ut suam suscipit" ("the Church ... accepted [the Septuagint] as her own"), the fundamental process of the reception of the Bible of the old People of God and its form in the Bible of the Greek speaking Jews as the Holy Scripture of the new People of God is brought to explicit consciousness. Through this new context, the new ground for the ecclesial valuing of the Vulgate is now also expressed: it is the Bible of the Fathers, as translation inevitably also already a piece of interpretation, the way in which the old Church of the West read, understood and received the Bible. In this sense it is not only Scripture, but also a piece of ecclesial interpretation of the Bible, and "tradition". To declare it alone authentic would be to place tradition above Scripture. In contrast, to "hold it in honor" and at the same time to demand a return to the original text implies a new definition of the relationship of Scripture and Tradition, such that the step taken by Vatican II in this matter becomes clearer here in this concrete example than it is in the formal statement of principle found in chapter 2. Above all, however, it should also be noted that the fundamental ideas of the Constitution on the



Church and of the Decree on Ecumenism are worked out in a practical way here. The isolation and raising to effectively absolute status of the Latin Church is broken through and she is viewed once again in tandem with the non-Latin churches as the one and universal Church, such that one cannot speak of the Latin translation alone, but before it is even mentioned, similar observations must be made about the translations of the Eastern Churches. This broadening of horizons brought about by Vatican II over against Trent and Vatican I proves to be a not merely human, but genuinely theological phenomenon.

b) As I already indicated, at the same time that it honors the Tradition by acknowledging the enduring value of the ancient Christian translations of the Bible, the Council also mandates a return to the original texts. The mandate states that God's Word in Scripture is to be made accessible to people today through direct translation from these original texts into modern languages. The way in which a "return" here is intrinsically and at the same time also a way forward, and the unity in an original text that holds all together is at the same time an enabling of pluralism, should shed light on the fundamental structure of ecclesial reform: To go behind the classical translations to the original text means at the same time to translate anew and so stride forward; to reflect on a basic text means also to open the Bible to every modern language. The unity radius of the text has more to it than that: when on the Catholic and the Protestant sides people return to what lies behind the classical translations of their own traditions, to the source that binds all together, it will also be possible to have common translations, and with the translations a common reading and a common understanding. The encouragement to common translations with non-Catholic Christians is a challenge to a common re-reading of the Bible from out of our present Christian situation, to a common understanding of the Word of God that sustains all. If anything, it can become a starting point for a new common understanding of the message that sustains us all. This is actually an enormous advance over Trent, and the pragmatic statements of this conciliar text are themselves truly theological events of great significance. (...)

Article 24

Article 24 is devoted to the function of Scripture for theology. This function is initially described with the image of a foundation, whereby the element of continuity stands in the foreground: Regardless of how much in a house can grow and develop, its foundation remains and is the stable presupposition without which the rest could have no sustained existence. (...) The static character of the image of a foundation is complemented in the second half of the sentence through the predicates "roboratur" ("strengthened") and "iuvenescit" ("rejuve-

nated"): the "house" of theology is not a building built once for all time, but it stands only if theology remains vibrantly engaged. And so the foundation is also the ever grounding and ever sustaining starting point for the durability of theology. For this reason Scripture, shifted to the organic level of imagery, is described as that which makes young, that which keeps theology strong and vibrant. (...)



In a third image, which goes back to Leo XIII, Scripture is finally described as the "soul of sacred theology". The expression receives here its far-reaching power through its connection with the Decree on Priestly Training, which employs the same expression (*S. Scriptura anima theologiae*), to draw from it a practical consequence, which for the formal system of Catholic theology would have to possess an almost revolutionary significance.

In the previously existing manuals of dogmatic theology the starting point of the respective treatment was the doctrinal scheme of the Church. Following this, a biblical proof and then one from the tradition were offered, and then an attempt at a theological argument or synthesis. The consequence of this approach was the fundamental fact that Scripture was treated only with a view to its probative value for existing statements of doctrine. Even where this treatment of Scripture was conducted with considerable care and with the use of modern exegetical methods, scholars never quite succeeded in developing a given topic out of the perspective of Scripture itself, nor were questions newly raised that emerged from the biblical text itself and that were not intended by the syllabus of ecclesial dogmatics. Where new questions were dealt with, they emerged generally out of the work of systematic theology itself, not from the impetus of Scripture. In the Decree on Priestly Training it is now said that dogmatic theology is to be so constructed "ut ipsa themata biblica primum proponantur" ("...that these biblical themes are proposed first of all", *Optatam totius* 16). This means that in the future the Bible is first to be read, reflected on and questioned in its own context, and only then the development of the tradition and dogmatic analysis will come into play. The consequences this new approach has for problems of method in Catholic theology have yet to be fully thought out. But it should not be difficult to see that the expression of Scripture as the soul of theology has enormous practical weight here.

The last sentence of our article subjects the homily and all forms of ecclesial preaching to the same law which we have just found applied to theology: that these ecclesial functions draw their inspiration from Scripture is their most urgent task. The unity of the conciliar work is also evident here: the demand for regular homilies made by



the Council in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (chapter 2, art. 52), is here picked up and expanded to include the requirement of a biblical orientation of the entire work of preaching. (...)

Article 25

Article 25 draws some practical consequences from the new attitude to the original text, to translation and to accessibility to the Bible that was formulated in article 22. Bible reading is moved to the center of Christian existence and a new orientation is given to Catholic piety. Until now, the prayer life of Catholic Christians, apart from their participation in the liturgy, was primarily marked by various kinds of devotions – the rosary, the Stations of the Cross, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, etc. – which originated since the late medieval period and in the course of the modern era. Private reading of the Bible played no primary role here and even for meditation and preaching it was not of first rate significance. It may thus be seen as an event of far-ranging significance for the development of the spiritual life when our text highlights personal engagement with the Scripture as a fundamental form of a relationship with God and further underscores its importance by means of the emphatic statement of Saint Jerome: “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” It is important to see that the Council is not talking about a purely intellectual, informative knowledge of Scripture, or even one resulting from cultural and educational considerations. Rather, it speaks of a Bible reading as prayer, as the execution of that dialogue with the Lord, whose vibrant realization in faith and prayer the pages of Scripture as it were await. One might say that Catholic piety to a large extent has yet to properly discover the Bible and that such an event will in turn also be of great significance for exegesis, which can otherwise easily slip into a purely intellectual atmosphere, to which profound dimensions of this book must remain hidden, however much insight might be gained through the historical sciences.

The last section of our article extends what has thus far been said to the level of the Church’s missionary activity and thereby once again takes a novel step that will certainly be of some significance for the fundamental understanding of mission. What for a long time has been taking place on the Protestant side will now become the proper work of Catholic Christians and of the Catholic Church – namely, the dissemination of the Bible among non-Christians. A new element thus enters into the understanding of mission, which has thus far been defined in overly hierarchical and institutional terms: a trust in the self-operative power of the Word, which of course cannot and should not render the Church’s preaching superfluous, but that it can carry as a piece of the presence of Jesus Christ among the peoples, far beyond the realm of the hierarchical Church. Perhaps we

should learn to give a higher theological rating to the presence of Christ that comes to be in this way among those who are not baptized, and who to a large extent will probably remain un-baptized: In the last analysis, only the Lord himself can decide what it means when people in this way also manage to take hold as it were only of the hem of his garment as he passes by (cf. Mark 6:56). This would make tangible in an especially beautiful way that spirit of openness which more and more left its stamp on the Council. “It seems indisputable to me that the Church with this word has in a sense achieved the waiver of any claim to monopolize the Bible, to be its sole proprietor and legitimate reader. In this way she found a standard, in all simplicity, for the renewal that she introduced in the incredibly short time-span of three years.” (J.M. González Ruiz, *Der Gebrauch der Bibel in der Kirche des Konzils*, in: J.C. Hampe [ed.], *Die Autorität der Freiheit. Gegenwart des Konzils und Zukunft der Kirche im ökumenischen Disput*, München 1966, 232-239: 238)

Article 26 returns once again to the comparison with the Eucharistic mystery that stood at the beginning of our chapter: Word of God and Body of Christ, Word and sacrament belong together and are the two-in-one way in which the Logos become flesh remains with his Church and gives her life ... The universalistic ideas of the proemium return here as well: “That the word of God may spread rapidly and be glorified.” (2 Thess 3:1) It is precisely the idea that comes immediately before these words, the readiness to generously and fearlessly scatter abroad the seed of the Word of God, even in those places where what grows from it is something we cannot supervise or control, that constitutes a full yes to the universal meaning and to the inner power of the Word of God, that does not return to Him empty (Is 55:10f). The Constitution that begins with the idea of universalism, ends with it as well: the Word of God is intended for men, and the ministry of the Word, which the Church seeks with this Constitution, can not be restricted to the matter of internal church reform. In the final analysis it is ordered to humanity as a whole, for it is not the Church as such but every individual human being that lives in the most profound sense from the Word of God more than from the bread that sustains him in an earthly life threatened by death.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)

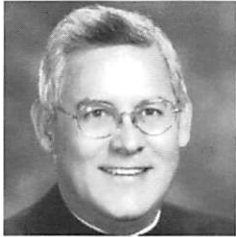
* Translation from German. Publication with kind permission of Verlag Herder, Freiburg i. Br., Germany. The original text has been published in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 13, Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 1967).



From a Seedling to a Mature Plant

The Post-Conciliar Path Taken by the Pastoral Biblical Movement in Latin America

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1. Precedents

Latin America's awakening from the biblical slumber of the years and centuries that preceded the Council can be considered as the breaking through of a seedling that has finally germinated. It has now grown into a plant and a tree, giving ample shade and producing much fruit.

Its precedent was the Catholic biblical movement at the end of the 19th Century and in the first half of the 20th, spurred on by three great magisterium documents: Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920), and Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943).

This great stride forward by the Catholic Church cannot be seen apart from the daring scientific studies of the Bible carried out by exegetes and theologians of mainline Reformation Churches in Europe, the Christological current of their investigations, and their pastoral efforts, linked to the Gospels by their famous problem of the historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith. All of this led up to a Christological centralization of Christian life, which served, along with many other factors, as a platform for the event of the Council.

Thanks to this Christological vein and its influence on the framework of the Council, clear reference to the Word of God both in the Church and in pastoral appears with *Dei Verbum*. As John Paul II later commented, this was a "much neglected" area.

Cardinal Ratzinger, commenting 1967 upon *Dei Verbum* in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, highlighted the importance of the pre-conciliar biblical movements, understood as organizations that helped the faithful to have access to Sacred Scripture, through texts, guidelines for reading, conferences, congresses, biblical circles. This fact, which defines what biblical pastoral work is all about, was already a reality on the eve of Vatican II.

2. Inspiring post-conciliar trends

The determinant influence of *Dei Verbum* in the biblical apostolate of our continent has not been so much in terms of method as in its inspiring content. It has continued to advance and progressively configure the movement, rooting itself in these three principle ideas:

- The power of the Word of God, contained, almost totally but not exclusively in the Holy Scriptures. Here we find transmitted not only information, but a message filled with efficacy and power, and still more, a person, the Saviour: "the Word of God is living and effective" (Heb 4,12). Here lies the root for Church's vigor and its capacity to bring about the Kingdom, transforming people and their circumstances in a salvific way.
- The relationship between words and deeds in revelation: intrinsic, interactive and interdependent. This dynamic has sensitized the Church to events around it, in time and space; it has taught her to listen to voices in their cultural and historical context. It has opened her to interpreting the signs of the times and in this way to be in tune with humanity, offering answers of immanent and transcendent meaning. And most of all it has helped her to find the Lord's face, as Incarnate Word.
- The Bible as a book for the entire people of God: "Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful" (*Dei Verbum* 22). It belongs to the bishops, to the exegetes, to the theologians, but not only to these, but also, and frequently forgotten, to the faithful, to the laity, to the poor, to the Indians, to women, etc. Only the entire Church, hierarchically and ministerially organized, can bring about an ever fuller, deeper and defining understanding of the revealed content. The theological root of this right and possibility is seen when the people of God take on the character of bearers of this revelation: prophets (Nm 11, 29; Jl 3, 1.2).

3. Milestones along this path

The Council generated the last forty years of biblical awakening in Latin America. The rapid and dynamic application of this document was not equaled on any



other continent. For biblical pastoral work, *Dei Verbum* is regarded as the constitutive point of departure because it gave life, spirit, soul, fire, content and moorings to a pastoral movement still in the process of configuration.

Equally, one cannot underestimate the importance of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* as an explicit call to the central role of the Bible in evangelization, and the life-giving context that it gave to the Church, undoubtedly closer to the historic and salvific parameters inspired in Sacred Scripture. For the same reasons it is necessary to recognize the determining character of Medellín, Puebla and Santo Domingo. The pastoral and evangelizing character of these Latin American Episcopal Conferences have more far-reaching consequences as ecclesial events than for the biblical content of their documents.

a) **Medellín**, in 1968, gave a breath of fresh air to the Bible and its importance. By applying the Council teaching, it tried to understand the historic moment of the Latin American people, looking at their face with its features, especially its pain, but also its hope. This Conference affirmed the power of the Word, which calls together and promotes communities (6.9). For this reason, it recommended that experts be prepared in the area of Sacred Scripture (9.11), that priests be trained to hear and live the Word in their personal conversion, study and prayer (13.10), that the pastoral affirm this aspect of power (6.13, 14.14), that catechesis transmit it faithfully (8.6), that it permeate the popular devotions (6.12) and be the foundation for communities (6.13). This Second Conference produced an ecclesial process of great vitality, marked by its creativity, imagination, investigation, study, the chief role of the laity, and its sense of belonging to the Church, ...which oxygenated the growth of that biblical seedling in the evangelization process¹.

b) **Puebla**, in 1979, related the Bible to evangelization². In this time period the Latin American Church, through the biblical apostolate, had become familiar with references to the Word of God. It echoed an expression of Leo XII about Sacred Scripture as the soul of theology (*Providentissimus Deus* 58), declaring that Scripture is "the soul of evangelization" (372), and, echoing the Council, it is "the source for catechesis (981; 1001).

As a result, it recommended the diffusion of the Word of God through the biblical apostolate (1001). The document, contrary to a policy of their General Secretariat which mentions but two institutions, CELAM and the Holy See, now also makes reference to the Catholic Biblical Federation and its pastoral biblical program.

By articulating the pastoral options by which the Church would move forward under the guidance of

the Spirit, it insisted that its foundational attitudes would lie in listening to, growing in, celebrating and proclaiming the Word of God, and in living witness to it by denouncing situations of sin, hoping to bring about one's own conversion and to help build the new society (1305). It took a great stride forward of enormous proportions, in insisting not so much on Bible interpretation, but rather on interpreting life in light of the Bible.

c) **Santo Domingo**, in 1992, gave full breath to the Bible's Christology and expression. The Fourth General Conference of the Latin American bishops responded to the explicit desire of its participants for the formulation of the final document: "that it should be Christocentric in its content and biblical in its expression"³.

During the preparation period, they had explicitly consulted communities about the presence of the Scriptures in their life; this opened up a panorama which was already hinted at in the dialogues and conclusions. The working draft highlighted the following lights and shadows: the experience of encountering the Scriptures, the centrality of the Word for the Church, study, biblical reflections and prayers, love for the poor and simple in the Bible, translation into Indian languages, popular editions, availability of biblical methods and materials, biblical pastoral; but also, a lack of biblical formation, homilies not based on the Bible, tendency toward fundamentalism and literalism, Catholics becoming "Protestants" because of a pastoral that does not mention the Bible, and the lack of Bibles at a price affordable for the poor.

The conviction that the new evangelization will only "have renovating power in the degree that it is faithful to the Word of God" (27) was expressed within a biblical framework with the logo, "Jesus Christ, yesterday, today and always" (Heb 13:8), marked the document and the Church quote⁴.

Besides the logo, Santo Domingo introduced two biblical texts, both from Luke, whose placement made them paradigmatic: the Emmaus incident 24:13-35, which lent form and structure to the bishops' message to the Latin American and Caribbean peoples⁵; and the synagogue scene, 4:16-22, which supports the preferential option of the Latin American episcopate⁶.

These three biblical quotes have made possible the definition of the new evangelization in Latin America. It is characterized by three axes:

- reference to the Word of God,
- lead role of the laity, and
- promotion of Base Communities.



Pastoral experience continues to show us that, on the one hand, these two latter receive their vitality and sustenance from the former; and on the other, the new evangelization will be a reality and at the same time an explicit announcement of Jesus Christ only to the degree in which it is anchored in the Word of God, is open to the hour of the laity (the poor) and guarantees the future of the Church by the formation of communities.



Scripture references inspire all of Santo Domingo opening the Christological pole to the elements of the tripod upon which John Paul II had set up Puebla. The biblical background of Santo Domingo is also measured in the enlightenment, the challenges and the pastoral guidelines, totally inspired in the revealed data, although they do not appear either implicitly or explicitly as biblical citations. Suffice it to mention that which is related to the poor, women, youth, ecology, family and human rights.

The Fifth Conference, programmed for 2007, will take as its direction a definitely biblical thematic: discipleship. One foresees a touchstone for the relationship between Bible and Church in Latin America. If the bishops orient their reflection around the theme of discipleship in Luke, they will take a more definite direction toward the centrality of the Bible in the Church and the biblical orientation of all pastoral. How? By taking as the point of departure his typically kerygmatic presentation of the Saviour, one should insist, as Luke does, in the reaction of the believer, that is to say, in discipleship, through the three fundamental postures of faith, of conversion and of baptism; and the five attitudes of following Jesus, personal witness, spirituality, prayer, poverty, community life⁷.

d) Comparable to the transcendence achieved by *Dei Verbum* in Latin America is the document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church", promulgated by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1993, save one difference: while the conciliar Constitution unleashed the biblical movement in Latin America, IBC confirmed, with a balancing degree of modera-

tion, some intuitions about the path of the Latin American biblical movement. In this regard it will suffice to mention the following reflections⁸:

- *Interdisciplinary approach* in the interpretation of the Bible, relying on the help of sociology, anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis.
- The value of the *reader's context*, which complements an "objectifying" interpretation, centered on what the text said situated in its original context. Related to contextualization, the document offers two valuable reflections about a liberationist and a feminist reading.
- *A liberationist reading*: looking at liberation theology, recognized as a "complex phenomenon, which cannot be arbitrarily simplified," it regards positively the attention given to the economic, social and political circumstances in Latin America and the two great ecclesial events, the Council and Medellín, and their response to people's needs and their attention to the premise of God's presence in history to save us and God's love for the poor.
- *A feminist reading*: after noting "it gives great satisfaction to see the number of women exegetes who are contributing to the interpretation of the Scriptures, offering new and insightful points of view, bringing forth aspects which had long been forgotten" (III,B.3), it recognizes that the God of the Bible is fatherly, but also maternal in love and tenderness.
- *A fundamentalist reading* was totally rejected, because it has as a presupposition the rejection of the historical character of biblical revelation, making it incapable of taking seriously the truth of the Incarnation. Such a reading gives divine authority to a religious-political-social ideology which to a great degree is contrary to the Gospel; for its numerous deviations about inspiration and inerrancy, being innocent of Gospel and Church tradition, offering simplistic solutions to complex problems, and promising false and illusory security.
- *The Inculturation of the biblical message*: this is about the effort that attempts to root the message for all places and in all soils, conscious of the fact that there is really not a total diversity between the message and culture and that every culture is a carrier, in its own way, of the universal values that come from God (Cfr. IV,B).
- *The method of lectio divina*: should be encouraged being that it is an ancient practice of the Church that sowed much fruit for holiness and led to a better knowledge of God, of his plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. It recognizes that there are numerous attempts to revitalize this method and its contribution to a communal Bible reading.



- *The ecumenical movement*: of particular importance because the majority of the problems faced are related to the interpretation of biblical texts. It takes into account that dialogue has demonstrated that a variety of interpretations, all enriching to Church life, are possible.

4. The steps on the path

We can gauge these steps, although not exclusively, in terms of what we called the "pastoral biblical gatherings." These gatherings were points both of arrival and departure, fraternal gatherings, to share faith and communion, to examine the horizon. They were celebrated on the national, zonal⁹ or continental level, the latter being sponsored by the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF/FEBIC), CELAM, and the local episcopal conferences of the places where we met. Intertwined with these and of more notable influence was the Fourth Plenary Assembly of CBF/FEBIC held in Bogotá.

I, Bogotá, Colombia, 1985

II, Mendes, Brasil, 1989

*IV Plenary Assembly of CBF/FEBIC,
Bogotá, Colombia, 1990*

III, Quito, Ecuador, 1993

IV, Los Teques, Venezuela, 1999.

To these five continental gatherings, we add, because of their importance, two zonal gatherings, one in the Southern Zone and the other, of the Bolivarian countries, and in the interval in between, we had a gathering from all of America of the experts in pastoral biblical work:

VI (Cono Sur), Santiago, Chile, 2001

Meeting of experts, Quito, Ecuador, 2002

II (Países Bolivarianos), Quito, Ecuador, 2004.

These moments, along with many other facts and factors¹⁰, form a three-stage frame for this small history:

- a) Between 1965 and 1985: contact with the biblical text.
- b) Between 1985 and 1993: biblical prophecy and formation for ministry.
- c) Between 1993 and 2005: centrality of the Bible in the Church and formation for Bible reading.

These steps have given us a rich fabric. They were brought about through pastoral biblical planning, the creation of commissions and the foundation of centers and groups. Important also was the lead role of the laity, religious and numerous other pastoral agents; the relationship between episcopal conferences and promoters, the centers and biblical groups, the

methods for reading the Bible, especially the use of *lectio divina* over the last few years, the use of social communication media, interest in ecological problems, the wide distribution of "economical and big print" Bibles. But the shadows were also present: biblical pastoral ministry considered as the appendix to catechetics, clericalism in both priests and laity, fundamentalist interpretations¹¹. The "life context" path of the Bible in Latin America has been undeniably the Ecclesial Base Communities: these have permitted the Word of God "to nest again," or they have grown out of this reference. These have become the thread that links through shared experience, geographically separate churches, and have contributed to spreading to other continents "the Latin American reading of the Bible."

5. An interpretive synthesis of this path

Let us take a look now at the global vision coming from Latin American panorama, honing in on a few key points:

5.1. Tendencias

There is a hunger for the Word of God (cf. Am 8:11), which has spread itself across the entire geography of Latin America, particularly in more marginated areas, generating hope and a fruitful encounter with the text.

Translations of the biblical text, a worldwide phenomenon which has multiplied like never before in the history of the Church, defined in Latin America in three different rhythms:

- liturgical, through the use of the vernacular language in liturgical celebrations (*Sacrosantum Concilium* 54);
- interconfessional, through the expressed suggestion of the Council (*Dei Verbum* 22) and the "Guiding Principles / Guidelines for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible" (1968/1987), conjointly published by the Holy See and the United Bible Societies and accepted by CELAM;
- missionary, through the ability of the Bible to enter into the most impregnable spheres.

The interpretation of the text in the context of everyday life, through emphasis on a hermeneutical understanding before an exegetical understanding, identifying "faithfulness to the message" with "faithfulness to humanity," supported by accentuating concepts such as "theology in its context" and the "inculturation" of the Gospel¹².

5.2. Difficulties

Continued conditions of poverty and illiteracy that marginate and precondition millions of brothers and



sisters, directly contrary to their dignity and their participation in the creative work that the very Scriptures proclaim.

- The divorce between exegesis and the interecclesial community, between exegesis and dogma, between exegesis and pastoral. Specialists who work from books, desks and classrooms, but who fear meeting the pastoral, for fear of losing the scientific rigor of their studies. This difficulty makes for a Bible presentation devoid of any pastoral, ecclesial, catechetical meaning; the Bible becomes a catechism of dead truths, lived out by no one, creating vacuous homilies, filled with the celebrant's words, but bereft of the Word, and in structured pastorals that do not promote Church, community or evangelization.
- Fundamentalism as found both among sects and Catholics, that makes for a reading that foments passivity, legitimizes situations which are against life, justifies invasions or subhuman dominations, legitimizes practices and doctrines which are anti-gospel.

5.3. Results

- A biblical anthropology characterized by the integrity of the human person, the unity of body and soul, matter and spirit, intelligence and emotion, within a historical context and the web of "interpersonal" relationships with God, our brothers and sisters and nature.
- An ecclesiology characterized by communion and participation, ministries, plurality and unity, all of which are seen as inspired in the saving community of the Trinity.
- A moral theology characterized by social and communal referents, conscious of the individual's responsibility; a theology which affects structures and laws and their relation to human dignity.
- A "Latin American reading" of the Bible, which is wide-ranging and inspiring, rather than exclusive: it is already spreading to other continents. It gallops forward, paced by these two convictions: people are the subjects of this reading, and the Bible is the book of life! This has produced three characteristics:
 - its relation to life: contextual;
 - its relation to people: communal;
 - its own hermeneutics: current.

5.4. Needs

- For the translation of the Bible text into the many spoken languages on the continent in which it is still not known, and for an *en masse* literacy program for large sectors of the population.
- For a scientific and academic preparation for the pastoral agents, spiritual and pastoral formation for

the exegetes, biblical formation for priests, and spiritual formation for laity to insure a faithful reading of the Bible (*Dei Verbum* 23), and to avoid the problem of fundamentalism. This implies a pedagogy that provides easy access not only to the text, but also to the message, overcoming, through hermeneutics, the distance between exegesis and pastoral, and facilitating the intercultural and interdisciplinary reading of the text.

- For integration and dialogue between the magisterium and the people of God, between professors of Sacred Scripture and Bible group animators, appreciating both the "sensus fidei" and the "sensus fidelium," and a reading of the Bible understood as "locus theologicus".
- At this point it is more urgent than ever to petition the Holy See to convoke a Synod about the place of "Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church."



5.5. Challenges

- The relation between word and communication, between interiorization and technology. Confronted by a technology of unprecedented progress, but also filled with risk of manipulation, it becomes necessary to redeem that interior space where the Word can be heard. We are talking about that depth of compelling communication in which we share not only ideas, but also experiences, visions of being and of life, and the convictions of our faith.
- Relations between plurality and unity. Faced with the variety of biblical material and the objective value of the differing methods to engage it, as well as anthropological and spiritual needs, the need arises to guarantee dynamics that avoid misstatements or divisive interpretations, and which safeguard the overall unity by reference to Jesus Christ and by the affirmation of biblical values.
- Relations between Catholicism and ecumenism. By taking as a starting point non-confessional material, but material that is original and co-extensive through



unity in a common commitment to the dignity of the human person and witness in service to the world.

- ☐ Relation between the local and the universal: done in such a way that it affirms the diversity in the contextual surrounding, without introducing divisions, thanks to the contribution of what is truly human, bringing about the truth of God's Word: "the treasure and wealth of the nations will be brought there..." for the glory of God (Rev 21:24,26).
- ☐ Fulfilment of three complementary but non-substitutable areas:
 - wide publication of the Bible text through translations, production and distribution;
 - facilitate contact with the Bible for the laity along with resources for a proper reading (commentaries);
 - centrality of the life of the Church, concretely in its pastoral dimension, so that she might truly be "the spouse of the Word" (*Dei Verbum* 23).
- ☐ The formation of priests¹³.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)

- ¹ Cf. Motta Lima da Cruz Therezinha / Inês Broshuis, O apostolado bíblico nos documentos de Medellín, Puebla e os preparatorios de Santo Domingo, seguindo as recomendações da *Dei Verbum*, in: *La Palabra Hoy* 63 (1992) 3-8.
- ² Cf. Mora R. Jaime Alfonso, La pastoral bíblica: núcleo de la nueva evangelización y fuente vitalizadora de la pastoral de conjunto, Cúcuta 1994; La Biblia modelo de acción para la nueva evangelización, Cúcuta 1994.
- ³ De Gasperin G. Mario, La Palabra de Dios en el documento de Santo Domingo, in: *La Palabra Hoy* 67 (1993) 5-6: 6.
- ⁴ Cf. Naranjo S. Gabriel, Estudio exegético del texto bíblico: "Jesucristo ayer, hoy y siempre" (Hb 13, 8), in: *Grandes temas de Santo Domingo; reflexiones desde el CELAM, Bogotá (CELAM) 1994*, 89-103.
- ⁵ This is not the first time that the biblical text has been considered an apt instrument to express the content and the implications of the new evangelization. It was the reference point in the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the CBF/FEBIC held in Bogotá, June, 27 to July 6, 1990.
- ⁶ In spite of the concluding prayer, the bishops affirm right there that the "only option is Christ" and in the synthesis, the poor are the only element that appears as a "preferential option."
- ⁷ Cf. Fitzmyer Joseph A., *El Evangelio según San Lucas*, Madrid 1986, 1.396-435.
- ⁸ Cf. Galindo Florencio, *Visión global del documento de la Pontificia Comisión Bíblica "La Interpretación de la Biblia en la Iglesia"*, in: *La Palabra Hoy* 80/81 (1996) 89-99.

⁹ Up to the present, four have taken place in Mexico, one in the Caribbean, five in Central America, two in the Bolivarian Countries, and six in the Southern Zone.

¹⁰ Cf. Weisensee Jesús Antonio, La FEBIC-LAC a los 35 años de la FEBIC, en sus 30 años de existencia, in: *La Palabra Hoy* 112 (2004) 5-30.

¹¹ Cf. III Encuentro de Pastoral Bíblica de América Latina y el Caribe, especialmente "Nuestro Caminar Bíblico desde la Asamblea de Bogotá" y "Declaración Final", in: *La Palabra Hoy* 71/72 (1994) 6-25; 119-130.

¹² It is worthwhile to point out that this tendency has had great success in Brazil, with the support and the enthusiasm of its exegetes and communities. There they talk about "the reading of Holy Scripture in light of life, and of life in light of Holy Scripture."

¹³ Cf. Naranjo Gabriel, La formación para la lectura de las Escrituras y para el ministerio de la Palabra, in: *La Palabra Hoy* 83 (1997) 10-27.



“For the Sake of Our Salvation” A Re-reading of *Dei Verbum* After 40 Years from an European Perspective

Daniel Kosch



Dr. Daniel Kosch is a theologian who for nine years headed the biblical pastoral ministry department of the Swiss Catholic Biblical Association. From 1996 till 2001 he was the moderator of the Executive Committee of the CBF. Since 2001 he has been the general secretary of the Roman Catholic Central Conference of Switzerland (RKZ).

A forty-year anniversary does not justify a “real” jubilee. A Jubilee Year is celebrated, after all, only at the end of 7 x 7 years. But the forty-year timeframe is – in the context of the Bible – a highly significant one: for 40 years the People of God journeyed through the desert. This time of the Exodus was marked by such different experiences as the liberation from slavery, the yearning for the land of promise, the victory song of Miriam, nostalgia for the flesh pots of Egypt, the authority and the rejection of Moses, the gift of the ten commandments, the dance around the golden calf, power struggles among people in leadership roles, the manna miracle and the crises resulting from the people’s hunger, thirst and overall despondency. All these experiences have echoes in the later history of the People of God as well: Even after the entrance into the “Promised Land” the liberating presence of the “I am there” (Ex 3:14) was experienced only in the context of history, to which belonged dark, even dismal sides alongside the bright.

For many Christians – even beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church – the Vatican Council was an “experience of liberation”. Images such as that of the “open window and doors”, expressions such as “a leap forward” (John XXIII, in the opening address *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, Nr. 15), theological buzz terms such as that of “the pilgrim People of God” go back directly or indirectly to the language of the central biblical narratives of liberation, those of the Exodus and of the resurrection. That even the 40 year history of the life of the Catholic Church that came out of and followed the experience of the Council has many parallels to the stories of the wandering of the People of God in the desert is actually not so astounding from this point of view. But de facto many people refer incessantly to the “letter” and the “spirit” of the Council, as if these could spare the Church the experiences of wandering in the desert, as though everything with the Council were once and for all, “the plain truth”. The Council then becomes a kind of magical formula that serves to make the whole contradictory cha-

racter of the Church’s experiences with itself in the world of today resolve into a kind of euphoric “satisfaction”. Others seem to treat the Council as a “closed event of the past” that was more an expression of the optimistic *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s than of the Spirit of God and that has no enduring significance. Such a view relativizes the Council’s lasting significance. Both the lofty memorialization and the relativizing dismissal of the Council amount to the notion that an exodus could be had without the immediately following years of wandering in the desert, as though Moses were only a liberator of his people and not also a deadly slugger, as though Miriam had only sung a victory song and not also suffered setbacks through the pride of male leaders, as though the leaders of the people were always at one and never wrestled for power and influence at the expense of those entrusted to them, as though the ten commandments were revealed without a hitch, but the tablets of the Law never got broken.

What I wish to indicate with this reference to the 40 years of desert-wandering by the People of God in view of the Council as a whole could also be said in particular of its “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation”. An approach to *Dei Verbum* marked by a biblical realism will, of course, interpret this document – together with the other Council documents – as a central testimony to that “leap forward” that John XXIII was trying to achieve with the Council, and which the Council actually effected. But such a realistic approach will also take into account the fact that this liberation experience must be tested along the way of the Church through the wilderness of everyday life, and that setbacks, ambiguities and conflicts will therefore always be connected with it – not only in the time of the beginnings, in that of the appropriation of the Council’s thought by the first generation, but also beyond this period.

In such a perspective, on the one hand, we need to ask about the direction-setting, motivating and inspiring challenges of the Constitution on Divine Revelation, which has been assessed by some as “not yet well received in many of its parts” (Cardinal Karl Lehmann), but by others as the “center and standard of the Council” (Elmar Klinger). And, on the other hand, we should also take a look at those statements which might have raised exaggerated or false expectations. Finally, we must take into account the fact that what the Council



says about the inspired scriptures, namely that they are marked by “the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer” (DV 12) applies preeminently to the conciliar Constitution itself. To these characteristic traits belong, for example, the patriarchal style of the Constitution (written before the emergence of feminist theology), the state of the discussion on exegesis and methodology that was dominant at the time (before the wider reception of literary-critical, more strongly synchronic forms of reading) or the lack of a hermeneutic of doubt with respect to dangerous tendencies within the biblical heritage (before a critical outworking of the problem of the biblical roots of Christian anti-Judaism).

“God has revealed Himself” (DV 2)

One of the most important ways in which *Dei Verbum* went beyond earlier official Church statements on Revelation is “that revelation [in the Constitution] is understood as the self-communication of God and should therefore henceforth no longer be wrongly understood as a purely intellectual matter, a mere communication of statements about God and his saving intentions. It is by no means to be seen only in word and teaching, but as an integral unity of deed and verbal revelation, as an event-based interaction of God with humanity, to which the word spoken to faith belongs as an essential inner moment.” (Karl Rahner/Herbert Vorgrimler, *Kleines Konzilskompendium*, Freiburg 1978, 362).

Revelation consists, then, not primarily of statements, which are to be believed as “true”, nor primarily of divine “instructions” that are to be followed, but rather of the “witness” to the fact “that God is with us, to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal” (DV 4). This understanding of revelation might be described in terms of the following series of qualifiers: It is something personal, dialogical, integral and historical. The response of man to this revelation is neither a purely intellectual one nor is it a consent imposed by authority; rather it is the “obedience of faith”; “an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God” (DV 5).

“For man’s salvation” (DV 6)

“The salvation of men” (DV 6), “of all nations” (DV 7), “of souls” (DV 10), “our salvation” (DV 12) or the salvation “of the whole human race” (DV 14), “salvation for all who believe” (DV 17) are repeatedly named as the goal of this self-communication of God in word and deed. The Word of God is then first of all “message of salvation” for “the whole world” (DV 1).

The God who communicates himself, who “uninterruptedly converses” with the Church (DV 8, cf. DV 21 and 25, where the reading of Scripture is characterized as a kind of conversation between God and man) wishes to be, or rather is himself the “salvation” of men and of the world. In saying this, *Dei Verbum* not only captures a basic trait of the biblical message. Rather, this “soteriological principle” also amounts to a fundamental axiom for the interpretation of Scripture, based as it is on its central affirmations: Scripture teaches “solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of our salvation” (DV 11) and “must be read and interpreted in the same spirit in which it was written” (DV 12).



The criterion for the inerrant truth of Scripture is the service to man’s salvation. The way in which it brings to expression the absolute saving will of God is, however, marked by the “characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer” (DV 12). Such a perspective not only recognizes the right and necessity of “historical criticism” and the attention that should be paid to “literary forms”; but it also formulates a substance-critical (*sachkritisches*) principle. Analogously to Luther’s principle “was Christum treibet” (whatever promotes Christ) one could express the Council’s principle in the following terms: Scripture is sure, reliable and without error to the extent that “it serves man’s salvation”. It is only logical to assume that this principle also applies to sacred tradition and to the teaching office of the Church. They should “contribute effectively to the salvation of souls” (DV 10). Unfortunately, *Dei Verbum* does not explicitly make the point that the enunciated principles apply in the first place to the magisterial teachings themselves, that official church teaching is always expressed in time-conditioned forms and that one can therefore “rightly understand” the tradition and official church teachings only if one interprets them contextually. But what applies to the “inspired authors” of Holy Scripture must first of all apply to those persons who “authentically interpret”



these (DV 10). Their statements, too, contain “incomplete and time-conditioned” elements (DV 15).

The “task of exegetes” and the “judgement of the Church” (DV 12)

The acknowledgment of the fact that in Scripture God “speaks through men in human fashion” (DV 12) and the connected recognition of the “historical character” of the Gospels and the fact that their authors explained the Jesus tradition “in view of the situation of their churches” (DV 19) logically implies that exegetes have an important role in the Church. One cannot do without historical research and a knowledge of literary forms “for the correct understanding of what the sacred author [and God through him – D.K.] wanted to assert” (DV 12). “It is the task of exegetes to work according to these rules toward a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture, so that through preparatory study the judgement of the Church may mature.” (DV 12) “And so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology” (DV 24).

The significance and relevancy of these statements goes far beyond the associated regard for Bible studies and for scientific exegesis. The entire preaching of the Church must take into account the historical character and the human form and transmission of the truths of Faith – and the magisterium of the Church not only has “the task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on” (DV 10), but also that of learning from those who interpret Scripture “so that ... the judgement of the Church may mature” (DV 12).

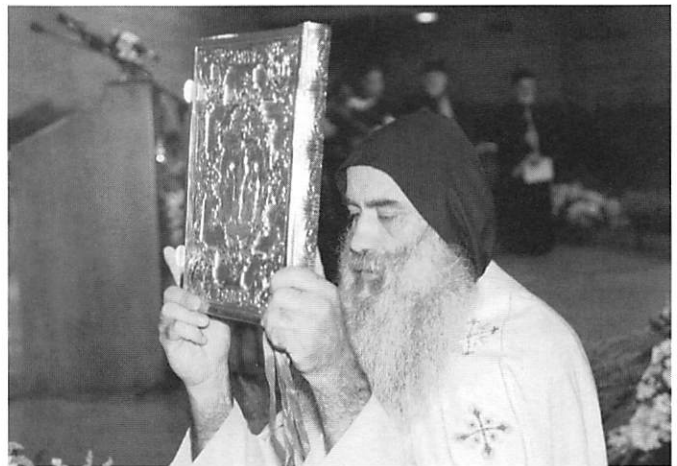
The question must once again be raised as to how seriously the magisterium takes this task: does it take the scientific preparatory work carefully into account, even when it questions many things? Does it take into account, for example, in its official use of sayings of Jesus in the world catechism, that we are not dealing with historical witnesses in the modern sense of the term? Is its attitude toward theologians – for example in its statements on their role in the Church – in the first place one of “learning” and “readiness to listen”, or is its tone rather that of the “teacher”, the “one who knows”?

The statements of *Dei Verbum* are already somewhat ambivalent on this point: the programmatic statement is made, to be sure: “This teaching office is not above the Word of God, but serves it” (DV 10), but immediately thereafter a kind of “pre-established harmony” (O.H. Pesch) between Bible, tradition and magisterium is expressed. And following the commissioning of exegetes to the required “preparatory work” the statement is immediately made: “All of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgement of the Church ...” (DV 12).

“Wide-open access to Sacred Scripture” (DV 22)

With respect to the “progress” that marks the way of the Church “in her teaching, life and worship” (DV 8) through the times, *Dei Verbum* affirms: “For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Lk 2:19,51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth.” (DV 8).

An understanding of the Church’s tradition and identity is here sketched that mentions in the first place the faith experience of members of the People of God (the *sensus fidelium*) and the spiritual dimension of the working of the Holy Spirit and only in third place alludes to the Church’s official preaching. Such an understanding of tradition corresponds very well to the Council’s image of the Church as it is developed in *Lumen Gentium*, where it is the fundamental equality of all the baptized that is first mentioned, and only thereafter the special services and offices in the Church.



To this corresponds, with reference to the role of the Bible in the life of the Church, that its significance is valued by no means for the teaching office and for theology alone. Scripture is “the supreme rule of faith” (DV 21) and “easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful” (DV 22). “For in the sacred books the Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life” (DV 21). These formulations not only bring out the significance of the Bible for the life, faith and spirituality of believers, but they also invite the faithful to deal with the Bible in a



direct and immediate way. One could say that the conciliar statements place a Bible directly in the hands of every man and woman. In this connection, collaboration with “the divided brothers” (DV 22) and the preparation of Bible editions “for non-Christians” (DV 24) is explicitly mentioned. Neither a Roman Catholic nor a clerical claim to a monopoly on the Bible or its interpretation is made. “Suitable institutions”, e.g. Biblical Associations, “and other aids” (DV 25) should contribute to the spread of the Bible.

At the level of the dissemination and translation of the Bible, as well as of biblical spirituality and of biblical pastoral practice the conciliar Constitution makes more room for the strengthening of the mature and informed faith of all Christians, for ecumenical collaboration and for dialogue with other religions and world views. Since of the same Bible it is said that “the Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord” and that it is “the supreme rule of faith” (DV 21), it can be said: the immediate access of every human being to God through his Word, the ecumenical exchange with other confessions and the dialogue with affiliates of other religions and world views (*Weltanschauungen*) belong to the heart of what makes the Church the Church: that she listens to God’s Word with full reverence and preaches it with full confidence (DV 1).



“It is only through this listening to the Word of God that the Church is constituted, not through her offices and functions. These are to be understood as derived and subordinate, if important structural elements of ecclesial self-fulfillment. The Word of Scripture remains the highest norm and the enduring standard of the Church’s teaching.” (Hanjo Sauer, *Die Dogmatische Konstitution über die göttliche Offenbarung Dei Verbum*, in: Franz Xaver Bischof/Stephan Leimgruber [ed.], *Vierzig Jahre II. Vatikanum. Zur Wirkungsgeschichte der Konzilstexte*, Würzburg 2004, 232–251: 247)

Neither the people of Israel nor Moses knew at the time of the exit from Egypt exactly what it meant to listen to

the voice of the “I-am-there” and to dare the departure into freedom. And even forty years of desert wandering, with all its many experiences of the nearness of God and all its crises of faith were not sufficient to ground the people and its leaders so firmly in its trust in the “God with us” (DV 4) that they were then able to make their way forward through history without detours and false trails. Many years later, experiences such as that of the loss of the “Promised Land” and the exile, or events such as the death and resurrection of Jesus brought the Exodus experience once again into a new light and found expression in terms of an interpretation and actualization of that experience within the Bible.

In the light of this – comparable, of course, only in a limited way to the experience of the People of Israel with its original liberation experience – we can, indeed we should expect and hope also with reference to the interpretation and implementation of Vatican II and its Constitution on Divine Revelation that their significance will be further clarified in the course of the Church’s future journey.

(Transl.: L. Maluf) ■

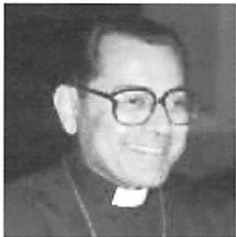
Abbreviated version of an article published in the Journal *Bibel und Kirche* 60 (2005) of the Katholisches Bibelwerk Deutschland.



God's Word: Living Hope and Lasting Peace

Inaugural Address for the Fourth Asia-Oceania Biblical Congress

Vincent Michael Concessao



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During the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation, held in Lebanon in September 2002, Asian delegates expressed a desire to have another Asian-Oceanian gathering, more than ten years after the Third Asian Workshop for the Biblical Apostolate in Pattaya, Thailand. The fourth regional workshop was held in February 2005 in Tagaytay City, Philippines. This Asia-Oceania Biblical congress was organized on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of *Dei Verbum* and was held under the auspices of the Catholic Biblical Federation, together with the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences' (FABC) Office of Peace and Harmony. More than 180 biblical pastoral ministers from all over Asia-Oceania – laywomen and men, bishops, priests and sisters – participated in this meeting.

The manifold Word: The call to life

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," St. John announced (John 1:1). 'Word' means communication. John tells us that communication is at the heart of the divine reality. God not only creates but also communicates from the beginning. Or rather, creation itself is the beginning of a continuous communication. Later Christian meditation fathomed the depth of John's Gospel and discovered that this Divine Word is not only the Word that creates and speaks to the universe, but is what makes the Father be eternally Father as he expresses himself in the Word and begets the Son – since a Divine Word always realizes what It says. God would not exist except in Self-communication. This is the very heart of the Christian experience of God. Hence we conclude that being itself is communication. *Omne ens est verum, omne ens est bonum*, said our ancestors.

God's Word is not merely a carrier of information. God's communication is a self-communication. Its content is necessarily God's self, even when the Word speaks

about the world and the humans in it. The unexpressed mystery of love, the Father, communicates the divine self to the Son and through Him, by the power of the Spirit, to the whole world. The world is the Word of God, as St. Bonaventure, and many other mystics have perceived. It is not only in the messages of the prophets and the apostles that the voice of God resounds (recall *Dei Verbum* 21), but also in the universe that has issued from the heart of God, and in all its history. *Liber naturae, liber scripturae, liber vitae* ...

The Word is not only the divine self-communication, but also a divine call. It is a summons, first to existence and then to growth. By his Word all things were created: "All things came into being through Him, and without Him nothing came into being." (John 1:3) *Asato ma sad gamaya*, we pray in India, a very ancient prayer dating from the times of the early prophets of Israel. "Lead me from non-being to being." This has been the effect of the Divine Word in our lives. We owe our existence to It; not only we, but the whole universe.

From darkness to light

Existence is a call to growth. "In Him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (John 1:4). This juxtaposition of life and light may surprise us. We may tend to think that the two belong to different realms: Life is reality that grows, light belongs to the world of knowledge, not of reality. St. John correlates them. The life was light. We can equally say that the light was life. The Word grows into life. This is the second invocation in Upanishadic prayer quoted above: "Lead me from darkness to the light" – *tamaso ma jyotir gamaya*. Light accompanies us on our pilgrimage; it shines in our darkness.

There are innumerable lights lit by the Word throughout history, as many as the stars sprinkled in the immensity of space. Theologically we may call them divine revelation. The *liber scripturae* of St. Bonaventure – perhaps we could correctly say, *libri scripturarum*. The Word is communicated to simple people, to cultures, to individuals, to religions: has not St. Thomas said somewhere that "whatever is good (and therefore whatever is true, too) has come from the Holy Spirit"? The Divine Word puts on a human garb and speaks Chinese and Vietnamese, Tagalu and Telugu, Arabic, Urdu and Tullu,



Tamil and Pali, Magadhi and Ardhamagadhi ... Seeking wholeness of life, our ancestors collected these lights and encoded some of them in scriptures and in traditional stories, made bright by that Light which enlightens every person coming into the world. It is our task to store up these words and listen to the Word they encode, to treasure these lights, colourful refractions of the divine Light, and to discern in human voices the Voice of the Maker calling us to growth, to a new existence, to hope and to peace.

We Christians carry in our collective memory the lights that shone in the deserts and the oases of West Asia and are preserved in the books of the First Testament. We have a special love for those words spoken in Israel about the same time as wise men like Confucius and Lao Tse, Siddhartha the Buddha and Mahavira the Jaina, and the Prophet Zarathushtra spoke their words in other Asian civilizations. Just as theirs, the expressions of the Divine Word in the east of the Mediterranean were devotionally collected and are now part of the Holy Bible. We treasure these authenticated expressions with special love because Jesus himself, his mother, the apostles and the earliest Christian communities, our ancestors in the faith, were fed by these words of life. We have experienced personally how much these lights have enlightened our paths through the deserts of life, how they have helped us to grow.



The table of the Word ...

But this does not prevent us from recognizing in other cultures, as Vatican II encourages us to do, not only wise human answers to fundamental problems of life (*Nostra Aetate* 2) but also the fruits of God's own grace which echoes within human freedom (*Gaudium et Spes* 16-17). They are lights that contain seeds of the Word that the Second Vatican Council wants us to discover with joy and reverence (*laete et reverenter*) (*Ad Gentes* 11). For "these ascetic and contemplative traditions ... of [our] ancient cultures" grow out of seeds planted by God in them, even prior to the preaching of the Gospel (see *Ad Gentes* 18). The Council is "without doubt that the Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified" (*Ad Gentes* 4). That is why it wants us to be at home (*familiares*) with our national and religious traditions.

We must ask ourselves: Are our reception sets capable of capturing the many waves of this omnipresent Word? How can they do that? How do they read the cultural expressions of humanity and discover them as expressions of the Divine Word? What or who enables us to discern in them God's Word of hope, peace and truth?

One question bothers us: Are the many and various ways in which God has spoken to our ancestors throughout history alternative communications of the Father to his dispersed children, or do they together form just one Word of love and salvation addressed to the heart of humanity?

From death to immortal life

The Upanishadic prayer quoted above has a third petition: "Lead me from death to immortality". Incidentally, when His Holiness Pope Paul VI was visiting Bombay in 1964, he made his own this whole prayer I am commenting on, precisely on the Feast of St. Francis Xavier, and declared it a universal prayer:

Rarely has this longing for God been expressed with words so full of the spirit of Advent as in the words written in your sacred books many centuries before Christ: 'From the unreal lead me to the real; from the darkness lead me to light; from death lead me to immortality.' This is a prayer that belongs also to our time. Today more than ever it should rise from every human heart. (AAS 57 [1965] 132)

Its last petition leads us beyond the mystery of creation and even beyond the revelation of God discernible in the lights lit throughout the history of humanity. It asks to be led into the mystery of divine life, immortality itself, eternal life, the *amrita*, the nectar of immortality, one of the great religious symbols found not only in Vedic literature but in many cultures. This prayer expresses the desire to enter into the profoundest Mystery, into the eschatological destiny prepared for us from the foundation of the world. As Christians, we have been blessed by the revelation of this ultimate destiny made present already now, in history, in the Word incarnate, immolated and risen. Such a blessing is also a frightening responsibility. For this Word, the foundation of our faith, the object of our hope, the power that enables us to love, is destined to all humanity: the light that enlightens all nations (Luke 2:32), the great light shining in the 'Galilee of the peoples', for all who live in the darkness of death (Mathew 4:15, 28:19).

Many words, one Word

We may perhaps ask ourselves how do we relate and coordinate the Word manifested in creation, and the Word spoken through history to enlighten every person coming into the world, and the Word revealed in the



risen Christ, the Word that became flesh and lived among us? Are these different words of God revealing different faces of the divine mystery, like the many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle offer partial views of the picture we want to compose? This is one way pluralism tries at times to come to terms with the plurality of religions. But there may be place for a different and more integrated understanding, wherein the various moments and aspects of the Divine Word are interrelated in a way that each is echoed from a different context but all form a single harmony wherein the whole history of humanity is contained. They all are one single Word by which God "reveals himself and the eternal laws of his will" (to use the terminology of Vatican I, *Dei Filius* 2). Vatican II explains it more articulately:

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Exod 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. (DV 2)

Later the same chapter tells us what is the specific role of Jesus Christ in this life-long history of the Word in the history of the world. It says:

To see Jesus is to see His Father (John 14:9). For this reason Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making Himself present and manifesting Himself: through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, but especially through His death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth. Moreover He confirmed with divine testimony what revelation proclaimed, that God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal. (DV 4)

There is a mysterious relation, one that we need to clarify, between the many stages and aspects of the Divine Word and the Word spoken in Son Jesus Christ, 'completion' of revelation, the Word incarnate. In him we can perceive how God is present in all creatures, how God acts in all history and illumines every human being coming into this world (John 1:9), and how God has spoken in various ways through our fathers (Heb 1:1), east and west, and what the total Word of God tells us: peace and hope, God with us as saviour, fullness of life.

The Council is echoing here the teaching of the letter to the Hebrews that says that the same God who spoke in many and various ways to the ancestors in the prophets has now, in the ultimate times, spoken to us in a Son. This Son is heir of all the words spoken through nature and history, because God has

created all history through him, who is "the splendour of God's glory and the imprint of his existence" (Heb 1:3) in our visible world. He is therefore able to carry all things to God's word of promise. Thus the Word spoken through the Son is not a foreigner in our midst: for the world was created through that Word, and through it is guided to completion. Being the fulfillment, the Son enables us to discover the full message in God's creating and revealing Word. Indian grammarians have taught us that the meaning of a sentence can be fully known only when the last word has been pronounced. The final reading of the Word in creation and in all history is given to us when we hear the Word revealed in the risen Lord.

The Word in history

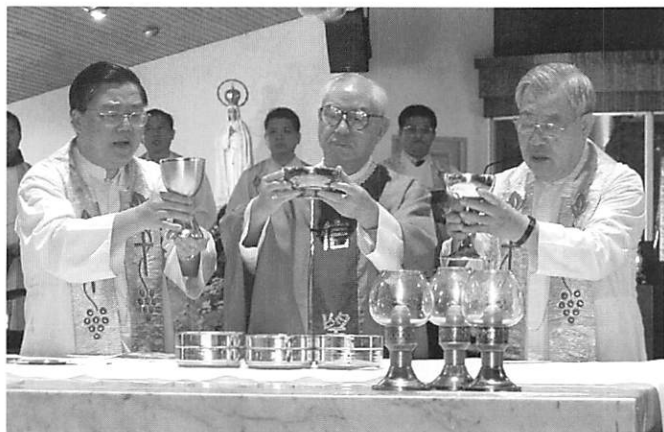
Can the Word from on high respond to the needs, desires, ideals that emerge from human hearts? Is there a dialogue between the world and God? Are we allowed to expect from God's Word answers to our human questions, to our problems of violence, injustice, globalization, natural disasters, impotency before nature? Was the tsunami a word of God? To discover the connection between human history and needs and the revelation of God has been a concern of theologians from the middle of the nineteenth century, and has been articulated in various ways.

The traditional preachers of the Church even before the modern age, had always tried to apply the Word of God to the situations of their audiences and their times, and find in the Word they were preaching resources of hope, joy, faith, love to heal the evils of the time. Actually, the Bible itself is a reading of the Word of God in the light of the presuppositions and questions of the various contemporary communities that composed it, so that there is an implicit contextual theology operative in it. There are, besides, the specific "paraenetic" sections in the Bible: in the New Testament, for instance, the message of Jesus is the starting point for exhorting the readers to reflect on their own lives. All preachers have always helped in this task.

But the Christian reflection on the Word of God can go further than the idea of "applying" the revealed teaching to concrete situations. It can perceive the Word of God operative *within* the nature and the history of humanity. Justin and Origen spoke of the *logoi spermatikoi*, at times identified with Universal Reason, or with the Word that is found in every person coming into this world. St. Augustine is inspired by this tradition when he speaks of *rationes seminales*, a Latin translation of the *logoi spermatikoi*. In our times, Karl Rahner has referred to the "supernatural existential," the situation of grace in which historically the whole of creation, and specifically



human beings, find themselves. The Word of God does not come to us extrinsically, but is inside history. Not strangely, the Indian tradition encourages us to seek the absolute reality, the *brahman*, in the Self, the *Atman*.



... and the table of the Eucharist

Signs of the times

Around the time of the Second Vatican Council, forty years ago, the theme of reading the signs of the time came up as a theological concern. John XXIII and Paul VI made frequent use of this expression, which St. Matthew records on the lips of Jesus (16:3). The Council itself used it at least five times and often alluded indirectly to it. "Impelled by its faith that it is being led by the Spirit of the Lord who fills the whole earth," it said, "God's people endeavours to discern the true signs of God's presence and purpose in the events, needs and desires which it shares with the rest of modern humanity" (*Gaudium et Spes* 11). Three elements are included in the prophetic function of reading the signs of the times: (1) "events, needs and desires" of the people; (2) God's presence and work in the world, and (3) a Spirit-filled discerning community. The events are not 'signs' except in the measure in which they are read by the believing community. Even God's personal presence in the world through his Word is made real and visible in the faith and obedience of Jesus of Nazareth. Revelation and faith make one whole. The interpreter is part of the interpretation.

The discernment of God's presence and action in history is part of the Christian tradition. The classical work is St. Augustine's *The City of God*. Leo the Great tries to interpret in the light of faith the crisis of the Roman Empire. We find a similar effort in Dante's interpretation of history. John XXIII read God's Word in the emergence of the working classes in the political area, the feminist movement, the de-colonization of the world. *Gaudium et Spes* added to that list. Note that the interpretation of the signs of the time is not just a theology of

history. It is not meant just to interpret the past, but to change the world. It is the root of the prophetic function, a discernment of the Word of God operative in our history and calling us to act today in view of a better future. That is how the prophets delivered their messages.

The Council mentions "events, desires and needs" of the people. I think these must be seen together. Less than three months ago we experienced around the Indian Ocean a tragic event: the tsunami disaster. A prophetic reading of the event will include not merely the cosmic phenomenon seldom experienced in those regions, but also the way in which the local population reacted to it and the ways the world responded to this event, thanks to the instant communication systems of our times. Is there a Word of God in this total event? How do we discern it? Is it a Word pronounced for us today? We make it real when we receive it through human discernment.

Reading the Word in history

A new understanding of the process of knowledge and of hermeneutics has given new support to the reflections on the immanence of the Divine Word in history. For us today reading the Word is not so much catching a ready-made meaning obvious or hidden in the text, as producing a meaning. The pre-understanding, activity and context of the reader are intrinsic elements of the act of reading or listening to the Word. 'Word' need not mean only the written or spoken word: it may well be the events of history, the signs of the times, messages that comes to us in thousands of ways. We are not tape recorders that pick up divine meanings floating in nature or in articulated works and print them on tapes. Every reading of the Bible is a production of God's Truth, for true knowledge is a personal activity.

We know from our faith that the Divine Word comes in the human words. Not seldom it echoes human words. When Moses heard the call of God what he heard was really the cry of the oppressed people, for God relayed it to him: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt, I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings and I have come to deliver them" (Exod 3:7-8). And so the events and situations of history are not only helps to discover the Divine Word, but are intrinsic to the Word communicated to us.

This, I submit, will be our main task: to recognize the Word of God speaking to us in the various voices of our days. Some of the challenges we are confronted with: Globalization of the economy and the globalization of culture that goes with it. How shall we discern it with insight and sensitivity? Where is the sin in globalization? Is it in its universality or in its exclusions? Then we may



consider the growing anger of the people of the globe and its manifestations in deadly violence: is the Lord speaking to us through them? What is the Word? Is it a judgment on our modern civilization, too strong in its achievements, so weak in human concern for the other? We have also a growing celebration of the pluralism of cultures and religions: does it bring a Word of God to the Christian community and to the world at large? How do we hear the Divine Word in the limitations and exhaustion of our natural resources, especially in the growing scarcity of drinking water?

Heralds of the Gospel, we cannot be messengers of doom. We carry with us the last Word of God, which is a Word of hope and peace: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). We must seek this Word of hope and peace also in the events of history and in the scriptures of the world. How can we convey it to the people? How to articulate it today in our situation? For our word of peace and hope cannot be a facile word, as it was with the false prophets of Israel so often condemned by the Lord. Hope and peace must find roots and be incarnate in our concrete history. The Word must also give us an active commitment to justice, a will not to be exclusive, and the power of forgiveness made real in the concrete histories of our peoples. What does justice imply, what does true forgiveness demand from all of us? These are no easy questions.



May the Word, who was with God from the beginning, remain central to our reflections. Permit me to transmit a promise of the divine presence from a Vedic hymn composed three or four thousand years old, where the Word (Vák, a feminine noun) speaks about her function in the world:

*I am Queen, the Gatherer-up of treasures,
The Knower, the First among the Holy Ones.
The gods have established me in many places,
Me who lives on many planes, in many a form.*

*The One who sees, who breathes, who hears what's spoken,
Through me alone obtains sustenance.
There are those who dwell by my side but know not,
Hear thou who hast hearing: I tell thee the sacred truth ...*

*And it is I who, like the wind, breathe forth,
And set all existing worlds in motion.
Beyond heavens and beyond the earth am I,
And all this I have become in my splendour. (RV X 125.3,4,8)*

One final word. There is a charming story in the Bible to which, according to St. Luke, the Lord alluded. It is the story of Naaman the leper (2 Kings 5). There are many theological ideas conveyed through that popular tale, but in this context I would like to mention that the word of sanity, the word that proved a word of hope and peace for Naaman, came first from a simple slave girl, a foreigner, who suggested that Naaman undertake his trip to Israel. When Naaman was discouraged in his expectations, again the word of sanity came from his servants, not his theologians. I want to suggest that if we want to interpret properly what the Lord is telling us in Asia today, perhaps we have to listen more carefully to what the little ones, the poor, the villagers, the girls, the simple people have to tell us. After all, they may well be the privileged media of the Divine Word. *Ex ore infantium ... Out of the mouth of children ...* ■



“Ignorance of Scripture Is Ignorance of Christ” – Know, Love, Live and Proclaim the Word of God Pastoral Letter for the Year of the Bible in Africa

John Onaiyekan, Archbishop of Abuja, President of SECAM



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Besides being the worldwide “Year of the Eucharist”, the year 2005 is also being celebrated on the African continent and the surrounding Islands as the “Year of the Bible”. For this reason the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) has published a pastoral letter from which we are quoting some excerpts. In this letter, also the significance of Dei Verbum and the implementation of the conciliar text in Africa and Madagascar in the last forty years is discussed.

Introduction

1. Right from the beginning of the Church there has always been a hunger “for hearing the Word of the Lord” (Amos 8:11). Today, like in times past, more and more Christians are reading, listening to, reflecting on, sharing and studying the Word of God. This is a sign of a deep search for God, and the Bible is one of the places to learn about Him and His plan for humankind. The yearning for redemption and a world of peace, unity and justice, etc will be greatly enhanced by the knowledge of God and an encounter with Him in, and through the Bible. Ignorance of Scripture is, therefore, ignorance of God’s plan of salvation, accomplished by Christ, His Incarnate Word.

I write to encourage you to continue deepening your knowledge of God through diligent and daily reading of, and reflection on God’s self revelation in Holy Scripture. This is the primary goal of the Year of the Bible in Africa and the surrounding Islands, which was declared by SECAM in February 2004 to be observed from January to December 2005 at all levels of the Family of God on the continent and the Islands (i.e. parish, diocesan, national and continental).

Sacred Scripture in the life of the Church

2. The Church...“has always venerated divine Scriptures as she venerated the body of the Lord” (*Dei Verbum* 21). Right from earliest times, as the canon of the Bible started, one may talk about two complementary attitudes of the Church to the Bible.

On the one hand, it was recognized as an essential reference point for the life of the Church, whether officially in the liturgy and the dogmatic documents or the private writings of the Fathers of the Church and theologians. Many of the Fathers wrote mainly commentaries on Scripture. On the other hand, the Bible was handled as a book of the Church; it was, and is still to be read within the Church, which fixed its limits and its authentic interpretation.

(...)

10. This year, 2005, marks the 40th anniversary of *Dei Verbum* and the 10th anniversary of *Ecclesia in Africa*. These two anniversaries, coupled with the Year of the Eucharist, afford us a unique opportunity to reflect, firstly, on the impact of Sacred Scripture on our lives as Christians in Africa and the surrounding Islands, and secondly on ways to make the Word of God accessible to Christians on the continent and the Islands in languages they can understand.

The situation in contemporary Africa and the surrounding Islands

11. Contemporary Africa is plagued by wars, ethnic conflicts, corruption, injustice and other vices; even in countries with predominantly Christian citizens. You will recall the appeal we made to you in 2001 for peace and reconciliation through a pastoral letter on “Christ our Peace”. It must be admitted that lots of positive efforts have been made, since then, by several individuals and groups in different parts of the continent towards peace and reconciliation, and we are deeply grateful to all those involved in this positive development. Nevertheless, much still needs to be done to end the clashes everywhere on the continent. We are optimistic and convinced that you will not relent in your efforts towards har-



monious co-existence, so that people of different cultural backgrounds and social status in Africa and the surrounding Islands will live together in peace, unity and mutual respect.

Let us always bear in mind that the current intra- or inter-ethnic wars and conflicts in Africa contradict our cherished values of extended family, communality, solidarity and corporate personality.

It is our conviction that the recurrent problems in Africa and the surrounding Islands cannot be solved merely by a change of one government or political party to the other but by a genuine change of heart on the part of the leaders and the citizenry.

12. Another worrying situation in contemporary Africa and the surrounding Islands is that religion has become a source of constant friction, bitter rivalry, conflicts, violence and (in some cases), bloody clashes. This widespread phenomenon arises from a fundamentalist approach to religion.

In some Christian circles, fundamentalists maintain that the Bible is inspired by God and thus each word in the Scriptures is without error; so they take every word in the Bible at its face value and reject any attempt to apply human skills and scholarship to analyze a biblical text. This leads to the literary interpretation of the Bible.

13. Christian fundamentalists also tend to adopt a magical view of the Bible i.e. an attempt to make God conform to human problems by the performance of certain ecstatic acts or incantations. Christians should be aware that the biblical text is not magic; neither is it an answer to every need nor a source of infallible guidance or knowledge. Rather it is a divine gift that is interpersonal in nature and which can never be turned into a thing. In the Bible we listen to God not to ourselves.

As it was pointed out by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, the fundamentalist approach to the Bible may be "attractive to people who look to the Bible for ready answers to the problems of life". But it is dangerous because "it can deceive the people, offering them interpretations that are pious but illusory, instead of telling them that the Bible does not necessarily contain an immediate answer to every problem. Without saying as much in so many words, fundamentalism actually invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide, for it unwillingly confuses the divine substance of the biblical message with what is in fact its human limitation." (*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* I.F)

14. The fundamentalist trend, notwithstanding, we encourage readers of the Bible to seek an encounter with God through the Scriptures while relying on the power of His Word to create the right changes in both

individuals and communities in Africa and the surrounding Islands (cf. 2 Tim 3:1-17), no matter how long it may take. We are also certain that the correct interpretation of the Bible as well as interreligious dialogue shall be of tremendous assistance in solving the problem.

15. BICAM, in collaboration with other animators of biblical apostolate, must continue to provide reading/study guides, short commentaries etc. to enhance a deeper understanding of the biblical message and to avoid its fundamentalist interpretation.

(...)

Witnessing to Christ, the incarnate Word

24. The daily reading and sharing of God's Word must pave the way for a profound personal conviction enabling all of us to bear witness to it in daily life. We should not just be contemplators on, or listeners to, or readers of the Bible but, more importantly, imitators of Christ and actors on the Word of God.

(...)



25. Special attention must be paid during this period to the most challenging and difficult parts of the Bible which make us rather uncomfortable. Here we are talking about the command of Christ to love one's enemies (Matt 5:44; Lk 6:27-28), to forgive those who offend us (Matt 5:23-24; 6:14-15; 18:21-22; Mk 11:25) or to carry one's cross daily and follow after him (Lk 9:23) etc. We are aware that many of you are experiencing all kinds of hardships but, as said above, have courage and do not give up hope, the Lord shares your pain and accompanies you in your suffering.

The incarnation of the Word of God in African life and culture

26. The growing interest in the Bible among Christians on the continent and its Islands calls for intensified



efforts towards the incarnation of the Bible message in African life and culture. The translation of the Bible in indigenous languages is a major step in the direction of achieving this task. For this reason, the Catholic Church in Africa and the surrounding Islands shall continue to work together with United Bible Societies (UBS) in Africa, other individuals and groups on projects that enhance a deeper understanding of God's Word.

We appeal to all biblical scholars in Africa and the surrounding Islands to contribute to translation projects in their respective languages, and to embark on an African Commentary on the Bible, all aimed at making the Word of God known, loved, preserved in the hearts of all Christians on the continent and the Islands.

27. Another step required for the incarnation of the Bible message is to communicate the Word of God in indigenous thought patterns, categories and images. A commendable attempt has been made in this direction by the introductory remarks and notes in the African Bible.

28. BICAM shall intensify its efforts towards the training of animators of biblical apostolate who will become facilitators of Bible study/sharing groups in their respective places in indigenous languages; this will assist in the communication of the Bible in categories readily understandable to the people.

29. We call upon all those involved in the promotion of God's Word on the continent and the Islands (ecclesiastical institutions, departments of biblical studies or biblical scholars within or outside academic communities, other individuals and organizations) to liaise and collaborate with BICAM in its task of facilitating for the Christians in Africa and the surrounding Islands access to the treasures of the Bible.



Year of the Bible and Year of the Eucharist

30. The Year of the Bible in Africa and the surrounding Islands coincides with the Year of the Eucharist, and the

question may be asked whether the call of the Holy Father does not supercede that of SECAM. Of course it does, but both the Year of the Bible and the Year of the Eucharist can be co-jointly celebrated, and indeed, do not contradict but rather complement each other. While the focus of the former is on the Word of God, that of the latter is on the Incarnate Word (Jn 1:14) received in the Eucharist.

It is common knowledge that "at every Mass, the liturgy of the Word of God precedes the liturgy of the Eucharist in the unity of two tables, the table of the Word and the table of the Bread" (Mane Nobiscum Domine 12). Accordingly, the focus of both celebrations is on the person of Christ who is not only the full revelation of God but the sole source through which the Church draws nourishment.

Moreover, the Holy Father has made it clear in his pastoral letter, Mane Nobiscum Domine that the Year of the Eucharist "will in no way interfere with the pastoral programmes of the individual Churches. Rather, it can shed light upon those programmes, anchoring them, so to speak, in the mystery which nourishes the spiritual life of the faithful and the initiatives of each local Church. I am not asking the individual Churches to alter their pastoral programmes, but to emphasize the Eucharistic dimension which is part of the whole Christian life" (Mane Nobiscum Domine 5).

(...)

Conclusion

41. From all this, it can be summed up that the goal of the Year of the Bible is to encourage a deeper knowledge of God's Word and His love for humankind. Like the prophet Isaiah, we believe that when Christians "will be full of knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea, no hurt, no harm will be done" (Is 11:9) to one another and no hateful feelings, wars, conflicts, divisions, corruption and other vices will be experienced in Africa and the surrounding Islands any more.

We therefore encourage Christians everywhere on the continent and the Islands to intensify their interest in the daily reading and sharing of the Word of God, leading to its deeper understanding and to a spirituality based on the Bible. The more we read or study and share the Scriptures with other people, the more we become aware of God's love for each one and the implications of Christ's death on the Cross for us.

(...)

43. Those among you who experience starvation and hunger should not lose hope; continue to trust in the



Lord who has said, "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full" (Jn 10:10). Even when He delays in answering your prayers for daily bodily nourishment, do not forget that He fulfils our deepest longings and will never abandon His own which you all are.



44. Similarly, those who have lost hope in a healthy living should also remember that Jesus makes our broken lives whole and makes it possible for us to share in God's life as well. He has come to make us fully human and free, more truly what we are made to be, so too he has called us to a new life, so that we might share divine life with him. His sacrifice on the Cross has freed humankind from the slavery of sin; it is thus the decisive and central event of human salvation.

(...)

46. To all who are menaced on all sides by outbreaks of hatred and violence, we join the Holy Father, John Paul II, in sending you a message of "the hope of life rooted in the Paschal Mystery. It was precisely when, humanly speaking, Jesus' life seemed doomed to failure that he instituted the Eucharist, the pledge of eternal glory, in order to perpetuate in time and space his victory over death. That is why at a time when the African continent is in some ways in a critical situation the special Assembly for Africa wished to be the Synod of Resurrection, the Synod of Hope: Christ our Hope is alive; we shall live. Africa is not destined for death, but for life" (Ecclesia in Africa 57).

(...)

50. Let us remind all those called to proclaim the Gospel that, as the Holy Father, John Paul II, says, they should "seek to act with total docility to the Spirit, who today, just as at the beginning of the Church, acts in every evangelizer who allows himself to be possessed and led by him. Techniques of evangelization are good, but

even the most advanced ones could not replace the gentle action of the Spirit. Even the most thorough preparation of the evangelizer has no effect without the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit the most convincing dialectic has no power over the human heart" (Ecclesia in Africa 77).

(...)

54. In the dual celebration of the Year of the Bible and that of the Eucharist at parish, diocesan, national and continental levels, we recommend that the activities of the last day include a Eucharistic procession, interspersed with the reading of selected biblical texts at designated stop/stations, culminating with Mass and a homily based on the Bible and the Eucharist.

(...)





“Listening to the Word of God Is the Most Important Thing in Our Lives”

Pope John Paul II on the Importance of Holy Scripture



“Listening to the Word of God is the most important thing in our lives” – this statement uttered at the Angelus appearance of July 18, 2004, is evidence of the central place given to the Word of Scripture in the life, preaching and doctrine of this Pope.

The Catholic Biblical Federation remembers with deep gratitude Pope John Paul II. The Lord has

called his servant from life to life. “I am happy, be happy, too!” – In our faith we follow this invitation which the Holy Father has pronounced briefly before his death. R.I.P.

In the following pages we document a few of the statements of the deceased Pope in which he speaks of the importance of Holy Scripture in the life of the Church. In our selection of these statements, we have deliberately focused on documents from the second half of his pontificate (a collection of such statements from the previous period was made at an earlier date and can be ordered, for anyone interested, through the CBF General Secretariat).

On the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (April 23, 1993)

1. (...) As the Council well reminds us: “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 vigour, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting source of spiritual life” (*Dei Verbum* 21). For men and women today the manner in which biblical texts are interpreted has immediate consequences for their personal and community relationship with God, and it is also closely connected with the Church’s mission. A vital problem is at issue and deserves all your attention. (...)

15. (...) The Bible exercises its influence down the centuries. A constant process of actualization adapts the interpretation to the contemporary mentality and language. The concrete, immediate nature of biblical language

greatly facilitates this adaption, but its origin in an ancient culture causes not a few difficulties. Therefore, biblical thought must always be translated anew into contemporary language so that it may be expressed in ways suited to its listeners. This translation, however, should be faithful to the original and cannot force the texts in order to accommodate an interpretation or an approach fashionable at a given time. The Word of God must appear in all its splendour, even if it is “expressed in human words” (*Dei Verbum* 13). Today the Bible has spread to every continent and every nation. However, in order for it to have a profound effect, there must be *inculturation* according to the genius proper to each people. Perhaps nations less marked by the deviances of modern Western civilization will understand the biblical message more easily than those who are already insensitive as it were to the action of God’s Word because of secularization and the excesses of demythologization. In our day, a great effort is necessary, not only on the part of scholars and preachers, but also those who popularize biblical thought: they should use every means possible – and there are many today – so that the universal significance of the biblical message may be widely acknowledged and its saving efficacy may be seen everywhere.

Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “Vita Consecrata” (March 25, 1996)

Listening to the Word of God

94. The Word of God is the first source of all Christian spirituality. It gives rise to a personal relationship with the living God and with his saving and sanctifying will. It is for this reason that from the very beginning of institutes of Consecrated Life, and in a special way in monasticism, what is called *lectio divina* has been held in the highest regard. By its means the Word of God is brought to bear on life, on which it projects the light of that wisdom which is a gift of the Spirit. Although the whole of Sacred Scripture is “profitable for teaching” (2 Tim 3:16), and is “the pure and perennial source of spiritual life”, the writings of the New Testament deserve special veneration, especially the Gospels, which are “the heart of all the Scriptures”. It is, therefore, of great benefit for consecrated persons to meditate regularly on the Gospel texts and the New Testament writings which describe the words and example of Christ and Mary and



the apostolica vivendi forma. Founders and foundresses were inspired by these texts in accepting their vocation and in discerning the charism and mission of their institutes. Meditation of the Bible *in common* is of great value. When practised according to the possibilities and circumstances of life in community, this meditation leads to a joyful sharing of the riches drawn from the Word of God, thanks to which brothers or sisters grow together and help one another to make progress in the spiritual life. Indeed it would be helpful if this practice were also encouraged among other members of the People of God, priests and laity alike. This will lead, in ways proper to each person's particular gifts, to setting up schools of prayer, of spirituality and of prayerful reading of the Scriptures, in which God "speaks to people as friends" (cf. *Ex* 33:11; *Jn* 15:14-15) and lives among them (cf. *Bar* 3:38), so that he may invite and draw them into fellowship with himself".

Apostolic Letter "Dies Domini" (May 31, 1998)

The table of the Word

40. In considering the Sunday Eucharist more than thirty years after the Council, we need to assess how well the Word of God is being proclaimed and how effectively the People of God have grown in knowledge and love of Sacred Scripture.⁶⁵ There are two aspects of this – that of *celebration* and that of *personal appropriation* – and they are very closely related. At the level of celebration, the fact that the Council made it possible to proclaim the Word of God in the language of the community taking part in the celebration must awaken a new sense of responsibility towards the Word, allowing "the distinctive character of the sacred text" to shine forth "even in the mode of reading or singing".⁶⁶ At the level of personal appropriation, the hearing of the Word of God proclaimed must be well prepared in the souls of the faithful by an apt knowledge of Scripture and, where pastorally possible, by *special initiatives designed to deepen understanding of the biblical readings*, particularly those used on Sundays and holy days. If Christian individuals and families are not regularly drawing new life from the reading of the sacred text in a spirit of prayer and docility to the Church's interpretation,⁶⁷ then it is difficult for the liturgical proclamation of the Word of God alone to produce the fruit we might expect. This is the value of initiatives in parish communities which bring together during the week those who take part in the Eucharist – priest, ministers and faithful⁶⁸ – in order to prepare the Sunday liturgy, reflecting beforehand upon the Word of God which will be proclaimed. The objective sought here is that the entire celebration – praying, singing, listening, and not just the preaching – should express in some way the theme of the Sunday liturgy, so that all those taking part may be penetrated more powerfully by it. Clearly, much depends on those who

exercise the ministry of the Word. It is their duty to prepare the reflection on the Word of the Lord by prayer and study of the sacred text, so that they may then express its contents faithfully and apply them to people's concerns and to their daily lives.

41. It should also be borne in mind that the liturgical proclamation of the Word of God, especially in the Eucharistic assembly, is not so much a time for meditation and catechesis as a dialogue between God and his people, a dialogue in which the wonders of salvation are proclaimed and the demands of the Covenant are continually restated. On their part, the People of God are drawn to respond to this dialogue of love by giving thanks and praise, also by demonstrating their fidelity to the task of continual "conversion".

⁶⁵ The Council's Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* speaks of "*suavis et vivus Sacrae Scripturae affectus*" (No. 24).

⁶⁶ John Paul II, *Letter Dominicae Cena* (February 24, 1980), 10: AAS 72 (1980), 135.

⁶⁷ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* 25.

⁶⁸ Cf. *Ordo Lectionum Missae, Praenotanda*, Chap. III.

Message to the Executive Committee of the CBF (May 1, 1999)

Without a sound understanding of Scripture, there will not be that fullness of Christian prayer which begins with the experience of listening to God's Word. Nor will there be that powerful Christian preaching which rises from the experience of hearing God's Word and opens the ear of the faithful to hear what the preacher himself has heard first. Nor will there be a Christian theology which speaks the great truth of God's Word rather than the uncertainties of human opinion. In helping the bishops to teach the way of truly biblical prayer, preaching and theology, the Federation stands not in the margins of the Church's pastoral life but at its very heart; and that is a reason for great gratitude.

I also encourage you to continue to foster the ecumenical dialogue which follows when Scripture is studied and shared by people of different religious allegiances. It is vital now for all Christians to explore more deeply the shared resource of the Bible in the search for the unity which the Lord clearly wills and the world so urgently needs if it is to believe.

Post-Apostolic Exhortation "Ecclesia in Asia" (November 6, 1999)

Key Areas of Inculturation

22. (...) The Synod Fathers stressed particularly the importance of the biblical word in passing on the mes-



sage of salvation to the peoples of Asia, where the transmitted word is so important in preserving and communicating religious experience.⁹⁸ It follows that an effective biblical apostolate needs to be developed in order to ensure that the sacred text may be more widely diffused and more intensively and prayerfully used among the members of the Church in Asia. The Synod Fathers urged that it be made the basis for all missionary proclamation, catechesis, preaching and styles of spirituality.⁹⁹ Efforts to translate the Bible into local languages need to be encouraged and supported. Biblical formation should be considered an important means of educating people in the faith and equipping them for the task of proclamation. Pastorally oriented courses on the Bible, with due emphasis on applying its teachings to the complex realities of Asian life, ought to be incorporated into formation programmes for the clergy, for consecrated persons and for the laity.¹⁰⁰ The Sacred Scriptures should also be made known among the followers of other religions; the Word of God has an inherent power to touch the hearts of people, for through the Scriptures the Holy Spirit reveals God's plan of salvation for the world. Moreover, the narrative styles found in many books of the Bible has an affinity with the religious texts typical of Asia.¹⁰¹

Another key aspect of inculturation upon which the future of the process in large part depends is *the formation of evangelizers*. In the past, formation often followed the style, methods and programmes imported from the West, and while appreciating the service rendered by that mode of formation, the Synod Fathers recognized as a positive development the efforts made in recent times to adapt the formation of evangelizers to the cultural contexts of Asia. As well as a solid grounding in biblical and patristic studies, seminarians should acquire a detailed and firm grasp of the Church's theological and philosophical patrimony, as I urged in my Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*.¹⁰² On the basis of this preparation, they will then benefit from contact with Asian philosophical and religious traditions.¹⁰³ The Synod Fathers also encouraged seminary professors and staff to seek a profound understanding of the elements of spirituality and prayer akin to the Asian soul, and to involve themselves more deeply in the Asian peoples' search for a fuller life.¹⁰⁴ (...) Moreover, since the inculturation of the Gospel involves the entire People of God, the role of the laity is of paramount importance. It is they above all who are called to transform society, in collaboration with the bishops, clergy and religious, by infusing the "mind of Christ" into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the secular world in which they live.¹⁰⁷ A wider inculturation of the Gospel at every level of society in Asia will depend greatly on the appropriate formation which the local Churches succeed in giving to the laity.

⁹⁸ Cf. Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops, *Relatio post disceptationem*, 13.

⁹⁹ Cf. *Propositio* 17.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *Propositio* 18.

¹⁰¹ Cf. *Propositio* 17.

¹⁰² Nos. 60; 62; 105: AAS 91 (1999), 52f.; 54; 85f.

¹⁰³ Cf. *Propositio* 24.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *Propositio* 25.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. *Propositio* 29.



Pope John Paul II views the illuminated St. John's Bible, a work commissioned by St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn., USA.

Apostolic Exhortation "Novo Millennio Ineunte" (January 6, 2001)

Listening to the Word

39. There is no doubt that this primacy of holiness and prayer is inconceivable without a renewed *listening to the Word of God*. Ever since the Second Vatican Council underlined the pre-eminent role of the Word of God in the life of the Church, great progress has certainly been made in devout listening to Sacred Scripture and attentive study of it. Scripture has its rightful place of honour in the public prayer of the Church. 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. Dear brothers and sisters, this development needs to be consolidated and deepened, also by making sure that every family has a Bible. It is especially necessary that listening to the Word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever valid tradition of *lectio divina*, which draws from the biblical text the living Word which questions, directs and shapes our lives.

**Proclaiming the Word**

40. To nourish ourselves with the Word in order to be “servants of the Word” in the work of evangelization: this is surely a priority for the Church at the dawn of the new millennium. Even in countries evangelized many centuries ago, the reality of a “Christian society” which, amid all the frailties which have always marked human life, measured itself explicitly on Gospel values, is now gone. Today we must courageously face a situation which is becoming increasingly diversified and demanding, in the context of “globalization” and of the consequent new and uncertain mingling of peoples and cultures. Over the years, I have often repeated the summons to the *new evangelization*. I do so again now, especially in order to insist that we must rekindle in ourselves the impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardour of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor 9:16).

This passion will not fail to stir in the Church a new sense of mission, which cannot be left to a group of “specialists” but must involve the responsibility of all the members of the People of God. Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves, they must proclaim him. A new apostolic outreach is needed, which will be lived as *the everyday commitment of Christian communities and groups*. This should be done, however, with the respect due to the different paths of different people and with sensitivity to the diversity of cultures in which the Christian message must be planted, in such a way that the particular values of each people will not be rejected but purified and brought to their fullness.

In the third millennium, Christianity will have to respond ever more effectively to this *need for inculturation*. Christianity, while remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root. In this Jubilee Year, we have rejoiced in a special way in the beauty of the Church’s varied face. This is perhaps only a beginning, a barely sketched image of the future which the Spirit of God is preparing for us.

Message on the occasion of the VI Plenary Assembly of the CBF in Lebanon (August 30, 2002)

“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* 22).

Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “Ecclesia in Europa” (June 28, 2003)

The Gospel: a book for the Europe of today and tomorrow

65. As I stepped through the Holy Door at the beginning of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, I held high the Book of the Gospels, showing it to the Church and to the world. This same ritual action, carried out by all the bishops in the different cathedrals of the world, points to the task awaiting the Church of our continent now and for ever.

Church in Europe, enter the new millennium with the Book of the Gospels! May every member of the faithful hear the Council’s plea “to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ’.”¹¹⁸ May the Holy Bible continue to be a treasure for the Church and for every Christian: in the careful study of God’s Word we will daily find nourishment and strength to carry out our mission.

Let us take up this book! Let us receive it from the Lord who continually offers it to us through his Church (cf. Rev 10:8). Let us devour it (cf. Rev 10:9), so that it can become our very life. Let us savour it deeply: it will make demands of us, but it will give us joy because it is sweet as honey (cf. Rev 10:9-10). Filled with hope, we will be able to share it with every man and woman whom we encounter on our way.

¹¹⁸ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* 25.

Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “Pastores Gregis” (October 16, 2003)

Entrusting oneself to the Word

15. The assembly of the Synod of Bishops indicated several indispensable means for the sustenance and



progress of the spiritual life.⁶⁶ First among these is reading and meditating on the Word of God. Every bishop should always commend himself and feel commended “to the Lord and to the word of his grace, which is able to build up and give the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (cf. *Acts* 20:32). Before becoming one who hands on the Word, the bishop, together with his priests and indeed like every member of the faithful and like the Church herself,⁶⁷ must be a hearer of the Word. He should live “within” the Word and allow himself to be protected and nourished by it, as if by a mother’s womb. (...)



Pope John Paul II with former CBF General Secretary Ludger Feldkämper, svd, in 1990.

To commend oneself to the Word of God and to keep it, like the Virgin Mary, *Virgo audiens*,⁷⁰ requires the practice of certain aids constantly proposed by the Church’s tradition and spiritual experience. These include, first of all, frequent personal reading and regular study of Sacred Scripture. A bishop would try in vain to preach the Word to others if he did not first listen to it within himself.⁷¹ Without frequent contact with Sacred Scripture a bishop would hardly be a credible minister of hope, since, as Saint Paul reminds us, it is “from the lessons of patience and the words of encouragement in the Scriptures that we can derive hope” (cf. *Rom* 15:4). The words of Origen remain ever applicable: “These are the two activities of the bishop: learning from God by reading the divine Scriptures and meditating on them frequently, and teaching the people. But let him teach the things that he himself has learned from God”.⁷²

The Synod recalled the importance of reading (*lectio*) and meditation (*meditatio*) on the Word of God in the life of pastors and in their ministry of service to the community. As I wrote in my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, “it is especially necessary that listening to the Word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever valid tradition of *lectio divina*, which draws from the biblical text the living Word which que-

stions, directs and shapes our lives”.⁷³ In the realm of meditation and lectio, the heart which has already received the Word opens itself to the contemplation of God’s work and, consequently, to a conversion of thoughts and life to him, accompanied by a heartfelt request for his forgiveness and grace. ■

⁶⁶ Cf. *Propositio* 8.

⁶⁷ Cf. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975), 59: AAS 68 (1976), 50.

⁷⁰ Cf. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus* (February 2, 1974), 17: AAS 66 (1974), 128.

⁷¹ Cf. Saint Augustine, *Sermo* 179, 1: PL 38, 966.

⁷² Origenes, *Homilia in librum Leviticum*, VI, 6: PG 12, 474 C.

⁷³ No. 39: AAS 93 (2001), 294.



The CBF Congratulates Pope Benedict XVI



In the name of all members of the Catholic Biblical Federation the CBF General Secretary congratulated Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of his election to the ministry of Pontifex Maximus, wishing him God's blessing and the guidance of the Holy Spirit for his ministry.

The following are excerpts taken from the letter of congratulations:

Holy Father:

In the name of the Catholic Biblical Federation I send you our warmest congratulations on the occasion of your election as Pontifex Maximus. Moving best wishes and congratulations messages have been pouring into our General Secretariat, written by members of the Catholic Biblical Federation worldwide. In this summary form we would like to say to you: you can not only count on the support of the faithful for your pontificate; you have already won their hearts.

The words of your homily of 24 April, "Aprite, anzi spalancate le porte per Cristo!" evoked for many of us that image, which the Constitution Dei Verbum of Vatican II employs and which so aptly describes the concerns of the Catholic Biblical Federation: "Christifidelibus aditus ad Sacram Scripturam late pateat oportet" (DV22). Indeed, to carve out a place for the Word of God in our lives means precisely to open the doors wide to Christ.

As a fruit of the Second Vatican Council and on behalf of the whole Church of Christ the Catholic Biblical Federation is committed at the various levels of ecclesial life to the aim of making the letter of Holy Scripture become the life-giving Word of God. In the name of our member institutions in 127 countries of the world we would like to assure you of our commitment to this goal for the future as well.

May God, who achieves everything He desires, grant you the strength to follow His Word and His will. And may the Holy Spirit with His gifts stand by you as you fulfill the task entrusted to you as supreme shepherd, as Vicar of Jesus Christ.

Alexander M. Schweitzer
CBF General Secretary

In his letter of reply of June 14, 2005, the Holy Father pronounced his gratitude for the prayers of support and solidarity with the Holy See; he mentioned special thanks to all CBF members for their untiring and fruitful commitment in the service of the Word and granted his Apostolic Blessing to them. ■



Yahweh, Our Guard

Catechesis on Psalm 121

Pope Benedict XVI

The weekly catechesis on the Psalms of Lauds and the hymns of Vespers begun by Pope John Paul II is being continued by his successor. The first of these so-called Wednesday catechetical reflections was given by Pope Benedict XVI during the General Audience on May 4, 2005, and had Psalm 121 as its topic.

Psalm 121[120]:1-4.7-8

- ¹ *[A Song of Ascents] I lift up my eyes to the mountains; where is my help to come from?*
- ² *My help comes from Yahweh who made heaven and earth.*
- ³ *May he save your foot from stumbling; may he, your guardian, not fall asleep!*
- ⁴ *You see – he neither sleeps nor slumbers, the guardian of Israel.*
- ⁷ *Yahweh guards you from all harm Yahweh guards your life,*
- ⁸ *Yahweh guards your comings and goings, henceforth and for ever.*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. As I announced last Wednesday, in our Catecheses I have decided to continue the commentary on the Psalms and Canticles of Vespers, using the texts prepared by my beloved Predecessor, Pope John Paul II.

Let us begin today with Psalm 121[120]. The Psalm is one of the “songs of ascents” that accompanied the pilgrimage to the encounter with the Lord in the Temple of Zion. It is a Psalm of trust, for the Hebrew verb *shamar*, “to safeguard, to protect”, is repeated in it six times. God, whose name is frequently invoked, emerges as the ever vigilant, attentive and concerned “guardian”, the “sentinel” who keeps watch over his people to protect them from every hazard and danger.

The song begins with the Psalmist raising his eyes “to the mountains”, that is, to the hills crowned by Jerusalem: from up there comes help, for there, in his temple, the Lord dwells (cf. vv. 1-2). However, the word “mountains” can also conjure up images of idolatrous shrines in the so-called “high places”, which are frequently condemned in the Old Testament (cf. 1 Kings 3:2; 2 Kings 18:4). In this case, there would have been a contrast: while the pilgrim was advancing towards Zion, his eyes would have lit on pagan temples that were a great temptation to him. But his faith was steadfast and he was certain of one thing alone: “My help

shall come from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Ps 121[120]:2).

There are also similar things in our pilgrimage through life. We see the high places that spread out before us as a promise of life: wealth, power, prestige, the easy life. These high places are temptations, for they truly seem like the promise of life. But with our faith we realize that this is not true and that these high places are not life. True life, true help, comes from the Lord. And we turn our gaze, therefore, to the true high places, to the true mountain: Christ.

2. This trust is illustrated in the Psalm through the image of the guardian and sentinel, who watch and protect. There is also an allusion to the foot that does not stumble (cf. v. 3) on the way through life, and perhaps to the shepherd who, stopping for the night, watches over his flock without falling asleep or dozing (cf. v. 4). The divine Pastor knows no rest in the task of caring for his people, for all of us.



Another symbol is then introduced into the Psalm: “shade”, which implies that the journey is resumed during the heat of the day (cf. v. 5). Let us remember the historic march through the desert of Sinai where the Lord preceded Israel “in the

daytime by means of a column of cloud to show them the way” (Exod 13:21). Many prayers in the Psalter say: “Hide me in the shadow of your wings” (Ps 17[16]:8; cf. Ps 91[90]:1). Here too, there is an aspect that relates to our life. Our lives move beneath a merciless sun; the Lord is the shade that protects and helps us.

3. After the vigil and the shade there is the third symbol, that of the Lord who is “at [the] right side” of his faithful (cf. Ps 121[120]:5). This is the position of defence, both in military and court contexts: it is the certainty of never being abandoned in a time of trial, in an assault by evil or by persecution. At this point the Psalmist returns to the idea of a journey on a scorching hot day on which God protects us from the fierce heat of the sun.



But night follows day. In ancient times it was also thought that moonbeams were harmful and caused fever or blindness, or even madness; thus, the Lord also protects us at night time (cf. v. 6), in the nights of our lives.

The Psalm now draws to a close with a concise declaration of trust: God will protect us with love at every moment, guarding our lives from every evil (cf. v. 7). All our activities, summed up in two opposite verbs, “going” and “coming”, always take place under the vigilant gaze of the Lord, as do all our acts and all our time, “both now and for ever” (v. 8).



“I lift my eyes up to the mountains ...”. On the way to Jerusalem

4. Let us now, in conclusion, comment on this final declaration of trust with a spiritual testimony of the ancient Christian tradition. In fact, in the *Epistolarium* of Barsanuphius of Gaza (who died in the mid-sixth century), a widely renowned aesthete sought out by monks, clerics and lay people for the wisdom of his discernment, we find several references to the verse of our Psalm: “The Lord will guard you from evil, he will guard your soul”. With this Psalm, with this verse, Barsanuphius wanted to comfort all those who came to him with their toils, life’s trials, dangers and misfortunes.

Once asked by a monk to pray for him and his companions, Barsanuphius responded as follows, including the citation of this verse in his greeting: “My beloved sons, I embrace you in the Lord, entreating him to *protect you from all evil*, and to support you as he did Job, to give you grace as he gave to Joseph, gentleness as to Moses and valour in battle as to Joshua, the son of Nun, mastery of thought as to the judges, victory over enemies as to King David and King Solomon, fertile land as to the Israelites. ... May he grant you forgiveness of your sins with the healing of the body as he did to the paralytic. May he save you from the waters as he did Peter and snatch you from troubles as he did Paul and the other Apostles. *May he protect you from every evil*, as his true children, and grant you your heart’s desire, for the advantage of your soul and your body, in his name. Amen” (Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, *Epistolario* 194, in: *Collana di Testi Patristici XCIII*, Rome 1991, 235-236). ■

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New Members

Full Members

In October 2004 the Federation was joined by the

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Associate Members

As of January, 2005 the following ten organizations became CBF associate members after having been officially accepted by the CBF Executive Committee:

AFRICA

Archdiocese of Kasama – Biblical Apostolate, Zambia

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The Apostolic Vicariate of Kasama was founded in 1913; in 1959 it was elevated to diocesan status and in 1967 became the Archdiocese of Kasama. Msgr. James Spaita has been Archbishop of Kasama since 1990. The Archdiocese covers an area of 60.000 square kilometers, with more than 450,000 Catholics (50 percent of the population). The Archdiocese has been working vigorously on the biblical apostolate; Bible groups have been established in all parishes and several biblical pastoral projects are currently being carried out.

AMERICAS

Instituto Nova Jerusalém, Brasil

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The Instituto Nova Jerusalém derives from a community of religious and lay people, founded in 1981. The institute works in the field of evangelization and biblical pastoral ministry and lays emphasis on biblical formation work in parishes, awareness-building, formation of lay guides and pastoral leaders, Bible courses, catechesis, Bible groups, retreats on lectio divina and Bible-teaching in theology courses for lay people.

Publication: Revista Bíblica Brasileira

Congregação das Irmãzinhas da Imaculada Conceição (CIIC), Brasil

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This congregation was founded in 1890 and counts 538 members. The CIIC's main focus is on work with the needy. Though many of its activities go beyond the normal scope of the biblical pastoral field, the sisters' engagement in the apostolate of the poor and in evangelization is explicitly based on the biblical message and biblically animated.

ASIA / OCEANIA

Arul Kadat – Jesuit Regional Theologate, India

98, Santhome High Road
 Chennai – 600 028
 India
 Tel.: +91-44-24 93 83 89

The theologate offers scriptural formation for seminarians, religious and lay people, it publishes daily scriptural meditations as well as biblical research articles and thus bridges the gap between an academic and a pastoral approach to Holy Scripture.

Arul Vakku Manram – St. Paul's Seminary, India

Post Box No. 36
 Tiruchirapalli 620 001
 India
 Tel.: +91-431-240 25 00
 Fax: +91-431-241 41 50

Just like Arul Kadat (see above) the Arul Vakku Manram is a link between an academic and a pastoral approach to Holy Scripture. It prepares and publishes biblical commentaries and Bible related material.

**KCBC (Kerala Catholic Bishop's Council) Bible Commission – Pastoral Orientation Centre, India**

P.O.C. Palarivattom

P.B. No 2251

Kochi – 682 025, Kerala

India

Tel.: +91-484-280 58 97

Fax: +91-484-280 58 95

E-mail: kcbs@satyam.net.in;

secretary@keralabiblesociety

Website www.keralabiblesociety.com

The Pastoral Orientation Centre was founded in 1976 its main aim being to propagate the Word of God. Among its manifold activities both in the biblical pastoral field as well as in the field of translation-production-distribution are the organization of biblical courses, correspondence courses, festivals, Bible weeks etc. and the printing and distribution of Bibles (together with the KCBC). The institution thus contributes immensely to biblical animation of pastoral activities in the Church of Kerala.

Kristu Jyoti College (Salesian Theologate), India

Krishnarajapuram

Bangalore 560 036

India

Tel.: +91-80-561 00 12

Fax: +91-80-561 20 12

E-mail: dbkjc@blr.vsnl.net.in

Website: www.children-of-Bangalore.com/kristu.htm

The College, affiliated to the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome, offers specialisation in catechetics and youth ministry and pays special attention to a balanced formation of future priests including practical training periods etc. Its students who belong to the different Salesian provinces in India and to three other religious orders regularly conduct biblical programs in the parishes of Bangalore. Kristu Jyoti College publishes the quarterly "Kristu Jyoti" with a strong pastoral and catechetical orientation.

St. Thomas Apostolic Seminary, India

Vadavathoor, P.O.

Kottayam – 686 010

Kerala

India

Tel.: +91-481-578319, 571807, 571809

Fax: +91-481-578525

E-mail: santhom@vsnl.com

Web: www.santhom.org

This seminary with a student body of about 350 was established by the Congregation for the Oriental Churches in 1962 and is affiliated to the faculty of Oriental Ecclesiastical Sciences at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome. Its primary purpose is the education and formation of the seminarians of the Syro-Malabar

Church but its doors are open to students of the Syro-Malankara and Latin rites and to those of other religious congregations.

St. Francis Xavier's Major Seminary, Sri Lanka

Columbuthurai

Jaffna

Sri Lanka

Tel.: +94-21-2 22 24 82

E-mail: xavsem@eureka.lk

St. Francis Xavier's Major Seminary focuses on several specific activities in the biblical pastoral field such as teaching Sacred Scripture to the laity, catechesis for teachers, conducting Bible exhibitions, staging dramas based on biblical events and themes, etc.

EUROPE / MIDDLE EAST**Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique (Pères Blancs), Rome**

Missionari d'Africa

Via Aurelia 269

C.P. 9078

00100 Roma

Italy

Tel.: +39-06-39 36 34-1

Fax: +39-06-39 36 34 78

E-mail: m.afr@mafroma.org

Website: www.africamission-mafr.org

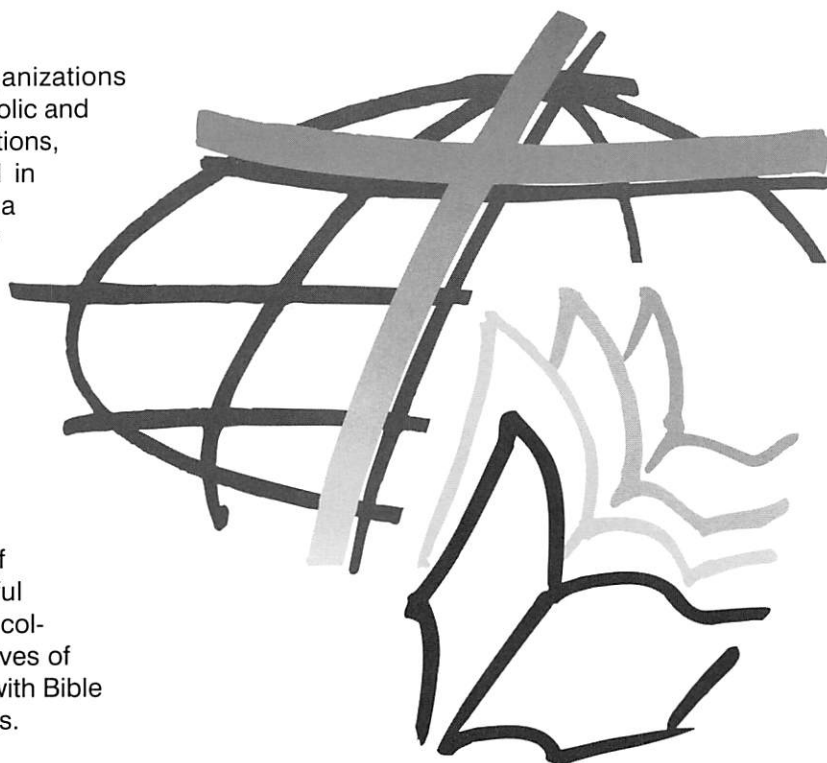
The aim of the Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique, founded in 1868 in Algeria, is to proclaim the Gospel to the peoples of Africa. The Bible takes a privileged position in the lives of the White Fathers, in their communities and in their apostolate, as can be seen from their major activities: Bible translation, translation and production of biblical materials, publication of magazines in various languages and collaboration in biblical pastoral work, especially the biblical pastoral ministry, biblical formation work, etc.

Presently, the Catholic Biblical Federation is represented by 319 member institutions in 127 countries worldwide.

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 92 full members and 227 associate members coming from a total of 127 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