

DEIVERBUM

Catholic Biblical Federation

BULLETIN

**Word of God – Source of
Reconciliation, Justice and Peace**
CBF's Seventh Plenary Assembly

Approaching Paul
The Pauline Year 2008/2009



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We would like to express our deep gratitude to the Diocese of Augsburg, Department for Mission and Universal Church, for its financial aid for the printing of this issue.



Dear Readers:



Paul, the heroic lone warrior, who almost single-handedly brings the Gospel to the ends of the earth – this image of the Apostle to the Gentiles is one that is still popular in some circles today. But for a long time now other facets of this intriguing personality, so important for the history of Christianity, have been coming to light.

Paul was in fact no lone warrior, but rather a staunch team-worker and a capable “networker”; he was no “dry”, abstract theologian, but rather a courageous and gifted visionary; an enthusiastic messenger of the Gospel, a multi-talented man – and yet at the same time a man with rough edges, who did not shrink from the use of direct language, when the stakes were high.

On the occasion of the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Paul, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed the time from 28 June 2008 to 29 June 2009 a Year of Paul in the Catholic Church. The Pope himself said in one of his addresses that it would be an important goal of this Pauline Year “to learn from Saint Paul, to learn the faith, to learn Christ, and finally to learn the way of right living”. Perhaps the Pauline Year can help us all to encounter Paul the man anew. From his life and his faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ we can perhaps all receive inspiration and incentive for our own lives and our own personal faith.

Besides the Pauline Year the primary focus of this issue lies on the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the CBF, which took place last year in Tanzania. We document the major articles presented as well as the message of the Pope, and we supply a few background reports on the course of the Assembly. You will also find – as a removable insert – a copy of the Final Statement of the Plenary Assembly.

The Plenary Assembly was devoted to a great theme of humanity: the question of how reconciliation takes place, what righteousness looks like concretely, and how peace can be lived today. Such great themes always harbor the danger that they remain in the realm

of the vague or the ideal, that they are too far removed from reality, that they sound good in theory, but cannot be implemented in any practical way. And it is not only we as individuals that are exposed to this danger time and time again; organizations and communities must confront it too, even the CBF.

In Tanzania the great, worldwide family of the CBF came together to get a grip on this great concrete theme. It did this with enormous enthusiasm and many good results. But the theme is by no means exhausted with this meeting. The participants were very much aware of this as they together composed the following prayer, with which on behalf of the entire team of the General Secretariat I wish you an exciting and enriching reading.

Sincerely yours,

Claudio Etti

*God and Father of Life,
You open for us your arms of mercy
and with your Son you fill us with your Spirit of love.
You will that your children live as brothers and sisters
and walk united into the light of your project.
We come to you thirsty of the justice of your Kingdom,
Justice that fights the perverse powers
which destroy the beauty and dignity of your creatures.
We feel with you the sorrows of the victims of violence
and the anguished cry of so many excluded and ill treated.
Teach us in the school of your Word,
mainly the great Word of the Paschal Cross of your Son,
the attitudes and initiative that bring into the world
a flow of reconciliation, a source of new creation.
May this discipleship of your life-giving Word
make our communities vital places,
instruments of peace and witnesses of hope.
Lead us not into temptation of avoiding this mission
by fear of persecution for the cause of justice,
give us rather the courage of Mary
to proclaim with all the humblest of the world
a hymn of joy as we believe that your Word will be fulfilled.
For yours is the justice of the Kingdom, the reconciliation
and the peace, now and forever. Amen.*



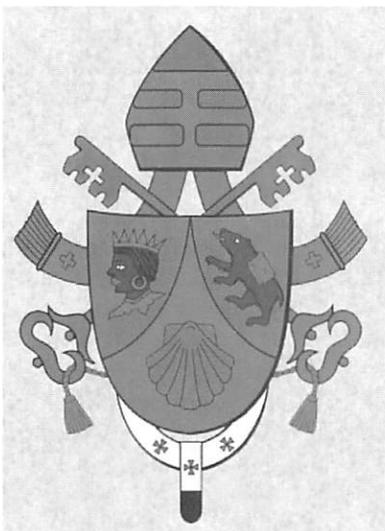
Message to the PA Participants from the Holy Father

"Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace" (Eph 6:14-15). With these words of the Apostle Paul, I am pleased to greet the delegates and all those attending the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation taking place in Dar es Salaam from June 24 to July 3, 2008, dedicated to the theme: *Word of God – Source of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*. The Plenary Assembly is always a privileged opportunity for the members of the Catholic Biblical Federation to listen together to the Word of God and renew their service to the Church, called to proclaim the gospel of peace.

The fact that your meeting is being held in Dar es Salaam is an important gesture of solidarity with the Church in Africa, more so in view of next year's special Synod for Africa. "The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (*Gaudium et Spes* 4). The message you bring to Dar es Salaam is clearly a message of love of the Bible and love of Africa. The theme of your Plenary Assembly draws attention to how God's Word can restore humanity in reconciliation, justice and peace. This is the Word of life that the Church has to offer to a broken world. "So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making His appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20). May the African continent set the context for the *lectio divina* which will assist you in these days and may your efforts help the Church in Africa to "pursue its evangelizing mission, in order to bring the peoples of the continent to the Lord, teaching them to observe all that He has commanded [cf. Mt 28:20]" (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa* 6).

Christianity is the religion of the Word of God, "not a written and mute word, but incarnate and living" (Saint Bernard, *S. Missus est* 4,11 PL 183,86). It is only Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, who through the Holy Spirit, can open our minds to understand the Scriptures (cf. Lk 24:15; *Catechism* 108). I warmly encourage you

therefore not only to continue to make known the profound relevance of the Scriptures to the contemporary experience of Catholics and particularly to the younger generations, but also to lead them to interpret them from the central perspective of Christ and his Paschal mystery. The community of believers can be the leaven of reconciliation, but only if "she remains docile to the Spirit and bears witness to the Gospel, only if she carries the Cross like Jesus and with Jesus" (*Homily, Solemnity of Pentecost*, May 11, 2008). In this regard, I wish to make my own a reflection from the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II, who observed: "How indeed can we proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation without at the same time being committed to working for reconciliation between Christians?" (*Ut Unum Sint* 98). Let this observation also find its way into your undertakings these days. May your hearts be guided always by the Holy Spirit in the unifying power of the Word of God.



All Christians are called to imitate the openness of Mary who received the Word of God "in her heart and in her body and gave Life to the world" (*Lumen Gentium* 53). May the peoples of Africa receive this Word as the life-giving source of reconciliation and justice, and especially of the true peace that comes only from the Risen Lord. Commending to the same Virgin Mary, the Seat of Wisdom, all those gathered

for this Plenary Assembly, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

Benedictus PP XVI



CBF'S
SEVENTH
PLENARY
ASSEMBLY

Karibuni Afrika! Welcome to Africa!

First CBF Plenary Assembly Held on African Soil

More than 240 specialists in biblical pastoral ministry from over 80 countries met from June 24 on for the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation under the motto "Word of God – Source of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace". For the first time in the nearly 40-year history of this organization the meeting took place in Africa.



Every six years the more than 320 member organizations of the Catholic Biblical Federation meet for their Plenary Assembly. These regular meetings offer a place of encounter and exchange of biblical pastoral specialists and assets from all over the world. During the Plenary Assembly committee members are elected and the ongoing work of the Federation discussed. But this is not all. More important are the common lectio divina and Mass, and particularly the exchanges on relevant biblical pastoral themes and ideas, the building of international networks and the planning of new initiatives that often transcend individual countries and continents.

In the Tanzanian metropolis, Dar es Salaam, Africa was for the first time hosting a CBF Plenary Assembly. This means that the meeting took place in a country, which in spite of all the efforts in the struggle against poverty remains one of the economically poorest countries of the world, and which like so many countries of Africa is also hard hit by the AIDS/HIV virus. It took place in a country which, unlike many neighboring countries, has managed to overcome its tribal conflicts, whose form of government favors good social interaction between Christians and Moslems, but which sees itself increasingly confronted with the challenges of fundamentalism. And it took place in a country

whose Church is extraordinarily vibrant by reason of its proliferation of groups and movements, and particularly in the Small Christian Communities.

The theme of this year's Plenary Assembly was "Word of God – Source of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace", accompanied by the complementary biblical motto: "We are ambassadors for Christ" (cf. 2 Cor 5:19-20). This theme took into account the particular context of Africa even as it took up current challenges of pastoral ministry in the Church throughout the world. As regards the contents of the work, its starting point was the sociological analysis of existing social, political and ecclesial structures in the regions of the world. With this as a foundation, measures and concrete steps were to be developed contributing to a concerted advocacy of reconciliation, justice and peace in the world of today from the perspective of the Bible. Most in the foreground was the question as to what role the Bible as God's Word of hope and of life could play in this regard. The meeting ended with the approval of a Final Statement on the theme.

His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI's message to the assembly was read by Fr. Juan Usma Gómez of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. The Holy Father greeted the CBF's decision to hold its Plenary Assembly in Tanzania, as "clearly a message of love of the Bible and love of Africa". Attentiveness to the African context, to the urgency of efforts for concrete reconciliation, justice and peace growing out of a prayerful dialogue with the Word of God, a concern about reconciliation even between Christians – these are some of the major preoccupations





that Pope Benedict conveyed to the assembly, accompanied with his apostolic blessings for the participants and their work.

Keynote speaker at the opening ceremony was Mr. Pius Msekwa, former Speaker of the Tanzanian Parliament and Vice Chairman of the CCM, ruling party in Tanzania. Recognizing the importance of the assembly devoted to the power of the Word of God to transform society, Mr. Msekwa spoke at length of the challenges of the African context, specifically for the Church, expressing that the decimating effects of poverty and undernourishment, in addition to the weight of colonial exploitation and ethnic conflicts and the violence that mushrooms from this seedbed seem to characterise a situation without hope.

Mr. Msekwa went on to say that the government had often been incapable of resolving these problems, especially considering the prevalent corruption of many government officials and that the Church's mission of evangelisation must seek to contribute to the healing of this situation and of the African populations, not only in the religious sphere, but also in the political, economic, cultural and social dimensions of human existence. Basic Christian Communities in Africa, with their lay leadership ought to be recognised for their work on the African continent and encouraged, even empowered, by the Church leadership to be "real instruments of reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa and the whole world".

(Translation: L. Maluf)

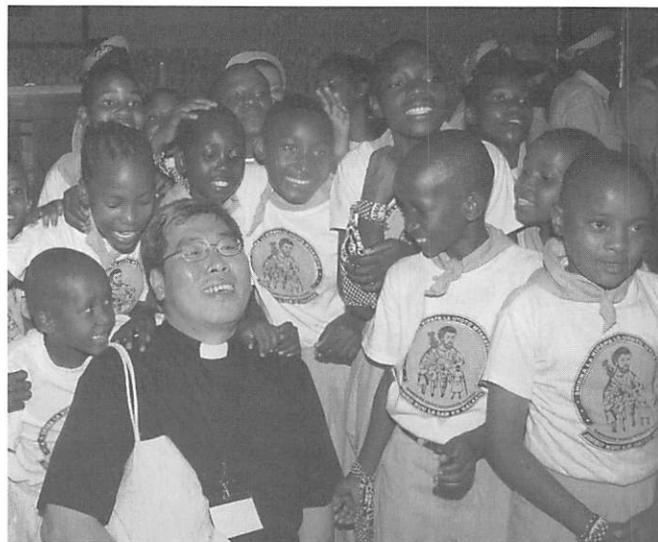
"We have faith in our children"

Moving Witness during Meetings with Christians in Dar es Salaam

An important dimension of the Seventh Plenary Assembly was the direct contact with the African Church in its many facets. The feast of Saints Peter and Paul was the setting for an encounter with several Catholic communities in and around Dar es Salaam.

St. Joseph's Cathedral and its parish council welcomed the assembly delegates to a celebration of the Eucharist presided over by Archbishop Joseph Chenoth, Apostolic Nuncio in Tanzania. The festive character of the liturgy, concelebrated by numerous bishops and priests from among the assembly participants, reflected the vibrancy of the Tanzanian Church, especially in the combined voices and rhythms of the parish choir and in the dance of the children who accompanied entrance and offertory processions. The president of the parish council warmly expressed the welcome that the community extended to its many guests.

On the same day other CBF Plenary Assembly participants were welcomed by several local Small Christian Communities. These communities are composed of Catholics who meet regularly to read the Bible together, to share their life and its burdens with one another, to offer mutual support and to celebrate common liturgy. The assembly delegates were deeply touched by the profound hospitality and generosity of the Tanzanian



Catholics they encountered. They were especially impressed by the continuous and active involvement of children in all aspects of the life of these communities: from the sharing of the Bible, through sharing of joy in song, dance and prayer, to the sharing of their resources, as limited or as abundant as they might be. "These Christians have faith in their children and they encourage them to take active responsibility in the life of the community", said one participant.



Instruments of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace in Africa and the Whole World

Opening Address of the Seventh CBF Plenary Assembly

Pius Msekwa

Distinguished representatives of the member institutions of the Catholic Biblical Federation, Invited guests, Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is indeed a great honor and privilege (...) to have been invited to perform an official opening function of the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation. (...)

Let me (...) carry out my assignment of officially opening this conference, by saying a few words in relation to its specified theme, which is "Word of God – Source of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace".

The theme of the Plenary Assembly

The conference program shows clearly that you have very serious, substantial and professional tasks to be performed during the week of your meetings here. It shows, for example, that the conference is scheduled to make a sociological analysis of reconciliation, justice and peace; and also assess reconciliation, justice and peace in the light of the Word of God. It shows further that there will be a full session on "exposure to the African context", including an encounter with the local Church.



Pius Msekwa is a former Speaker of the Tanzania Parliament and currently Vice-Chairman of Tanzania's ruling party CCM.

I expect that the conference will examine in detail how the ministers and servants of the Word, in collaboration with the members of the laity, should design our response of turning to the Word of God as the vision of our lives; but above all, as the source of divine power.

The Spirit and the Word can overtake us and empower us, as happened in the case of the apostles, provided we allow the Word to have a claim on our lives and on the life of the Church. The emerging power of the Word can be felt only in an obedient surrender, like that of Abraham and of the apostles, whose ministry we regularly contemplate as we read the Word in the Acts of the Apostles.

For example, there is the question which was posed by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, asking "what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man's conscience?" This question still continues to challenge us. We do know that God's Word is creative. It is the Word of power for renewal and transformation. Our task therefore is to seek ways of making the Word of God the source of energy in the heart of the Church and the whole world. This will bring about a change of consciousness, a change of behavior, and a change of structure. All of this is part of the mission of the Church, for all activities of the Church are, in one way or another, the ministry of the Word. The Church has the Word right at the center of her mission.

How can we experience the Word as the source of life? Without the light and grace of the Spirit, the Word will not generate the energy needed for the transformation of life and society. Hence, prayer, accompanied by hard work, should become the hallmark of the ministry of the Word. At this moment in history, we should listen to the pressing invitation of the Word of God for a deeper conversion and deeper evangelization of our vision, our attitudes and our behavior towards other groups in our society, be they religious, cultural or ethnic groups. But we must give special consideration to the poor, and all those who are victims of exclusion and discrimination in our societies. Reading the Word of God should lead us to inner transformation, because the Word of God comes to us with its power to impel us to live in solidarity, namely in union and communion. It is only when we feel the irresistible power of the Spirit that we can become effective instruments of transformation.

We have to reiterate our commitment to a self-critique of our way of reading Scriptures in the Church, either individually or collectively, by asking ourselves the following pertinent questions:



Do we facilitate the power of the Word to have an impact on the problems of society? Have we, perhaps unconsciously, used the texts of Scripture to legitimize attitudes of superiority or discrimination, or violence, against others? Fundamentalist and purely spiritualistic interpretations of the Scriptures have become a growing phenomenon in almost all Churches. The biblical pastoral ministry has an urgent task of countering a sectarian and fundamentalist reading of the Word of God, an approach which builds walls of separation and discrimination. The Word of God in Sacred Scripture releases its power only if it is read properly. In fact, the Bible itself teaches us the option for reading it properly, and for living the Word of God. Selecting the correct options will enable us to remain faithful both to the original message, and to the people to whom it is proclaimed as Good News.

The situation in Africa

This assembly is being held in Africa, and one of the sessions of this conference is listed as "exposure to the African context". This indeed is quite appropriate. It is appropriate because it is completely in line with the theme of the forthcoming Second Synod for Africa, which is scheduled to be held next year, 2009. Its theme has already been specified by Pope Benedict XVI to be "The Church of Africa, in service to reconciliation, justice and peace". For that reason, I beg your indulgence to spend the next few minutes talking about Africa, in the context of this conference.

One of the major challenges in Africa today is the comparative lack of success in both the political and economic fields of human endeavor. This is partly attributable to the multi-ethnic composition of the African states. For ethnic pluralism is often the cause of tensions within the states of Africa. The question here is: How can this pluralism be transformed into a positive, constructive factor, and not one which leads to divisions and rivalries? In some African states, persistent social tensions impede progress, and lead to political disturbances and even armed conflicts, for example, when peace is sometimes confused with tranquility imposed by force. There is also the challenge of the temptation to keep power for overly long periods in the hands of one person as head of state and government, often to the detriment of the economy and good governance of the country concerned.

Another major challenge is the influence on African states by external factors. While it is true that almost all of the African states lived through a long and sad history of exploitation at the hands of colonialists, it is also true that the factor of exploitation did not terminate with de-colonization. It still endures even today in different forms, including the crushing burden of international debts, the unjust trade practices, and the

severe conditions imposed by World Bank sponsored programs of structural adjustments.

In addition, there is the challenge of dishonesty on the part of corrupt government leaders who, usually in connivance with domestic and foreign private interests, divert substantial national resources to their own private ends by transferring public funds to their private accounts in foreign banks. Therefore, the question here is: Given this sad state of affairs, how can the Church in Africa assist in devising ways and means to encourage honest politicians to protect public funds from misuse and embezzlement?

Africa provides us with both the positive and the negative aspects regarding the issues of reconciliation, justice and peace. On the positive side, there are many splendid and encouraging efforts of reconciliation in a number of the countries of Africa. The monitors and promoters of these efforts are often persons or groups who are deeply committed to, and motivated by, Christian values of love and forgiveness, as enlightened by the biblical notion of justice. But Africa also provides examples of the negative aspects, which include the absence of justice and peace caused by the presence of hatred, of the desire for revenge, and of endless human conflicts. Those who have absorbed the teachings of the Church do understand clearly that the Church's mission is to proclaim the news of salvation, a salvation that frees man, (the entire man) every man and in every way: spiritually, physically, morally, culturally, economically and socially. This is the mission of the Church – family of God in Africa. All members of the Church are called to this task, whatever their situation or circumstances in life.

But apart from those general tasks, there are certain specific aspects which require specific attention. And these should be carefully noted. The first is in relation to the concept of mutual respect and acceptance of each other. One guaranteed remedy against the deadly virus of discrimination is a strong conviction and adherence to the culture of mutual respect and the acceptance of human equality. This requires a break from the negative forms of solidarity, that is, those which originate from overemphasis on the individual's ethnic group, or tribe.

The second aspect is in relation to reconciliation and forgiveness. With regard to the concept of reconciliation, it is important to note that in the light of the South African post-apartheid experience, the term "reconciliation" has acquired the limited meaning of "the elimination of animosity, or an end to violence". It is obvious that such a narrow meaning does not necessarily include the re-establishment of peace in the hearts of men. Forgiveness refers more to the internal work within a person, to heal the "wound" within and regain



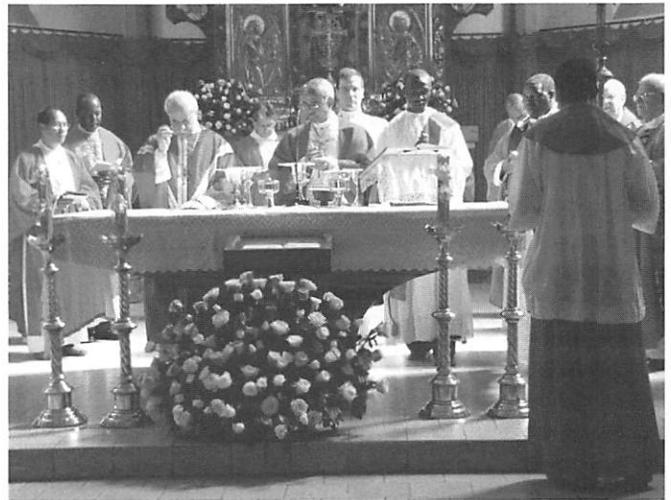
peace. In the words of Pope John Paul II: "there can be no peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness". This is because human beings are sinful beings. The responsibility of the Church in this regard is to direct its pastoral activities to the task of bringing those who are at fault to a process leading to conversion and recognition of their errors or crimes; and to help the victims generously offer their forgiveness.

The third aspect is poverty and violence. Poverty is in fact the most central issue, for poverty is a recipe for unrest. Violence is oftentimes caused by poverty. It is an indisputable fact that life for many ordinary people living in this continent is an appalling state while at the same time there is no hope that the situation will normalize any time soon. It has been said that "a hungry man is an angry man". In many areas, especially urban areas, where people don't grow their own food, and yet have no regular employment, there is a very high level of nutrition deficiency, which in turn impedes healthy growth and tends to propel such angry people into violent acts against others.

We have already observed that violence is oftentimes caused by poverty, as a reaction to growing social isolation between the "haves" and the "have-nots". But obviously, the real solution to violence is not to be found in social justice alone. Violence has also a cultural element in it. Hence, efforts must be made to create, or recreate, a culture of peace among people. Both non-violence and peace are cultural entities. Therefore, they must be built, or taught and learnt. Peace requires the ministry of the Word of God because peace is primarily a gift from God. If the Church has the vocation to be the sign and sacrament of peace, she must be involved in educating people on how to achieve peace. And this is indeed what was done by Pope Benedict XVI in his message on the occasion of the World Day of Peace in January 2007. Among other things, Pope Benedict said: "If it is true that peace between individuals and peoples – the ability to live together and to build relationships of justice and solidarity – calls for unflinching commitment on our part, it is also true, and indeed more so, that peace is a gift from God. Peace is an aspect of God's activity, made manifest both in the creation of an orderly and harmonious universe and also in the redemption of humanity that needs to be rescued from the disorder of sin." We are thus called upon to understand that peace is a task which requires individuals who live together to build relationships of justice and solidarity.

In April 2008, the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, expressed profound optimism about the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and notably Goal 1, which relates to fighting against poverty. With regard to Africa, he stated that "primary school enrolment has increased significantly

in a number of African countries, while in others, immense progress has been recorded in the fight against malaria; while economic growth is averaging 5 % across Africa alone." But as the UN Secretary General was selling the positives of the fight against poverty and the achievements of MDGs, the effects of the unprecedented world food crisis were already starting to hit developing nations, especially African countries, where the prices of almost all food crops increased significantly and chronic food shortage was recorded. Unable to make ends meet, populations in some of these countries started rioting against the soaring food prices and food scarcity. Consequently, some governments started panicking as the food situation threatened the political and economic stability of their jurisdictions.



Yet all efforts seemed to yield very little results. It is now estimated that over 100 million people have fallen into poverty over the last two years, as a worldwide food crisis washes out the progress which had been made in the fight against global poverty. It is also estimated that some 800 million people are suffering from hunger, the vast majority of them in developing countries; and further that over 24,000 people die each day from the effects of hunger (cf. David Akana, *World Food Crisis Threatens War on Poverty in Africa* [<http://www.panafricanvisions.com/old/11/development.htm>]).

Unfortunately, going by the experience of previous crises, some African leaders have always waited for externally conceived and driven solutions. But in fact, such external solutions are often un-adaptable to realities on the ground and more often impractical. Considering that Africa possesses immense natural resources, it is obvious that with the required political will and an environment of hard working populations, food production in Africa should be sufficient and enough to feed her people. Perhaps a gentle push from the Church is needed, and if given, it certainly would be immensely helpful.



The Church in Africa

For the Church in Africa, the connection existing between her evangelizing mission and human promotion should be an inseparable bond between her vocation and her mission, because the salvation in Jesus Christ which she proclaims, concerns man in his entirety. As was stated at the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar in Kinshasa in 1984, "to evangelize is to develop man in all the dimensions of his vocation as a child of God". This bond is made concrete in relation to human promotion, such as education, health, aid to the needy, development projects, defense of human rights and good governance.



It is Pope John Paul II who said that "the greatest challenge to achieving peace and justice in Africa consist in the good administration of public affairs, in the two interrelated areas of politics and the economy" (*Ecclesia in Africa*). He continued: "The suffering of the African peoples is, to a great extent, linked to bad administration in these two areas. This is a major challenge to evangelization in Africa."

There is no doubt at all that bad governance is the source of injustice and conflicts. It is adequately highlighted in the social teachings of the Catholic Church, and was given appropriate emphasis in the encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI which is titled: "On the development of Peoples"; that the peoples' major aspirations are for freedom from misery; greater assurance of obtaining sustenance, health services, education, an increased share of responsibility through meaningful participation in the decision-making process; and security from situations which violate their personal dignity. There are just too many examples of undesirable consequences arising out of bad governance. The sources of poverty, human suffering, instability, civil war, and unresolved conflicts, can easily be traced back to bad governance.

In my considered opinion, the Church has a clear obligation to actively address this fundamental issue of bad governance wherever it occurs, because it is directly

harmful to the existence of peace and justice among the people of God. This issue is obviously closely associated with the healing role of the Church, more specifically, healing in its relation to politics, the economy and culture.

We learn from the Bible (ref. Luke 9:6; Mark 16:15-20) that Christ heals and sends us to heal others, not to transmit spiritual goods only, but to save the body along with the soul. This means that the tasks of healing are not limited to the religious sphere alone; they also include and presuppose the political, economic and cultural spheres. The Church should therefore bring a kind of "healing" also in the political environment. In the footsteps of Jesus as a healer, the Church must commit herself to healing Africa from all the evils which are suffocating the continent, including, in particular, the evils of bad governance. Like John the Baptist, the Church must speak the truth to those in power. Because the Church as messenger will not be blamed for the bad news and should certainly not be cowed by Nagasona's argument in this second century story:

The King said: Venerable Nagasona, will you converse with me?

Nagasona replied: If your Majesty will speak to me as wise men converse, I will. But if your Majesty speaks with me as Kings converse, I will not.

The King asked: How then do the wise men converse, venerable Nagasona?

Nagasona replied: The wise men do not get angry when they are driven into a corner. But Kings do!

Despite all these challenges which Africa faces in the building and maintenance of peace and justice, the Word of God can still unite us in peace and solidarity, and in respect for the rule of law and the dignity of the human being, who is created in the image of God. The scourge of violence and death which is raging in several places on our continent is caused primarily by the absence of the requisite values, and the systems to protect them. It is absolutely essential for us Christians in Africa to constantly strengthen the foundation of our faith, our Christian values, and above all, our relationship to God. The Africa that we want is that which is conscious of its unity in diversity, and of the richness contained in its vast natural resources.

The Africa that we want and pray for is that whose leaders will be guided by a vision and a mission of creating strong, peaceful, and truly democratic modern states, capable of attaining the high levels of social and economic development which the developed countries of the world have achieved. Since Christ made the Church "the salt of the earth and the light of the world", the contribution of the Church in building and maintaining such



modern African states is of vital importance. She must preach to the leaders of Africa to become the instruments of transformation of their societies. The Church can contribute greatly to the achievement of reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa by promoting integrated human development and interreligious efforts for justice and peace.

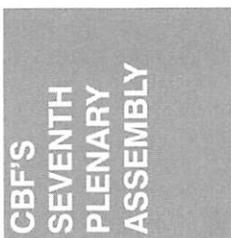
Small Christian Communities: Real instruments of reconciliation, justice and peace

Before concluding my statement, I wish to make a request to your conference, which is that this conference should please accord special recognition to the superb work and commitment of the laity in the Church here in Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa. Members of

the laity are playing a very crucial and significant role and are providing a major source of hope for the local Church. The meaning and importance of the laity's presence is to be found not only in their increasing responsibility and participation in the Church's activities, but also in their growing awareness of the nature of the Church's mission.

I wish therefore to recommend that advantage should now be taken by the Church to transform these reliable Christian lay communities into real instruments of reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa and the whole World.

I thank you sincerely for listening to my statement. May God bless all the deliberations of this conference. ■

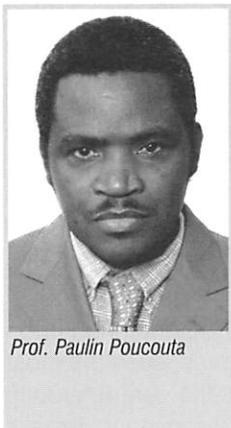


Entering into the Word of God to Find Peace¹

Paulin Poucouta

Introduction

The first Assembly of Bishops for Africa, commonly referred to as the African Synod, had chosen five themes for reflection: evangelization, inculturation, dialogue with other religions, the means of social communication, justice and peace.



Prof. Paulin Poucouta

In view of the endemic outbreaks of violence which are destroying the African continent, but also numerous countries of the world, and plunging them into mourning, the second special Assembly for Africa wishes to return to the last point mentioned (justice and peace) in a more concrete and pragmatic way. The intention is to make a powerful appeal to Christians' sense of responsibility: "The Church in the service of reconciliation, justice and peace, 'You

are the salt of the earth (...) You are the light of the world' (Mt 5:13-14)".

The Bible of the *Lineamenta* of this second assembly is marked by a strong disproportion between the Old and

the New Testaments in favor of the latter. In fact, we have 53 references to the New Testament and 10 to the Old. Number 33 of the document is based, among other things, on the text of Isaiah 55:11, to underscore the importance of the Word of God in the event of reconciliation, of justice and of peace.

Now Is 55 is the last chapter of the second book of Isaiah. Written by an anonymous disciple of the great prophet, it draws strongly on the Deuteronomistic tradition. It develops a theology of the Word of God, as good news, as gospel. It demonstrates its efficacy and the power in the coming to be of a world of genuine communion.

Assuming the redundant style of the prophet himself, our meditation will take its point of departure from the second book of the Isaian tradition, and more particularly of its epilogue, Is 55. In a first step, we will discuss the power of the Word of God in the book. Which will lead us, next, to focus on chapter 55, where Yahweh sends out an invitation to the banquet of His Word. This Word is a source of reconciliation, of justice and of peace. In conclusion, we will propose a number of pointers for group meditation, for a biblical pastoral ministry based on Jesus, who is the Word of reconciliation, of justice and of peace.



I. The power of the Word of God

A potent breath of hope traverses Second Isaiah, referred to as the book of the consolation of Israel, because of its opening words. It is essentially a message of comfort addressed to the Israelite exiles: "Comfort, comfort my people" (Is 40:1ff).

The prophet exercised his ministry toward the end of the Babylonian exile, between 550 and 539 B.C.E. These difficult years see the collapse of Babylon and the rise of the Persian Empire. In this context, he witnesses to the power of the Word of God as a place of gathering and of recreation of the history of the people and of humanity. Chapter 55 is certainly the one that most effectively transmits this Deutero-Isaianic theology of the Word.



Prophet Isaiah, fresco by Michelangelo

1. The Word that gathers

After their enslavement in Egypt, the exile is then the most painful experience of Israel's history. As a people, Israel becomes conscious of the fragility of its condition. Its institutions have vanished. It has lost its chief pillars: the temple, the land, the monarchy. But the Babylonian superpower is itself on the brink of collapse under the assaults of the Persians.

Faced with these successive breakdowns, only the Word of God remains, which, despite appearances, never deceives. It is thanks to this Word that the people will leave Babylon. One can understand the importance of the vocabulary of the word in the prologue of the book: to speak, to say, to proclaim, the voice, to announce the good news. Contrary to what had been the norm till that time, the prophet is intentionally wrapped in mystery in order better to highlight the voice of God, which speaks without explicit intermediary:

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." (Is 40:3-5)

Moreover, the law of the unity of the sanctuary, in force at the time of Josiah, prohibited the offering of any sacrifice outside of the temple, and a fortiori in a foreign land. Far from Jerusalem, the cult will henceforth be centered on the Torah. According to Ez 11:16, meetings take place on Sabbath days and on feast days.

By reason of the importance that is henceforth accorded to the Word, a school comes into being around some exiled priests and prophets. It is certainly this school that will begin the editing of the Pentateuch, assembling different existing documents in an autonomous way. Some of these are subject to the influence of the Deuteronomic school, others to that of the priestly milieu. Even the documentary theory has been questioned today, the priestly and Deuteronomic schools have not been seriously challenged.

However they were organized, the activities that took place around the Word of God are the places of renewal. Like the Exodus, the Exile is a time of purification and of reconciliation with God and among the members of the people. Priests, prophets and notables share the same socio-economic and religious conditions. They remind themselves then of the covenant which makes of them all one and the same people, called to live in communion, justice and peace.

This deprivation with respect to cult and temple, to political power and to its institutions, and even to the land, is to lead to a process of re-learning and re-structuring upon the rock of the Word of God. All structures, even the most venerable, are ephemeral. Scripture is the sure reference of faith, the principle focal point for discovering Israel's future. This Word is event.

2. The Word as event

The Deuteronomic school is marked by the ideas of covenant and election. These two terms qualify the



relations that unite Yahweh with His people: He chose Israel. This was a gratuitous election, an election of love. God is above all the God of Israel. Hence the recurrence of the expression characteristic of Deuteronomy: "Yahweh your God, or your God" (Dt 1:6; 4:2).

It is because of this choice that God saves His people from the slavery of Egypt, through the mediation of Moses, liberator, legislator and prophet. But this gratuitous gift of the liberating love of God calls forth a human response, a response that translates into observance of Torah, the source of life.

However, the Torah is not a mere series of juridical or moral precepts. It becomes interiorized in human hearts. Deutero-Isaiah picks up in his own way this Deuteronomistic theology of covenant, of the salvation of the Word, as W. Brueggemann well notes.²

The Word of God is ethical through and through. It is an event that creates a new, universal history. God creates as much in history as He does in the cosmos. He accomplishes what He intends. But, here in Second Isaiah, it is in history that this creation and this inventiveness are revealed. The Word of God is not so much a message as an event, perceptible in the mystery of the salvation of Israel:

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord, will answer them, I the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive; I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together; that men may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it. (Is 41:17-20)

The Word of God is always accomplished. Just as it demonstrated its efficacy at the time of the first exodus with Moses, so it assumes concrete form today with the prophets. It never returns to its point of departure. To meditate on it is to meditate on God Himself, on His salvation, His effective power. The Word holds good, is fulfilled, is accomplished and always succeeds.

This success of the Word is paradoxical, unsettling. Independently of the prophet, the Word becomes reality in a concrete, but unexpected way. At the time of the first Exodus, it is effected through the mediation of Moses, a fugitive who was hardly able to speak. Today, Yahweh makes use of a pagan king, Cyrus. He succeeds not by harsh suppression, but through the mildness of peace, tolerance and respect.

3. Isaiah 55: Epilogue and summary of Deutero-Isaiah

According to P.E. Bonnard, the book of Second-Isaiah would comprise two parts: the announcement of the reversal of history through the mediation of Cyrus (Is 40-48) and the restoration of Zion/Jerusalem (Is 49-55). These two parts corresponded to two phases of the prophet's ministry: in a first time, he addresses the entire group of deportees; in the second place, his target is a circle of the faithful who are identified as the suffering servant.³ More precisely, some commentators propose that besides the introduction (Is 40:1-11) and the conclusion (Is 55:12-13), the book comprises a focus first on the exile in Babylon (Is 40:12-48:22) and then on the restoration that is about to take place (Is 49:1-55:11).

But with some critics, like C. Stuhlmueller⁴, it is possible to view the entire chapter 55 as the book's epilogue, matching its prologue in Is 40:1-11. In fact, Is 55 forms a veritable inclusion with chapter 40. It picks up its keywords and themes.

Our passage is also a kind of summary of the whole book. It contains, in fact, the four major themes of the Deuteronomistic and the Deutero-Isaiahic interpretation of history: the promise to David, the appeal to return to Yahweh, the Word of God, the blessing and the curse. The message of consolation climaxes in an appeal to renew the covenant. The new deal which opens with the return from exile will be a covenant affair, like that which followed the Exodus. Moreover, the word "way" used five times in Is 55:7-9 appeared already in Is 40:3, 14, 27; 42:16-24; 43:16, 19; 45:13; 48:15, 17; 49:9, 11; 51:10; 53:6. Finally, everything revolves around faith in the stability and efficacy of the Word of God.

The epilogue then resumes the principal motifs related to this Word. The distance between the thoughts of God and those of men mentioned already at the beginning (Is 40:15-17) and expressed in the judgment brought upon the Servant (Is 53:4-5) would mean nothing if God were not close to us. It is by His Word that He encounters those who seek Him. The fecundity of this Word announced in Is 45:23 is re-affirmed in the epilogue (Is 55:11a). The mission of the Divine Word includes that of Cyrus as well as that of the Servant, as is suggested by the verbal links between Is 55:11b on the one hand and Is 48:14-16 and Is 53:10 on the other.

Moreover, the entire collection of the oracles of Deutero-Isaiah is framed by this twofold statement on the Word of God. At the beginning, we have:

A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people is grass. The grass withers, the

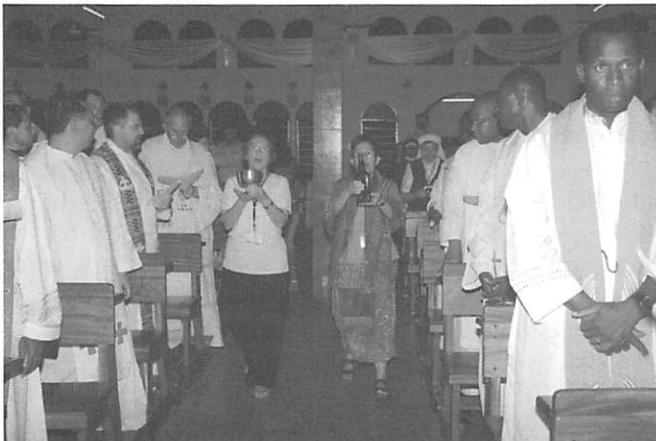


flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever. (Is 40:6-8)

At the end, we have:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it. (Is 55:10-11)

Moreover, a number of critics, such as W. Brueggemann, have noted the very strong resemblances between Is 55 and 1 K 8. This latter passage, in a typically Deuteronomistic context, describes the transferal by Salomon of the Ark of the Covenant to the temple. It offers themes analogous to those found in Is 55. Thus, in both cases, the author gives a prominent place to David (1 K 8:24ff; Is 55:3b-5), to conversion (1 K 8:33ff; Is 55:6), to reconciliation, to tenderness and to witness (1 K 8:50; Is 55:7). Both passages show that the curse can be changed into blessing (1 K 8:33-51; Is 55:13). But above all, both texts put great emphasis on the Word of God.



So, 1 K 8 certainly inspired the dynamic of our text: Is 55. Indeed, after addressing Himself to Jerusalem in the preceding chapter (Is 54), Yahweh, borrowing the tone of the Deuteronomistic style, offers His people the solid nourishment of His teaching which gives life to the full (Is 55:1-3a). He promises to give the faithful an aura and influence like that of David (Is 55:3b-5). He insistently demands of them that they be converted, trusting in His forgiveness. His views are very different from theirs and His Word never deceives. Finally, He renews the promise of a unique and eternal liberation. This dynamic movement of the chapter can be summarized in the form of a structure, which I take largely from W. Brueggemann and P.E. Bonnard:

55: 1-3a: the banquet of the Word of God
55: 3b-5: Israel restored
55: 6-7: call to conversion

55: 8-9: the transcendence of God
55: 10-11: the efficacy of the Word of God
55:12-13: joy of a new exodus

II. The Word of the living God

In His encounter with the exiles, "God invites His own to nourish themselves on His Word"¹⁵. At this banquet, the believers open themselves to reconciliation in the tenderness of the living and life-giving God.

1. The banquet of the Word of God

The text of Is 55 begins with a passionate appeal. It continues with an exhortation in the style of wisdom and punctuated with a long series of imperatives, the exhortative mode: come, ask, listen then, hear me, eat, incline your ear. This initial interpellation could be rendered thus: ah, all you who are thirsty, come, listen. Then, from water, the text moves to food: wine, milk, bread.

The thirsty most certainly represent the exiles, who yearn for freedom and are impatient to leave for home. The water is that of the life which God gives gratuitously and in abundance. The wine, the honey and the bread evoke the end of the famine and the rationing of food. As at the time of the entry into the Promised Land, the return to the fold, this second exodus, will be marked by super-abundance, in the country where milk, wine and honey flow.

But here these nutrients all represent the Word of God. Indeed, the water, which recalls that of the wells of Beersheba, linked to the memory of Moses, symbolizes the Torah as word of life. The wine on the other hand represents the teaching of God. Similarly, bread, which is indispensable to life, evokes the manna of the desert. Since the time of Amos and Deuteronomy it has symbolized the Word of God, indispensable to life with him, because men and women do not live by bread alone:

All the commandments which I command you this day you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to give to your fathers. And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord. (Dt 8:1-3)

Human nourishment is purchased and it is also perishable. The food that God gives is free and non-perishable.



It consists in hearing the Word of God. This emphatic appeal to listening occurs not only in the sapiential writings, but also in those of the prophets. Nevertheless, the text that best summarizes this idea is that of the *Shma Israel*:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.
(Dt 6:4-9)

This profession of faith scans the daily life of the believer who abandons himself to the one God. He meditates on the Word night and day and lives on it. The hearing is not in the first place obedience to precepts, but ongoing openness to Yahweh. Hearing is not merely a matter of being attentive, but also of understanding, assimilating, adhering, practicing what God teaches. It is a question of guarding, conserving, watching over. In both cases, the attention bears on the Word of God, the dialogue between Yahweh and Israel.

The Israelites are very familiar with sacred banquets, which are abundantly practiced by the neighboring peoples. But here, these feasts are desacralized. They extend to daily life. The only requirement for participating in them is a thirst for God, the earnest desire to live with Him, as the book has already noted explicitly in many places (cf. Is 41:17; 51:21). The author insists on the religious and social attitude that presides at the feast.

Moreover, the Bible very often evokes the banquet as a sign of God's concern in His dealings with His people. So, for instance, the Passover meal marks the liberation of the people while that of Sinai seals the covenant between God and man. The new world, which God is about to establish, is described under the form of a messianic banquet.

But here this banquet to which He invites us is that of His word. If we accept to take our seat at His table, then we will be served live-giving dishes of the Word of God. As in the Deuteronomistic perspective, this Word gives life and opens unexpected horizons:

*Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters;
and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which*

does not satisfy? Harken diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fatness. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear that your soul may live. (Is 55:1-3a)

2. The Word that reconciles

Verses 3b-5, which follow, are punctuated by a series of verbs in the future: I will make, I will maintain, you will call on Him, He will run. This is the prophetic style, which does not predict the future, but rather opens it up by rooting it in the present.

After having evoked the covenant with Noah and Abraham, the prophet recalls the promises made to David. To a people who are complaining about the apparent invalidation of the promises made with regard to the patriarch, God confirms that He remains faithful to the promises made to all the ancestors, from Noah to David, and including Abraham. To the disheartened exiles the prophet recalls the lasting character of the works of David.

However, this appeal, unique in Deutero-Isaiah, does not envision the restoration of the monarchy. Henceforward God's engagement is with the people as a whole. It is the people who are His servant, His favorite, His chosen one. The prophet transfers to Israel the privileges of David and the messianic hope. There is no longer the expectation of a Davidic king, such as was articulated in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. From now on it is toward Israel that the eyes of the nations are to turn. They discover in their rehabilitation and liberation the true God and Savior. He is no longer tied to a dynasty or a tribe, not even that of David. He can even make use of a pagan like Cyrus to accomplish His work of salvation. Neither is he any longer a prisoner of time. The prophet evokes here a new and eternal covenant, which will no longer be subject to the hazards of history.

Thus the exile is in no way a denial of the efficacy of God's Word. However, the prophetic word (*davar*) has nothing in common with magical power. It rends the historical universe. It becomes the place of dialogue between God and man. This cooperation passes through conversion.

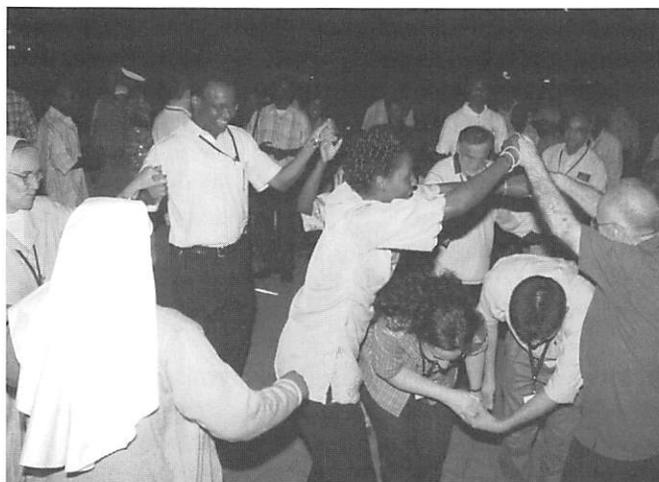
This theme is developed in verses 6-7 in an exhortative style with imperatives and subjunctives: seek, call on Him, abandon, may he return. The efficacy of the Word of God is absolute, but it is not magical. It passes through the quest of God and conversion: one must seek the Lord, that is to say turn to Him, encounter Him, in prayer and conversion of life. God is near, in the sense that He will soon liberate His people. But He is always near and allows Himself to be found by all:

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his



way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (Is 55:6-7)

To draw near to God means by this very fact to distance oneself from all that is not of Him, to withdraw from evil. One who frequents Yahweh must abandon the evil way. The time of the nearness of God is that of repentance and the renouncing of ways that are too easy, thoughts that are too short.



For the prophets, the principal cause of the exile was alienation from God. The end of captivity must be expressed by the return to the Lord. Here, henceforth, all must turn to Him. He reveals His more than maternal tenderness. Some had taken the line of becoming definitively established in a foreign land, saying to themselves that the sin of Israel was too great to obtain the Lord's forgiveness, such that it would be possible to begin a new affair with Him, on their own land.

But no, Yahweh replies. His heart shudders with tenderness, according to Jewish anthropology. He surpasses Himself in the act of forgiveness. Now, the history between God and His people is described as a story of love, punctuated by the infidelities of Israel and then reconciliation. The tenderness and pardon of God are so powerful as to allow Israel to bind its wounds, its ruptures, its infidelities and its injustices, in order to start again on new foundations. Reconciliation with God likewise transforms their relations with other people, and even with the environment. On condition that they are converted and accept this dynamic of the love of God.

So, reconciliation is the re-establishment of the community of life between God and His people.⁶ The latter by its resistance had broken off this community. It is the work of the divine mercy. Man participates in it through gestures of reparation, signs of conversion. These gestures can be rites. But for the prophet, reconciliation must pass through justice, peace, and respect for all. Contempt for

the poor and the weak is a violation of the covenant stipulations. Without justice, one cannot celebrate reconciliation in truth.

Moreover, the reconciliation is not a mere legal fiction, but an interior renewal. It goes beyond conciliation. It is more than a ritual, even a sacramental ritual. It is not possible without a real conversion of heart and mind. True reconciliation requires commitment to construct together another world – one that is universal, pluralistic, rooted in justice, liberty, peace and the respect of rights. It presupposes a journey of faith and of hope that makes life spring up anew.

In sum, the re-creative Power of God is rooted in the power of His tenderness and His forgiveness, the source of reconciliation, justice and true peace:

But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? See I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me. (Is 49:14-16)

3. The Word of the God of all human beings

This tenderness is that of a one and only God, who is the God of all humankind. Very emphatically, the prophet denounces idols, faithful as he is to the Deuteronomistic tradition with its insistence on the unicity of God. His thoughts are very different from ours. Through the pair of polarities heaven and earth, the author illustrates the distance between our plans and projects and those of God. With man, the horizon is limited to the level of earth. With God, the horizon has heaven for its measure. God is transcendent and holy, man is fragile and a sinner:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Is 55:8-9)

The book of Genesis already alludes to the Polytheistic tendencies of the patriarchs. Thus Abraham had his own god, the god of his clan, just as all the tribes and all the clans had theirs. But gradually, he opens himself to the one God. In the land of Canaan, Israel is strongly tempted by the Canaanite divinities, particularly Baal and Astarte, who are charged with insuring the fecundity of the soil as well as that of women.

In Babylon, similarly, the exiles are surrounded with pagan divinities. Some were perhaps tempted to ascribe to them the military power of the Babylonians. But their defeat at the approach of Cyrus should have removed any doubt. Yahweh is not to be compared with the pagan divinities. He is a jealous God who admits no competition



I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses, says the Lord. I am God, and also henceforth I am He; there is none who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can hinder it? (Is 43:11-13)

This God is not only the one God for Israel. He has the property of unicity for all of humanity. As Creator of everything that exists, He is the master of time and of history. He intervenes in the history of human beings, who owe Him all of their respect.

God is the future of every human person, of history, of humanity and of creation. So, when man wishes to build himself up and to organize the world without God, when he wants to run his own conduct by deciding himself regarding what is good and what is bad, he breaks his relations with the Creator, with his brothers and sisters and with the whole of creation. To be sure, God has placed a great destiny in man's hands. But he can fulfill this destiny only by remaining in communion with God, who alone is the key of human history. He alone can insure the triumph of peace, of justice and of reconciliation.



For the prophet, idolatry makes the bed of injustice and of violence. If one renders worship to the creature, one also tends to idolize power, force, greed, race, the tribe, the political party and even religion. God then takes second place unless we create a god to our own image, who backs our fears and our divisions. In fact, when man wants to take the place of God, then a veritable cannibalism dominates the relations between persons, between institutions, between Churches, between countries. If God is not the only object of worship, one loses one's bearings, and this opens the way to division. Pride is the greatest of the idols. Driven by pride, people go on to kill, steal, destroy.

To be sure, the prophet is not a political scientist. Nevertheless, in the situation of his time, he offers the

mad challenge of faith and of complete trust in Yahweh for the service of peace. This is why he denounces every idolatry of power, every will to power, every political organization that does not take into account the plan of God, the Master of history. For him, a way of fidelity and of faith in the covenant impinges upon political options and international relations, in search of peace. Human communities who renounce their idols, that is to say their egoistical projects to espouse those of God necessarily find another type of relationships founded not on violence, but on brotherhood, dialogue, reconciliation. After all, Yahweh wants all men to be reconciled in Him, the only God.

III. The Word of God, Source of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace

The Word of the God of life is a creative force. It is good news, which the evangelizers of peace proclaim.

1. A Creative Word

A striking proof of the life-giving fecundity of the Word is its creativity. To express this, the prophet utilizes, on the one hand, the image of rain and snow, and, on the other, that of the messenger:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it. (Is 55:10-11)

The rain and the snow are gifts of God. They are not made to stay suspended between heaven and earth. According to ancient cosmogony, God holds water and snow in reserve in the heavens. He opens heaven's floodgates to allow the rain and snow to fall and nourish the soil. Then, they return to God, from whence they came and from whence they will return to earth again. It is always the case that God has full and total mastery of the whole process. He sends the elements to earth. When they fall, they necessarily produce effects: they water the earth and make it produce fruits. This fecundity is seen through the plants and the trees, which grow up and supply human beings with food and seed for planting.

In the historical context of the passage, the prophet is thinking of the liberation of Israel, fruit of the Word of the Lord. The effects of this Word are unailing, and it opens completely new paths.

In verse 11, the Word of God is compared to a messenger, a trusted confidant of the king. He obeys him faith-



fully. He does not return to him until he has fully and perfectly fulfilled his mission. If the words of human beings often produce nothing but emptiness and wind, that of God always achieves its goal. It never falls behind. It always bring about that which is pleasing to the Lord.

Accordingly, the Word of God is not merely an intelligible message addressed to men. It is a dynamic reality, a *davar*. It always produces what it proclaims: the events of history, cosmic realities, terms of salvation. History and creation obey this Word. It was by a word that he brought them into being out of nothing. Such reliable efficacy in the events of creation concerns salvation, in its present and eschatological dimensions. God is He who by His Word saved His people from Egypt; He saves them again today, and will continue to save them.



The prophet employs the same terms as the book of Genesis to express the new deal that is now open to the people. The God of the Bible creates from nothing, through His Word. As absolute master, He effects an original work. So, for Is 55, the Word of God is not one element among others. It dominates the entire economy of salvation history.⁷ It is a message that guides the life of the believer. It is creative of new life for the believer and the people. It is clear why this importance of God's Word is should He be rendered through a personification of the Word:

*The Word of God is creative. This creative function is inherent in the prophetic word (...). Through the prophetic word, God continues to create: either by summoning people to obedience, in the *davar-command*, or by modifying the world in the *davar-creation*. The *davar* is the intervention of God in the moral and physical evolution of the world. It is remarkable that the word *davar* is one of the primitive terms, in the language of the Bible, to signify history.⁸*

2. The Good News of peace

Is 55 and the whole of the book of consolation ends with the solemn reference to a new exodus, more spectacu-

lar than the first. The liberation of the exiles will have consequences not only for the world of human beings but for the entire cosmos:

For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign which shall not be cut off. (Is 55:12-13)

The whole world breaks out in songs of joy over the return of the exiles. Everything is completely transformed. Creation itself participates in the jubilation. The people are back again in a kind of earthly paradise, amidst paradisiacal trees. All can then recognize Yahweh and experience for themselves the power of His Word.

Blessing replaces curse. Brambles and thorns give way to cypress trees, which remain green, just like God Himself and the people will henceforth remain. The abundance of myrtle evokes Eden. These two trees evoke the transformation of the desert, sign of the rebirth of the people and of the entire universe.

The new land which the ancient exiles will find is watered by the Word of God. This Word is more nourishing than normal food. It accomplished everything that it promises. It is creative of peace, *shalom*.

This term, which Oriental peoples use as a normal greeting, designates the integrity of the person and of the community. Peace is, in fact, the sum of all the benefits granted by Yahweh. Far from being merely the absence of war, it is a state of plenitude, a harmony toward which everything is ordered: relations with God, with the community, with oneself, with the cosmos. It is not something given once for all. It is a delicate balance, which must be continually consolidated and confirmed. It is to be acquired or defended.

Those who accept to liberate themselves through the Word will find peace in a world marked by the harmony of the primeval days, a cosmotheandric harmony, that is to say, between God and men, between men among themselves, between human beings and the rest of creation. They will then be witnesses of the saving power of God, who alone is capable of reconciling people in a profound way, of giving them justice and peace.

The Word of God is then *besorah*. This Hebrew term designated in the Old Testament the recompense that one receives for the announcing of good news. But more often, it designates the good news itself, related to the private life or to the life of the nation: the death of an enemy, victory, the salvation of Judah. With Deutero-Isaiah the Word takes on a properly religious sense. The



good news is that of a new life for the people, of the coming of the reign of God. Beyond the return from exile, it is the announcement of victory and of the definitive reign of God. This gospel is not only message; it is divine power in action, creative of peace.⁹

Henceforward, this peace extends beyond the limits of personal or national wellbeing. The peace of God cannot limit itself to a few regions of the world. It is universal. It concerns all nations and all individuals: bruised hearts are healed, peoples are reconciled. The peace of God likewise transcends the limits of time: it extends to eschatological times. Does this not amount to an escape into the future? In a realistic way, the prophet tells us that peace is a project to engage in, something that evolves, a continuous conquest. It is before us, an adventure with God who is its source. It is the product of imagination.

The prophet speaks of a full peace, quite different from the imperfect peace of human beings too sullied by the earthly limitations of the human, by its frailties and petty concerns. It will manifest itself through the reconciliation that takes place between man and God, between man and his like, between man and the rest of creation.

But true peace and reconciliation can be built only on right and justice. These latter are a transformative power for maintaining or restoring peace. Peace is inseparable from the exigencies of justice, of truth and of the love that accompanies it. Injustice is a violence that destroys the plan of God for the world.

In sum, Deutero-Isaiah offers a peace that springs up in the compost of the Word of God, and which is good news. It is not an assortment of regulations or laws, but an imaginative creativity. It does not reside in the rehabilitated house of David but in that of the heart. It is there that peace is constructed in a durable manner: "There is no peace," says the Lord, "for the wicked" (Is 48:22).

3. The Evangelizers of peace and of reconciliation

It is of this peace and of reconciliation in progress, under construction, that the prophet is the messenger. He is no longer a seer, but a witness of the Word in action and on the march, today and forever.¹⁰ As the Hebrew and Greek etymologies suggest, he is an announcer of good news, an evangelist.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings (euaggelizomenou), who publishes peace, who brings good tidings (euaggelizomenos) of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns" (Is 52:7).

The "evangelist" of peace is in essence a servant. The experience of the exile had certainly been a modesty cure for Judah and the prophet, who henceforth con-

ceives their mission as one of service. We can see this throughout the four servant songs, which have made famous the second book of Isaiah.



Chosen and sustained by God, the servant has received the mission to promote justice. His action is accomplished in the strength and assurance of modesty and mildness. The model for such action is the pagan Cyrus who does not take advantage of his victories to suppress. On the contrary, he gives freedom to the oppressed. He respects minorities, cultural diversity, both national and religious (Is 42:1-7). Instead of dividing and scattering, the servant of peace gathers, not only Israel but also all the tribes and all nations, without any distinction (Is 49:1-9). This mission is not easy. The servant must face many difficulties. He forgets himself in order to accomplish his ministry, trusting that nothing can stop the Word of God in progress (Is 50:4-11).

Finally, the struggle for peace is epitomized in the figure of the suffering servant (Is 52:13-53:12). Tormented, despised, in the end he is put to death unjustly. He offers his life for the sin of others. But he does not revolt nor does he accept his fate with passive resignation. He lives his suffering in solidarity with the "multitudes". The Word is so vibrant that even suffering and death do not suppress its life-giving effects. While others wish to construct peace at little expense, it is by the gift of his life that the suffering servant achieves the conquest of peace. Cowardice is not permitted. It is the negation of truth and justice. The true builders of peace must often go against the current with respect to their milieu, to the convictions of their peoples or even of their own.

Conclusion: Jesus, Word of Reconciliation, of Justice and of Peace

The Deutero-Isaian theme of the life-giving and creative efficacy of the Word of God will be taken up again in the sapiential tradition. Here, too, the Word reveals, but above all it is an active force, executor of divine



commands. Isaiah 55 announces Jesus, the Word of God, who challenges to a biblical pastoral ministry of reconciliation, justice and peace.

1. Jesus, the Good News of the Father

In the New Testament, it is certainly the Fourth Gospel which has most developed the Deutero-Isaian theme of the transcendence of the Word and that of its efficacy (Jn 1:1-18). Jesus, the *logos* made flesh is son of God. He participates in the creative activity of the Father. In him, God creates the new history and humanity, in collaboration with those who adhere to Him. He makes Himself nourishment through His Word as much as through his body and blood (Jn 6).



Is it possible not to see in this passage of Deutero-Isaiah a foreshadowing of Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, the suffering servant par excellence, the Prince of Peace through His life, death and resurrection? Does the text not foretell all those evangelists of peace whom Jesus, in the Matthean beatitudes, declares sons of God (Mt 5:9)? Does it not speak of all those evangelists who will invest their whole lives as artisans of peace (in the etymological sense of the Greek verb *poieo*), in total availability to God, in gentleness, uprightness, justice and solidarity with all?

The Word causes the Kingdom of God to spring up, the Kingdom of reconciliation, of justice and of peace. By announcing the Good News, evangelists participate in its construction. They expound the dynamic of the Gospel and offer it as salvation for the world. They witness to it as source of conversion and of brotherhood, trusting in the transformative power of the Word in the lives of those who receive it:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
(Heb 4:12)

It is in this perspective that the *Lineamenta* posit the two foundations for a true reconciliation, justice and peace: the Word of God and the body of Christ. The document bases its argument, among other texts, on Is 55:11:

This Son through whom God speaks to us is himself the Word made flesh: he is the proof par excellence of the efficacy of the Word of God such as this is attested by the Prophet: "so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it." (Is 55:11) (L'Eglise en Afrique au service de la réconciliation, de la justice et de la paix. Lineamenta 33)

The *Lineamenta* summon to a spirituality and to an ethic of engagement in the world. It is there that Christians exercise their priestly mission of reconciliation, justice and peace. This requires of them a familiarity with the Word, so that it can become effective in their daily lives:

It is urgent that our Christian communities become ever more these places of profound hearing of the Word of God, of a prayerful reading of the Holy Scriptures, as Pope Benedict XVI reminds us: "the reading of Holy Scripture is prayer, should be prayer, should emerge from prayer and lead to prayer." It is in this prayerful and communal prayer as Church that the Christian encounters the Risen Christ who speaks to him and rekindles in him that hope in the fullness of life which he gives to the world. ("L'Eglise en Afrique au service de la réconciliation, de la justice et de la paix." *Lineamenta* 34)

2. For a Biblical Pastoral Ministry of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace

Oriental, like Africans, are people of the Word, even if they do not organize themselves in the same manner. In the East, as in Africa, the Word is not merely the expression of a thought or of a desire. It is concrete, subsistent, active, efficacious.

But Deutero-Isaiah helps us discover it as a personified word. Its activity is covenant dialogue with God. Its efficacy becomes still greater to the extent that it is that of a transcendent God, master of history and of creation. For the Christian, it is Jesus, the Word come to take our paths furrowed with hatred, injustices and wars to open up there paths of reconciliation, of justice and of peace, through the conversion and the collaboration of man.

Such a Word is gospel, good news. It has nothing to do with either magic or esotericism. With the same vigor as Deutero-Isaiah, we must reject any ideological or mythical reading of the Word of God. We must likewise renounce the idols of race, tribe, political party, culture, and even religion. Reconciliation must continuously



Final Statement

Word of God – Source of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace

I. The context of the Seventh Plenary Assembly

[1] "Let's go to Africa" was the common cry heard at the closing of the Sixth Plenary Assembly held in Lebanon. Declaring the Region of Africa and Madagascar as a major priority of the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) for the years 2002 to 2008, we expressed our clear conviction regarding the significance of the African continent for the present and future of the Church. Having celebrated the previous assemblies in Europe (Vienna 1972, Malta 1978), Asia (Bangalore 1984, Hong Kong 1996), Latin America (Bogotá 1990) and the Middle East (Beirut 2002), our journey brought us to the African continent, which is opening itself to the Gospel with an extraordinary generosity of spirit.

[2] We, 230 delegates and observers from the member organizations of the Catholic Biblical Federation which is now present in 133 countries of the world, met in Dar es Salaam where we experienced the warm hospitality of the people of Tanzania and of the local Church. The message Pope Benedict XVI conveyed to us on this occasion gave us the encouragement of the entire Church.

[3] Inspired by the major pastoral preoccupation of the Church in Africa as expressed in the theme chosen for the African Synod in 2009, we decided to focus on the same topic for our Plenary Assembly and chose the theme "Word of God – Source of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace". This theme is a major concern that is of urgent significance not only for the people of Africa but for the whole world at this time in our history. Meeting when the year dedicated to Saint Paul was inaugurated, we also drew inspiration from his affirmation that we are called to be ambassadors of Christ for the mission of reconciliation (cf. 2 Cor 5:19-20).

[4] Three years after the international Biblical Congress which the Catholic Biblical Federation organized jointly with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome in 2005 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the promulgation of *Dei Verbum*, this assembly was held on the eve of the Synod of Bishops on "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church". Having proposed such a synod since the third Plenary Assembly (Bangalore 1984), we hope that our reflections may contribute to this important event in the life of our Church and that the synod be not only informative, but actually have a concrete pastoral impact and lead people to greater participation in the Church's life and mission.

[5] Believing in the power and effectiveness of the Word of God, that fulfills what it was sent to do (cf. Is 55:11), we came together to encounter the Word made flesh, who alone can lead us to reconciliation, justice and peace. We feel enriched by our mutual sharing in an atmosphere of fellowship and our encounters with the people from Tanzania. Listening to the Word and sharing our experiences with it in our daily *lectio divina*, celebrating the Word in the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, reflecting on it with the help of scholarly research and the experiences and insights of the faithful shared in Christian communities from all over the world, we want to give a personal response in our words and our deeds.

II. Looking at our reality

[6] In order to be faithful to our God who hears His people's cry (cf. Ex 3:7), we tried to open our eyes to the reality of our peoples in order to perceive the lights and the shadows of human existence, in order to discern the signs of the time and respond to them.

[7] We shared several positive developments that we can see in our world, like the growing relationship among countries, the increasing awareness of the diversity of cultures, the struggle for human rights and the dignity of all human beings especially the poor and the marginalized, the growing commitment to the care for the integrity of creation and the longing for justice, reconciliation and peace.

[8] But we cannot close our eyes to the shadows that are cast over the lives of many: divisions and conflicts, violence and hatred, the abuse of religion for the promotion of fundamentalistic ideologies and terrorism, the gap between rich and poor that becomes ever wider, the suffering of so many because of outrageous poverty, hunger and diseases like HIV/AIDS, the numerous injustices and abuses of power like the corruption of governments, the uncontrolled trade and circulation of arms and the devastation of the environment. To this we may add other life-diminishing forces like consumerism, hedonism and relativism, the negative influence of the media and the fragmentation of family life. Due to worldwide terrorism the fear of the other is escalating and spreading. We are concerned with the painful situation of the Christians in the Middle East, especially in the Holy Land where many brothers and sisters endure sufferings.

[9] Among the many positive developments in our Church we would like to highlight especially the growing love for the Word of God which makes the Church more evangelizing and missionary. With gratitude we notice a real hunger for the Word of God among the simple people and the youth in many regions, the widespread practice of communal Bible-reading and the diversity of perspectives and approaches in the encounter with the Word. We also would like to mention the renewed appreciation of the Bible in the liturgy, in catechetics and in exegetical and theological studies. In many places the ancient practice of *lectio divina* is being rediscovered. The use of new contextualized methods for the prayerful reading of the Bible builds community.

[10] Nevertheless there are several countries where the Bible is no longer experienced as a source of life and where biblical pastoral animation is difficult and frustrating. Looking at the entire Church we realize that there are still many obstacles which prevent the Word of God from becoming the valued center of the pastoral activity of the Church: illiteracy and poverty, fundamentalism, a clericalist mentality – of priests and bishops but also among the laity – as it is expressed in a lack of interest and concern for promoting Bible-reading, and the still prevailing gap between exegesis and pastoral work which makes easy access to Sacred Scripture difficult. We deplore the paradoxical situation that the faithful's hunger for the Word of God does not always receive an adequate response in the preaching of priests and lay ministers of the Word due to deficiencies in pastoral as well as academic preparation.

III. Judging reality in the light of the Word of God

[11] We followed the example of the first African Christian as described in Acts 8:26-39. Through attentive reading of the Scriptures and dialogue with a human companion who became for him an ambassador of Christ, the Ethiopian became aware of the presence of the Incarnate Word both in Scripture and in his life. Our communal reflection, praying and sharing was inspired by Is 55 and by Mt 5-7.

[12] In our prayerful reading of Is 55:1-13 and our reflections about the text we discovered the image of a compassionate God who invites us to His banquet of love. He takes the initiative of reconciliation between Himself and His people. The creative, dynamic and sanctifying power of His Word is able to restore and transform what is devastated and broken. The renewal of the covenant between God and His people leads to reconciliation among nations and peace.

[13] As in the time of Deutero-Isaiah, God offers us also today the gift of His Word which is the source for reconciliation, justice and peace. He calls us to radical conversion of heart at all levels, to return to Him in obedience, thus making true reconciliation with others possible. Our world which longs for peace and justice can be transformed and recreated by the Word of God which is powerful and effective. It can heal the wounds of injustice and hatred and lead to new life. In a daily encounter with the Word of God we can experience its appealing force which calls us to an active engagement for justice and peace.

[14] We also reflected on the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12), the introduction of the Sermon on the Mount which the Fathers of the Church considered to be a summary of the entire gospel. Guided by the message of the Beatitudes as found in the tradition of our Church, in scholarly research and in the sharing within small communities in various countries, we dis-

covered anew the powerful challenge of the Lord for the transformation of values. The Beatitudes reflect the values embodied in the Kingdom of God which Jesus Christ announced and made present through his life, death and resurrection. They express God's preference for the poor and stand in obvious contrast to our globalized world marked by idolatry of money, power, pleasure and knowledge. Nevertheless the poor, the afflicted and those who hunger for justice are called blessed not because of their existing condition but rather because of the empowering promise of the kingdom. This promise expects from us openness of heart and mind and a generous response. A new world governed by values of justice and peace is possible if we, Christ's disciples, are transformed by the power of his Word and strive together towards the realization of the kingdom.

[15] The work of reconciliation will be possible only if the Church imbibes the fundamental attitudes embodied in the Beatitudes. Those who live the spirit of the Beatitudes are God's agents for reconciliation, justice and peace. They have to be aware that they can not ever escape the cross of Christ (cf. Mt 5:9). The testimony of the new martyrs of our own times, like Bishop Oscar Romero from El Salvador and the trappist monks from Algeria, shows clearly that this challenge is not to be seen in a spiritualistic way. Only a Church which does not opt for the broad and easy way of avoiding conflicts can be salt and light of the world (cf. Mt 7:13-14; 5:13-16).

IV. Our response to the challenges of our reality

[16] We make an appeal for the renewed use of the Bible for the promotion of reconciliation, justice and peace. Confronted by the Word of God, we cannot but condemn the evils that provoke violence and injustice in our world. We commit ourselves and invite others to join in the struggle for a just and peaceful world.

[17] The mandate of the Catholic Biblical Federation is the biblical pastoral ministry, providing the Church with spiritual nourishment through biblical animation so that the Word of God can be the very soul (*anima*) of the pastoral life of the Church. On occasion of the Seventh Plenary Assembly, the members of the CBF renew their commitment to this mandate. Our reflection during these days made clear that biblical spirituality is by no means spiritualistic but embraces human life in all its aspects.

We are looking forward to the coming Synod of Bishops on "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church" and support it through our prayers and the recommendations given to the members of the assembly who will take part in its deliberations. We are willing to serve the Church in the implementation of the decisions and recommendations of the synod as they will be expressed in the Apostolic Exhortation which will promulgated in its aftermath.

[18] Priorities for our work 2008–2014

Taking into account both the challenges that we discovered during this assembly and the needs of the Catholic Biblical Federation and its members, the Plenary Assembly defines the following general priorities for the upcoming six years:

- **The biblical animation of the entire life of the Church**, so that all pastoral ministry be inspired, be animated by the Word of God.
- **The promotion of biblical formation of all agents of evangelization:** the laity, especially catechists, religious, priests and bishops – by providing deeper knowledge of Scripture, joyful conversion to the Word, biblical spirituality with the abilities to develop creative methodologies and skills for biblical pastoral ministry. This must be part of formation programs in theological faculties and formation institutes.
- **The promotion of the praxis of contextualized and creative *lectio divina***, which can facilitate a greater correspondence between faith and life, leading to the transformation of society.
- **The animation of Basic Ecclesial Communities and other small Christian communities** in order that they become truly the subjects of bible reading. This requires the promotion of the leadership of the laity, the deepening of the faith in the family and a special emphasis on specific hermeneutical perspectives (e.g. women, men, children, youth, indigenous and migrant ethnic groups).

- The promotion of biblical animation among children, youth, and university students in order to help them to find through the Word of God the true way to life in plenitude.
- The creative and innovative use of the electronic and digital media for the transmission and dissemination of the biblical message.
- The intensification of our efforts for ecumenical, inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue and dialogue with all people of good will in view of reconciliation, justice and peace.
- The support of the biblical pastoral ministry in Asia with a special focus on China as a priority of the CBF for the years 2008–2014, and this in response to requests coming from Asia.

[19] For the realization of these priorities at the different levels of the Catholic Biblical Federation, the Plenary Assembly makes the following recommendations:

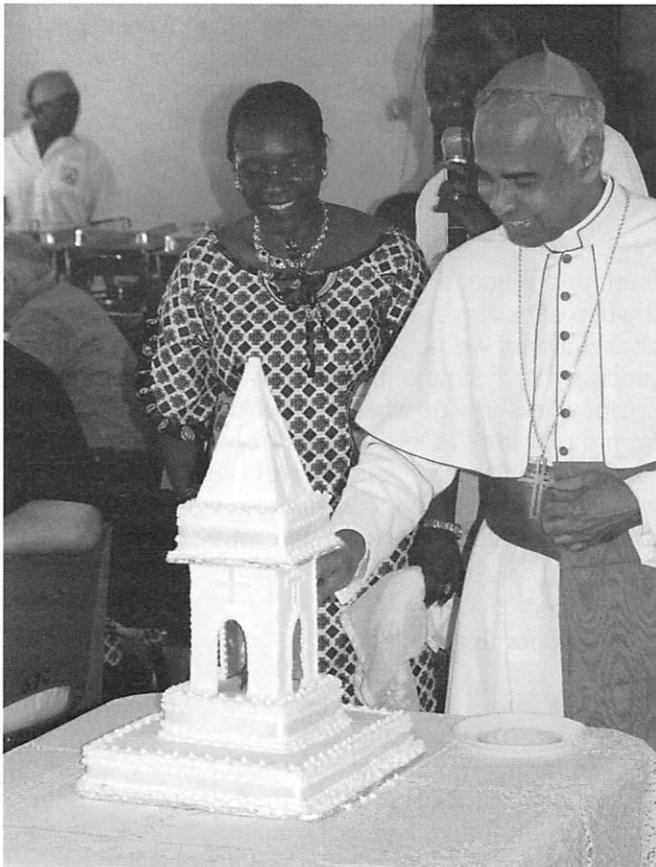
- The devising of plans and methods of biblical pastoral animation in order to ensure the presence of the Word in all pastoral areas and for a better implementation of the evangelizing mission of the church. The members of the CBF should promote the incorporation of the subject "biblical pastoral ministry" in formation programs for priests, religious and laity.
- The setting up of specific commissions for biblical pastoral ministry in dioceses and Episcopal Conferences where this is not yet a priority.
- The promotion of biblical formation, biblical spirituality and ecumenical commitment on a biblical foundation.
- Ensuring a close relationship between the Word of God, pastoral ministry and social commitment.
- Searching for new forms of biblical pastoral ministry especially in those countries and big cities which are strongly marked by postmodern lifestyle, as characterized by consumerism, loss of values and fragmentation of life.
- The organization of days of reconciliation that promote prayer, reflection and commitment and reading of the Bible from a pastoral, social, cultural, ecological and ecumenical perspective and the preparation of all kinds of materials related to the themes of reconciliation, justice and peace.
- The strengthening of structures of coordination on the regional and subregional levels in order to further develop the network of communication, exchange and support, with the help of electronic and digital means of communication.
- The pursuit of the dialogue between the Catholic Biblical Federation and the United Bible Societies (UBS) so that the Word of God might reach many people.

[20] We are aware that "if the Lord does not build the house, then in vain do the builders labor" (Ps 127:1). We commit ourselves to pray and work for the cause of reconciliation, justice and peace. We are aware that we rely on the grace of the Holy Spirit who empowers us to fulfill this urgent task of our time. In the footsteps of the disciples of Emmaus who encountered the risen Lord in the sharing of the Word and the breaking of the bread, we are convinced that the entire Church constantly needs to be nourished with the "bread of life from the table both of God's Word and of Christ's body" (DV 21) and try to contribute to these efforts through our biblical pastoral ministry.



invent itself in the triple relationship to the African tradition, to the biblical tradition and to lived, everyday life. This was the nub of the message of the African Bishop delegates to the synod of Rome in October 1983, on the theme: "Reconciliation and repentance in the mission of the Church":

The African traditions, which demand of all solidarity and sharing, and of those in charge concern for the common good, as well as the various traditional practices of reconciliation are there to inspire us with confidence and to attest to the fact that such an ideal is not beyond our capacities. That is why we pastors of Africa and Madagascar and the Islands invite all the disciples of Christ and men of good will to allow themselves to be reconciled with God and with one another, working together to construct an Africa with "structures more human, more just, more respectful of the rights of the individual" and of peoples. (Documentation Catholique, n. 1864, 1182-1183)



So then, in the light of Deutero-Isaiah and of Jesus, the Word of God heard, expounded, prayed and lived lights up the daily life of every individual and of the nation. It summons to a biblical pastoral ministry which resumes and develops the three stages of seeing-judging-action in five pillars: reflection on the mechanisms of violence and of peace, hearing of the experience of the elderly, hearing of the Word of God, ecclesial re-lecture, proposals for concrete action.

(Translation: L. Maluf) ■

¹ This title draws on the title of a book by B. & A. Thiran-Guibert, *Entrer dans l'Evangile pour sortir de la violence*, preface by J. Vanier, Bruxelles 2008.

² Cf. W. Brueggemann, "Isaiah 55 and the Deuteronomic Theology," in: *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, Berlin 80 (1968), p. 191-203.

³ Cf. P.E. Bonnard, *Le second Isaïe. Son disciple et leurs éditeurs. Isaïe 40-66*. (Etudes bibliques), Paris 1972, p. 21-28.

⁴ C. Stuhlmüller, "Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah," in: R.E. Brown/J.A. Fitzmyer/R.E. Murphy (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Englewood Cliff, N.J., 1990, p. 343.

⁵ This is the title given to this chapter 55 by the 2000 edition of the TOB.

⁶ Cf. X. Léon-Dufour, *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique*, Paris 1970, col. 1075-1076.

⁷ Cf. the article "Parole de Dieu," in X. Léon-Dufour (ed.), *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique*, Paris 2003, col. 908-914.

⁸ A. Neher, *L'essence du prophétisme*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1983, p. 110.

⁹ *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique*, col. 411-412.

¹⁰ Cf. P. Abadie/G. Verkindère, "Le Deuxième Isaïe 40-55", in: M. Quesnel/P. Gruson (eds.), *La Bible et la culture. Ancien Testament*, Paris 2000. p. 337.

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In Search of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace

A Dialogical Reading of the Sermon on the Mount

Ralf Huning

1. Prologue: The parable of the spring

In the middle of the desert a spring of water bubbles up. Some people discovered it a long time ago. Tired from their journey, from the heat of the day and from the burden of their lives, they finally found here the water that could quench their great thirst. They had not even a cup with them, so they used their bare hands to drink down the water in great gulps. Their faces lit up, so delighted were they to have found this refreshing drink. Strengthened, they resumed their journey and sallied forth anew into the desert. As they never found another place like this, they would return here often and they also told their families and friends about the spring.

In time, some of them came to settle here so that they could always be near the water. Over the spring they built a well house, with a flight of stairs going down to the water, and they made themselves pitchers and mugs to make it easier to draw the water. First it was very simple cups, from which they drank, but with time the containers became ever more elegantly adorned. "This water is something very special", they would say to one another, "so it should be drunk out of a high-class container". And now when they would approach the spring, they would bow before it with great reverence, they would draw their water with care and devotion and would treasure every last gulp. In time this all led to the establishment of great ceremonies. Some people thought long and hard about how they could express what the water meant for them. "Only when we can express in words how the water smells and tastes will we be able to fully enjoy it", they said. Many people learned from these thoughtful people to value the water more dearly and to drink it with much more conscious awareness.

But for some even all this was not enough. They wanted to know why it was that the water tasted so good and why it was so effective in quenching their thirst. They took some of the water home and began to subject it to careful research. Some would heat the water till it evaporated in order to determine its exact constitution. When they did so they noted that from the leaky roof of the well house dirt had fallen into the water and polluted it. So they launched a campaign to insure that the well house was repaired and that the approach to the water was kept clean.

But just as in the old days, when poor travelers had discovered this spring, other people, too, tired and exhausted and wanting only to quench their thirst would arrive at the spot. They did not stop to perform any lengthy ceremonies, but simply drank the water

eagerly with their bare hands. Many masters of ceremonies looked with disdain on these people. "The way they drink from our spring is unworthy", they said, "they should be barred from coming here." But not everyone thought this way. "These people are really thirsty for water; for many of us the festivities surrounding the spring are often more important than the water itself", said one who defended the poor people. "Have we not all



Fr. Ralf Huning, svd

long forgotten how it is when the first draft of water runs through a parched throat?" A woman agreed. "What is the use of having this precise knowledge of the water's constitution if we no longer experience thirst? Is it not precisely the simple people who communicate joy again, who show us what a beautiful thing it is to drink from this water? Is this spring not here for everyone?" And they reminded each other of a text someone had written long ago: "Oh, come to the water all you who are thirsty; though you have no money, come!"

2. Hermeneutical reflection

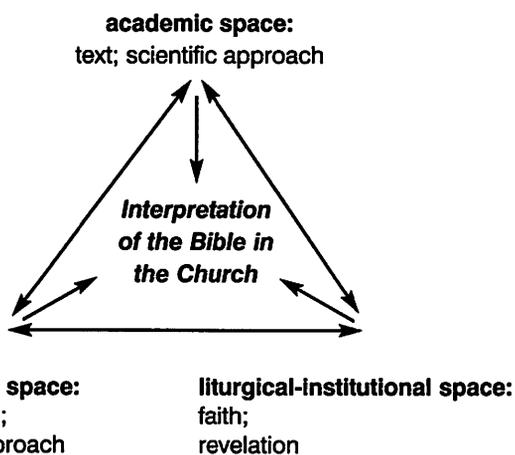
"Word of God – Source of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace". The image of the spring or source, which was chosen for the motto of the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation, can lead us to a reflection on the various approaches to the Bible as a wellspring of God's Word. In the Book of Isaiah we find the comparison made between the Word of God and rain, which "comes down from heaven and does not return thither without watering the earth, making it sprout and blossom" (Is 55:10). Just as with rain the ground can hardly take it all in at once, and so the water collects beneath the earth, so it is with the Word of God. I imagine it as something like a great reservoir of water, which remains hidden beneath the surface of our lives. We can dig deep to reach this water, but in



many places springs of water simply bubble up, the water comes up on its own and invites us to quench our thirst. I see the Bible as a kind of well house that has been built over a particularly productive spring, so that we can take the stairway of Scripture to arrive safely at the living water.

Not everyone draws water in the same way. In the Catholic Church three different approaches to the Word of God may be distinguished. There is the direct approach, as we see it above all in the case of the poor and the suffering, who with great thirst yearn for the Word of God. There is the approach of Church tradition, as it has been increasingly honed through the centuries in liturgy and instruction so as to celebrate the significance of the Word of God, to honor and accept it in the right way. And finally there is the approach of biblical scholarship which ensures that the Word of God suffer no pollution or even poisoning.

These approaches can be assigned to three different hermeneutical spaces. Pablo Richard defines the hermeneutical space as the "institutional *place*, where a specific interpretive *subject* gets its identity, proper to that place and different from any other subject. This space makes a certain *interpretation* of the Bible proper to that place and different from those other interpretations made in other hermeneutical *places*".¹ In the Catholic Church there is the liturgical-institutional space, in which the Faith of the tradition is the key to the interpretation of the Bible, the academic space, in which interpretation is particularly focused on the text itself, its origin and its structures and the community space, in which access to the text is found through the life and faith experiences of interpreters.



In the Catholic Church there is a particularly keen sense of the significance of the liturgical-institutional space and the tradition-principle that is characteristic of this space. The insight of the Second Vatican Council, that tradition is not itself a separate and independent

source, is however important. Its function is to bring visibly to expression the perspective from which the Word of God is experienced and received: the perspective of the Faith. In the liturgy, where the Word of God is given to us at the table of the Word, we are able to experience that the Word of God is something given and not disposable. In the liturgical-institutional space it is also clear that the Word of God is more than mere information about God. In the perspective of faith it is described as light and as effective power, ultimately as God himself, insofar as he is one who enters into dialogue with men and women in order to lead them to salvation. It is like water that does more than merely quench earthly thirst. In the one who drinks it, it will become a bubbling spring, whose water gives the gift of eternal life (cf. Jn 4:13f).

In the liturgical-institutional space the knowledge about this "surplus value" of the Word of God is guarded and transmitted. The ecclesial Magisterium has a special role here; but it fulfills this task, as the Pontifical Biblical Commission emphasizes, "within the *koinonia* of the Body, expressing officially the faith of the Church, as a service to the Church; to this end it consults theologians, exegetes and other experts, whose legitimate liberty it recognizes and with whom it remains united by reciprocal relationship in the common goal of 'preserving the people of God in the truth which sets them free'"².

Here the close connection with the academic space is already clear. The Church required a long learning process to arrive at this insight. It was only in the conciliar constitution *Dei Verbum* that the academic space was definitively acknowledged. In this space attention is given especially to the text that communicates God's Word to us. The first task of the scholar is the text-critical work of reconstructing the normative text and separating it from later accretions and adaptations. A second task is the translation of the text into modern languages. This requires doing justice both to the original text and also to the readers of this text in the various translations. Here the close connection with the two other hermeneutical spaces comes to light. As translator, the biblical scholar must at the same time be an advocate of the text and of the reader of today. Through his work he or she must on the one hand contribute to making the text received and respected in its autonomy and foreignness, but on the other hand, through this same translation work, he must contribute to diminishing this foreignness, to bridging this distance. This double duty can only be fulfilled if he is familiar not only with the text but also with the life-realities of its recipients. For this reason, participation in the life of the interpretation community is an indispensable presupposition for the work of biblical scholarship.³ The Pontifical Biblical Commission emphasizes the fact that this is also important for a correct understanding of the biblical text: "Faith traditions formed the living context for

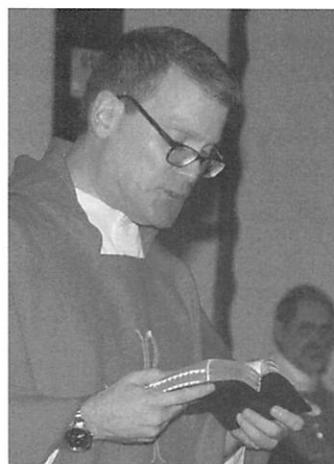


the literary activity of the authors of Sacred Scripture. Their insertion into this context also involved a sharing in both the liturgical and external life of the communities, in their intellectual world, in their culture and in the ups and downs of their shared history. In like manner, the interpretation of Sacred Scripture requires full participation on the part of exegetes in the life and faith of the believing community of their own time"⁴.

The third hermeneutical space has only recently entered the purview of official church teaching. The realization of the Pontifical Biblical Commission that "all the members of the Church have a role in the interpretation of Scripture"⁵, remains an innovation whose implications have not yet been fully digested. In the community space all the faithful are subjects of Bible reading; access to the truth witnessed to in the Holy Scriptures takes place here above all through intuition, experience and the practical wisdom of the active life. Reflection on the significance and the limits of the community space has not yet been completed. The document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* is an important milestone with respect to the appreciation of the interpretive competence of the poor. The document insists that we can "rejoice in seeing the Bible in the hands of people of lowly condition and of the poor; they can bring to its interpretation and to its actualization a light more penetrating, from the spiritual and existential point of view, than that which comes from a learning that relies upon its own resources alone (cf. Mt 11:25)"⁶. This statement calls radically into question the hierarchy between educated and uneducated people that is normally taken for granted, especially in scientifically oriented communities. Since the subjects of the liturgical-institutional and academic spaces understand themselves as part of the "educated" class and since training in the knowledge of the methods that are characteristic of these spaces frequently leads to an alienation with respect to the more intuitive, wisdom-based cognitional methods, a special effort is required to insure that in the Church the community space is not simply ignored. The re-discovery of the community space took place then not in countries where scientific scholarship has become a way of life, but rather among the poor, who, because of a basic lack of specialized training have at their disposal only a kind of wisdom knowledge as a medium of access to the truth and to Holy Scripture.

It is very important that there be more extended reflection on the significance of the Bible interpretation of ordinary believers.⁷ Theologically, it may be derived from Church teaching on the *sensus fidelium* (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 12). The judgment of the Church is revealed not only in statements of the magisterium or of theologians, but also in the faith understanding of the faithful, which can be verbalized in a remarkable way through dialogue with the Bible.

Among the tasks of biblical pastoral ministry in the Catholic Church belongs that of conveying to the liturgical-institutional and academic spaces the faith and life experiences of the faithful, which have been brought to verbal expression through Bible reading, so that these can be reckoned with in those spaces. This is not an easy task, because in the Catholic Church the relationship between the three hermeneutical spaces is quite tension-filled. The history of Bible use in the Catholic Church shows clearly that the subjects of the three hermeneutical spaces are always in danger of isolating themselves from the other hermeneutical spaces and of absolutizing their own approach. If the Word of God could be neatly distinguished from the human word, then it would be possible in fact to ascribe the knowledge and the preaching of God's Word to the liturgical-institutional space, the knowledge of the literal sense of the text to the academic space and the task



of faith-inspired application to the community space. But since in Holy Scripture the divine and the human constitute an inseparable unity, the subjects of the three hermeneutical spaces remain parts of an inter-related system. Their respective understandings can only attain a relevance for the whole Church when they are acquired in dialogue with the subjects of the

other hermeneutical spaces. Thus, the magisterial preaching of the word of God located in the liturgical-institutional space should never be in direct contradiction to the insights won in the scholarly investigation of the Bible. In order for it to be understood and received at all, this preaching must also be in touch with the contemporary experiences of the faithful. In the academic space isolation leads to a loss of relevancy of the results of scholarship. In view of the insight of science theory that science is not practiced in a neutral realm, but is always directed by paradigms and interests, no scholar today can continue to fear that taking the ecclesial presuppositions of the Bible as Holy Scripture as the referential framework for scholarly Bible reading would call into question its scientific character.⁸ Scholarly investigations acquire a higher relevancy for the recipients in the other hermeneutical spaces if they take their lead questions from the faith questions of the Church or from the real life problems of human beings. The ecclesial tradition, but also the practical wisdom of "ordinary believers" can moreover illuminate blind spots in the perception of scientific scholarship and thereby help it to prevent negative influences of the knowledge it has gained (e.g. anti-Judaism, justification



of patriarchalism, racism or the suppression of the poor).⁹ Finally, in the community space, taking into account official Church teaching as well as the results of biblical scholarship can prevent a subjective reception of the Bible. It serves as a preventive against the ideological prejudice of the small community and opens the eye to the foreignness of the text.

It follows that the interpretation of the Bible in the Church should not take place in a single hermeneutical space. "The understanding of Holy Scripture in the Church is too important for it to be the special preserve of certain members or groups, even the bishops or the experts in exegesis"¹⁰, as the late Bishop of Bozen-Brixen, Wilhelm Egger, a trained biblical scholar, recently emphasized. "For the conversation many readers are required, many who can contribute their reading and life experiences and their gifts of understanding."¹¹ The Pauline image of a body and the many members (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-31a) can also be applied to the interpretation of the Bible in the Church: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Cor 12:21f). Listening to God's Word with the help of the Bible should then take place in the Catholic Church by way of a dialogical process in which "all the members of the Church have a role in the interpretation of the Scripture"¹². The Church today is thus confronted with the challenge of giving a hearing particularly to those members who appear weaker. New ways must be found that would enable these people to bring the fruits of their Bible reading into the Church as community of interpretation, where at present only powerfully eloquent scholarship and the imposing treasure of ecclesial teaching tradition are dominant.

3. On the way of the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12) en route to the spring of the Word of God

I was asked to provide an introduction to a reading of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) in the perspective of the motto for this Plenary Assembly: "Word of God – Source of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace". The Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12) and the saying about the two ways (Mt 7:13f), which frame the great Sermon, should be treated by way of example in this regard. In my comments on these texts I would like to point out how enriching a Bible reading can be in which all three hermeneutical spaces are taken into account. Access to the insights from the liturgical-institutional and the academic spaces is relatively easy here, as these have long been recorded in written form. Somewhat more difficult, in contrast, is the effort to take into account the community space. The insights of the ordinary Bible reader are normally not documented in writing.

Whether ordinary believers are hearing the Word of God through Bible reading is demonstrated above all by the way they respond to it through their behavior.¹³ Not every interpretation does justice to the texts. Yet the poor and people with limited academic education have only their life practice at their disposal to verify the truth of their interpretation of God's Word. Truth is found in whatever brings a person closer to God and to his or her fellow human beings and promotes life. Such a verification or falsification of Bible interpretations occurs in this regard both at the level of the individual and also within the community. The ultimate verification takes place in the Church through a canonization. Pope Benedict XVI alluded to this in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*: "The saints are the true interpreters of Holy Scripture. The meaning of a given passage of the Bible becomes most intelligible in those human beings who have been totally transfixed by it and have lived it out. Interpretation of Scripture can never be a purely academic affair, and it cannot be relegated to the purely historical. Scripture is full of potential for the future, a potential that can only be opened up when someone 'lives through' and 'suffers through' the sacred text."¹⁴ Only recently has the effort been made on a larger scale to document the insights of ordinary Bible readers so as to make them available especially for purposes of intercultural exchange.¹⁵ In preparation for this assembly I asked Bible groups in various countries to exchange views on their spontaneous understanding of "reconciliation", "justice" and "peace" and to offer an interpretation of the Matthean Beatitudes. In the time between December 2007 and February 2008 a total of 15 groups from 13 different countries of Asian, African, Latin American and European countries met and recorded their insights¹⁶. The service of these Bible groups makes it possible for us, in our reading of the Beatitudes, to take into account understandings that emerge from the community space as well.

3.1 First step: Community space: Clarification of pre-understanding and knowledge interests

The method of interpretation here suggested¹⁷ begins in the community space. We must begin by clarifying the pre-understanding and interests involved in knowledge. It belongs to the important insights of the past decades that there is no such thing as a neutral and objective Bible reading. The knowledge interests of this assembly were brought to expression in the motto. But it needs to be made more concrete in what this consists in terms of content. For us as member organizations of the Catholic Biblical Federation it should not be a matter of highly personal interests, but rather of the aspiration of the people whom our biblical pastoral ministry is supposed to serve. We should therefore take into consideration the statements of ordinary Christians, so that we will not be discussing questions that may be inter-



esting in themselves, but yet are of little or no relevance for the lives of those to whom we are conveying our insights. This is why I asked the Bible groups that were surveyed by me, before reading the Beatitudes, to articulate as clearly as possible how they understood the meaning of the terms "justice", "peace" and "reconciliation." In view of the number of women and men (172) from 13 different countries that participated it is hardly surprising that a wide spectrum of comments emerged. A few emphatic positions stand out nonetheless. It is first of all apparent that in many groups the lead themes are immediately related to life together in the family and in the most close-knit social community. It is here that most Christians see themselves confronted with the challenge of leading a just and reconciled life. Very frequently a reference was here made to how much it depended on the fundamental attitude of the persons in question whether justice, reconciliation and peace would become a reality. More often cited as pertinent attitudes were honesty, humility, patience, respect, compassion and love. Building on this insight, a distinction was made in many groups between internal and external circumstances. Thus it was frequently stressed that that inner peace was a presupposition for external peace. It is also in the depths of people's hearts that God's work is expected; none of the groups spoke of a direct action of God in the external realities of life. We ought to take these observations into account when we read the Beatitudes and when we wish to draw from them incentives for action.

Alongside the commonalities, however, significant differences also stood out in the comments of the different groups. It is very easy to recognize certain culturally shaped thought patterns and values as they emerge in the intuitive, spontaneous expressions of the participants. One finds this cultural marking of knowledge also in the other two hermeneutical spaces, although it may not be as immediately evident there. For this very reason we should give our fullest attention to this factor. Most obvious are the differences between Bible groups from collectivist and individualist cultures.¹⁸ The highest values in collectivist cultures are harmony and the welfare of the community. This has significant consequences for the understanding of justice, peace and reconciliation. The clearest evidence of this came from comments of a Chinese group. In this group the point was often emphatically made that here on earth injustice must be accepted in order to reach harmony in communal living. Justice can only be an internal attitude. The participants' experience of reconciliation was often merely one of an external retrieval of harmony that would not necessarily heal deep wounds of hatred and feelings of revenge. With Bible groups from strongly individualistic European countries (the Netherlands, Germany) an opposite tendency is found. Harmony is there located above all in the internal life of the individual, and the expectation is that justice and peace would

be possible in state and community to the extent that the fundamental social and political rights of each individual are preserved.

Such comments from the community space can help make us sensitive to the limits of our own knowledge. For the use of the Bible as Holy Scripture it is very important not to focus too quickly on what appears evident, but to open oneself to the foreign and the unfamiliar. Intellectual exchange in the world Church can also lead us then to a new sensitivity for the foreignness of the Bible and help us to recognize that God speaks to us precisely through the foreign and the disturbing.

Moreover, these few observations, selected by way of example, of the influence of the culture of Bible readers on their reading can already help us to subject to critical review some of the insights gained in the course of this Plenary Assembly. If we wish to derive insights and action models from dialogue with biblical texts we have to be aware how strongly our interpretation of the texts is influenced by particular culturally transmitted thought patterns and values. Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his Jesus book, the Beatitudes are "promises resplendent with the new image of the world and of man inaugurated by Jesus, his 'transformation of values'".¹⁹ Is there perhaps a danger that the values transmitted by our particular culture are so strong that in the act of reading we subvert the values of Jesus, instead of allowing ourselves to feel the full impact of their challenge? It is important, then, that we critically question the particular understandings that emerge in intercultural exchanges. Together we should attempt to investigate what order of values we can perceive in the Beatitudes of Jesus and then attempt to define how these values correlate to those of our own particular culture. Such knowledge interests might also generate direct tasks for biblical scholars, e.g., an investigation of the Beatitudes of Jesus against the background of the values of first-century Hebrew culture.

3.2 Second step: Liturgical-institutional space: the liturgical use of the Beatitudes as a key to their interpretation

In a second step we pay attention to insights from the liturgical-institutional space. The liturgy of the Church makes it a matter of experience that we can gain access to the wellspring of God's Word through biblical texts. It schools our attentiveness for Holy Scripture and teaches us to listen with awe to the Word of God. For this Plenary Assembly the Matthean version of the Sermon on the Mount, with emphasis on the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12), was chosen as a New Testament reference text. There could hardly be a more suitable text for reflection on Holy Scripture as access to the Word of God. The Fathers of the Church described the



Beatitudes as the summary of the Gospel, of the teaching of Jesus Christ. This idea can be experienced even today in the liturgy of the Orthodox Churches, when during the Gospel procession a choir chants the Beatitudes. While the chant is being sung, the Gospel comes to the people and climbs the “mount” of the elevated ambo as the place of proclamation. This liturgical practice invites us, in the interpretation of the text, to relate each verse to the Gospel as a whole. Jesus’ life witness in word and in deed is the first commentary on the Beatitudes and conversely the Beatitudes are a key to the understanding of his mission.

In the Western Church, since the 9th century, the Beatitudes have had their place in the liturgy for the Feast of All Saints, on November 1. Even with the post-conciliar new order of readings this usage has not been altered. The Reform tradition, too, retained this Gospel text when the eve of All Saints Day became Reformation Day.



In the Roman Catholic Church the early ecclesiastical tradition, which understands the Beatitudes as a stairway to holiness, is thus picked up liturgically. “Being a Saint means living close to God, to live in his family. And this is the vocation of us all”, explained Pope Benedict XVI on the feast of All Saints in 2006.²⁰ There are moreover two different conceptions of how we human beings arrive at holiness: through our own effort and the help of God, or by grace alone. The Catholic Tradition has long been stressing the first perspective and for this reason, it initially understood the Beatitudes as ethical exhortation. They were interpreted as a kind of royal road of steps that lead to perfection. At a time when religious life was viewed as a “state of perfection” the Beatitudes and the whole Sermon on the Mount were interpreted one-sidedly in the sense of a strict monastic ethics; but this interpretation never defined the entire ecclesial interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. There were always the voices of spirited indi-

viduals who insisted that Jesus’ invitation to perfection applies to all Christians and is an ideal within the reach of all.

The Reform Churches did not adopt the Catholic concept of holiness. The connection of the Beatitudes with the Reformation Feast has the effect of placing them in relation to the heart of Reformation piety, justification by faith. The Beatitudes were accordingly interpreted above all as affirmations that convey grace. The holiness to which we are called, is not to be attained through our own performance, but is gift of God.

As I will show in even greater detail in the next step, with reference to the researches of biblical scholarship, the two interpretation approaches both have support in the text. The distinctive liturgical interpretations of the Beatitudes can give us an attentive ear for the tension present in the text between passive suffering or receptivity and active engagement. What does this mean for our search for reconciliation, justice and peace? They are totally gift of God, for which we must humbly pray (just as in the Catholic liturgy after the Our Father the gift of peace is prayed for) and they cannot be attained simply through action-oriented programs. The awareness of being on the way to the kingdom of God, which is characterized by reconciliation, justice and peace, is however also a stimulus to action. These are values to which we must commit ourselves with all our energy.

The liturgical use of the Beatitudes on the Feast of All Saints points also to something that must be seen as particularly central in the community space. On feasts of saints, we honor women and men who have followed Jesus in an exemplary way. They lived completely from the spirit of the Beatitudes, and, for this reason, their lives are a living commentary on the biblical text.²¹ In the seventh step we will return to this aspect.

3.3 Third step: Academic space: First encounter with the biblical text

The encounter with comments from the community space helped us to reflect on our own prejudices and on our knowledge interests. The use of the Beatitudes in the liturgical space awaked in us the expectation that, with the help of this text, we can find the way to the holiness to which we are called. We thus have already felt the tension between grace and virtue, between suffering and active engagement.

We now turn directly to the biblical text. Since the original text is no longer extant, biblical scholars have sought to reconstruct this text on the basis of later manuscripts. The text-critical problems with our text are not serious, and I will not make further reference to them here.²² Most Bible readers have access to the text



only through a translation produced by scholars. This for the Bible reader largely invisible scholarly mediation already makes far-reaching interpretative decisions that directly affect what the reader takes to be the meaning of the text. Every translation generates a new text, which through its influencing structures enables or favors certain reception options, which the original text does not enable or which at any rate are not so obvious, and conversely it preempts certain reception possibilities. A translation is never neutral; rather, it is already itself a reception of the original text. It is inevitably also marked by the gender specific, social, cultural and religious location of the translator and by his or her worldview.²³ It is very illuminating to compare different translations of the Matthean Beatitudes with one another. How does one adequately render *makarios*? How about the expression *ptochoi to pneúmati*, or the term *praÿs*? How can one translate into other languages precisely what Matthew understands by *dikaioσύνη*? The records of the conversations of the Bible groups surveyed by me well illustrate how much the translation of such terms influences interpretation. For example, in Togolese languages the term "justice" is hardly distinguishable from "truth", with corresponding consequences for the understanding of the text.²⁴

If we want to have access to the Word of God through the biblical text, then we must listen carefully to each individual word and try to discern its whole fullness of meaning. Commentaries can give important direction here. For non-scholars it can be very helpful to read the text attentively in a variety of translations, which will enable them to appreciate the full semantic range of the original text. For group work, therefore, I supply a rather literal translation, which offers a variety of translation alternatives for the central concepts.

Another difficulty of translations consists in the reproduction of the text form. Besides the translated text itself, Bible readers need scholarly explanations to help call attention to syntax. For the reading of the Matthean Beatitudes I can point here only to a few particularities.²⁵ In the Greek text, what strikes one immediately is the cohesiveness of the composition. Each line begins directly with *makarioi hoi* or *hoti autoi/auton*. The identical concluding statement in verses 3 and 10, with the keyword *basileia* so central to the preaching of Jesus, makes these verses stand out like a kind of frame. This raises the expectation that in the verses enclosed by this frame we will receive an explanation of the semantic contents of the expression "kingdom of heaven" (Mt 4:17, 23). The Beatitudes are subdivided into two strophes of equal length by the *dikaioσύνη* phrase that concludes verses 6 and 10. This word corresponds to our "knowledge interest". The expectation is thus awakened in the first strophe to learn something about "hunger and thirst for justice", and in the second about "persecution for justice's sake". Do the two perhaps belong inseparably together?

In the first strophe, an alliteration with "p" stands out, which seems to suggest that we should interpret the expressions "poor", "those who mourn", "gentle" and "hungering for justice" (all terms in Greek that begin with "p") as closely linked to each other. In verses 11-12 we find a ninth Beatitude, which however is longer than the others and contains a direct address in the second person plural. This form of address is carried forward into the following verses and thereby serves as a kind of transition that links the Beatitudes with the following text. In terms of its contents, the ninth Beatitude picks up the theme of the eighth and thus appears as an expansion that gives a concrete application. By its length and the direct address the reader is clearly to suppose that the situation of persecution there described in word (revilement) and deed represents the life-context of the original addressees.

In the extant text-form of Mt 5:3-12 it is obvious that in each verse a quality of the people addressed is named, some of which are exclusively or primarily concerned with the relationship with God, others are directed more to harmony with our fellow man.²⁶ In some, a more passive attitude is alluded to, in others a more active behavior. Even in the promise expressed in the apodosis two different types are detectable: while in the framing verses 3 and 10 the reference is to the present, in the other verses the promise is formulated with a future reference. These observations can caution us against reading the Beatitudes as one-sidedly related to the present or to the future, to action or to passive suffering, to the relationship with God or the relationship to our fellow man. As is true of the whole Gospel of Jesus Christ, here too all of these dimensions are intended together. Again we are invited to reflect on the consequences for our search for "reconciliation", "justice", and "peace".

Synchronic investigations of biblical scholarship can give us still further pointers for reading and thus help us to become attentive readers of the text. Important, too, are the explanations given on the form of the Beatitudes, which I cannot pursue further here.²⁷ With the insights that emerge from diachronic analyses we will concern ourselves in the sixth step.

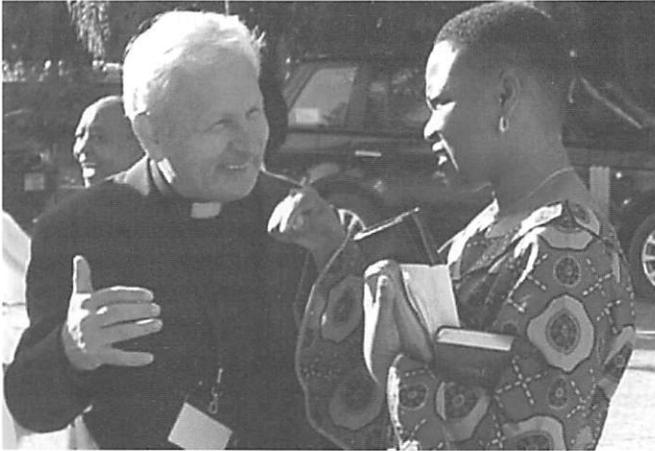
3.4 Fourth step: Community space: Text interpretation by ordinary Bible readers

After an in-depth *lectio* we are invited, in a fourth step, in the *meditatio*, to treat the text in the light of our lead questions. The exchange with other Bible readers is an important corrective against subjective misreading of the text.

I would like to cite here a few small examples of how ordinary believers understand this text. Later you will be



invited in the group work, to treat the texts on the basis of citations from the recorded discussions of the surveyed groups and thus to read the Bible “with the eyes of the poor”.



In many Bible groups the point was emphasized how out of the ordinary the words of Jesus are. A 25 year-old man from Tchatoun-Kora (Togo), who was taking part for the first time in a Bible discussion, said: “Never in my life have I heard a person (whether a chieftain or politician) speak like this. Only a good and powerful man like Jesus can speak this way.” A group of migrant women from Latin America and Africa, who now live in Switzerland and who in part come out of a life of extreme hardship and suffering, asked: “Must we have hardship and suffering in order to belong to the Lord?” A thirty-year-old man from Tindjassi in Togo initially reacted to the Beatitudes with skepticism: “Life is not always that easy. Who feels blessed or happy, when he is suffering, when he is hungry or being persecuted?” Similar comments are recorded from discussions that took place in the Netherlands and in Germany. A young Chinese priest remarked: “To hear the promises of the Beatitudes is like quenching one’s thirst by looking at juicy plums. One comforts oneself, gives oneself false hopes and illusions. True justice and recompense for good and evil is found only in heaven.”

Besides such comments of incomprehension, hope, sadness, joy and consolation are a few of the sentiments that were mentioned in response to a first hearing of the text. In such reactions it becomes clear that the words of Jesus address the inner depths of human existence, have an effect that is both provocative and unsettling.

In the majority of Bible groups it was discussed why it is precisely the poor and the suffering that Jesus proclaims blessed. In an Indonesian group a few of the participants did not agree that Jesus championed only the cause of the poor. In their opinion his mission must have made him engaged for all human beings. When something like this disturbs us we are chal-

lenged to reflect. The same group arrived at the following explanation for the question of why God has a preference for the poor: “Because the poor can get along with everyone; they are unassuming, generous and not at all pretentious; they are open and they question the rich in a frank and open way. The rich in contrast are closed and reluctant to share.” A group from Ghana explained the same thing in a slightly different way: “The poor recognize that they are totally dependent on God. They are humble. They are like Jesus.” Similar comments were made by a group of farmers from Nicaragua: “Jesus calls the poor blessed, because the rich man never thinks of God, since he has all the security he needs in money and in power. The poor man feels the need to look upward, because he has no-one to defend him.”

Many groups interpreted the Beatitudes as directives for action, also in reference to our yearning for reconciliation, justice and peace. A group from Germany (Ostfildern-Ruit) described them as directives for a successful life. People who are able to live this way and actually do so have a salutary effect on their fellow man. An Indonesian group felt challenged by the text to help one another and to respect each other more. A group from Nicaragua summarized as follows: “The Beatitudes are an invitation to turn more strongly to the God of life, for the next life begins right here. They nurture the hope that this world is not final and that something more is still to come. They represent a true path to reconciliation and justice, because a person who lives under their inspiration is able to live out of the demands of justice, which is the foundation for reconciliation and peace.”

3.5 Fifth step: Liturgical-institutional space: Text interpretations from the ecclesial tradition and from contemporary doctrinal teaching

In the fifth step we return to the liturgical-institutional space and compare there our initial interpretation with the text-interpretations from Church Tradition and from contemporary teaching and preaching. The insights gained by such an exercise could motivate us to undertake renewed readings of the biblical text, in order to deepen what we have learned thus far or to correct one-sided understandings.

As we have already seen, in the liturgical-institutional space the Beatitudes are above all interpreted as a path to holiness of life. Scholarly investigation called our attention to the emphasis on the situation of persecution found in the eighth and ninth Beatitudes. In this sense, holiness is understood, especially in the Catholic tradition, as the act of taking up our cross to follow Jesus.²⁶ The keyword “way of the cross” could serve us as a hermeneutical key for an interpretation of



the Beatitudes, even with respect to the search for the path to reconciliation, justice and peace.

With the Church Fathers we often find an interpretation of the Beatitudes as steps along the way that leads from initial repentance to perfection. The first three Beatitudes are understood as a way of breaking from worldly connections, in the next three we would find a way of disengagement from relations with our fellow man, and finally in the last two the topic would be definitive acceptance by God.²⁹ Accordingly, the Beatitudes are interpreted as impetus to ethical action. The observations made in our section on the community space about the influence of the culture of the interpreter on his reading could guide us to re-evaluate this interpretation in view of culturally conditioned reductions. Does the idea of "disengagement from relations with our fellow men" really correspond to the pragmatic intention of the text or does this interpretation rather reflect merely the ideals of an individualistic culture?

The Church's more recent dogmatic preaching cautions against understanding the Beatitudes as commandments in a one-sided way. In his Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), Pope John Paul II insisted: "*The Beatitudes are not specifically concerned with certain particular rules of behavior. Rather, they speak of basic attitudes and dispositions in life and therefore they do not coincide exactly with the commandments. On the other hand, there is no separation or opposition between the Beatitudes and the commandments: both refer to the good, to eternal life. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the proclamation of the Beatitudes, but also refers to the commandments (cf. Mt 5:20-48). At the same time, the Sermon on the Mount demonstrates the openness of the commandments and their orientation towards the horizon of the perfection proper to the Beatitudes. These latter are above all promises, from which there also indirectly flow normative indications for the moral life. In their originality and profundity they are a sort of self-portrait of Christ, and for this very reason are invitations to discipleship and to communion of life with Christ.*"³⁰

The interpretations of the Church Fathers are guided by the principle of the unity of Scripture. They supply important hints, therefore, as to how the Beatitudes can be interpreted in dialogue with other Scriptural texts. As Augustine had already done, many medieval commentators later interpreted the first seven Beatitudes in conjunction with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit found in Is 11:2f and the seven petitions of the Our Father.³¹ The eighth beatitude they interpreted as a forecast of the end times. The biblical scholar Ulrich Luz, who comes out of the Reform tradition, emphasizes in his great commentary on Matthew, that this is anything but playing with texts.³² What lurks here as a basic concern is the connection between petitions, grace and virtue, whose

sequence is not reversible. "Thus, the connection between gifts of the Spirit and challenges of the Beatitudes makes clear that they are primarily about *dona virtutum*."³³ Luz takes these suggestions as an occasion to investigate more closely as a biblical scholar the relationship between virtue and grace in the Beatitudes.³⁴

Very often in the tradition we encounter the Christological interpretation of the Beatitudes. This perspective is found also in the sermons of Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI. At the time of his trip to the Holy Land in the year 2000, Pope John Paul II remarked at the mount of the Beatitudes: "In the end, Jesus does not merely speak the Beatitudes. He lives the Beatitudes. He is the Beatitudes. Looking at him you will see what it means to be poor in spirit, gentle and merciful, to mourn, to care for what is right, to be pure in heart, to make peace, to be persecuted. This is why he has the right to say, "Come, follow *me!*" He does not say simply, 'Do what I say'. He says, 'Come, follow *me!*'"³⁵ The Pope understands the concept of the following of Christ as the solution to the tension between command and gift. Thus, in the school of the Beatitudes, to hear the Word of God means ultimately learning to listen anew to the voice of Jesus. Following Jesus in discipleship is the key to the understanding of the Beatitudes and conversely the Beatitudes themselves are the first directives for action for those who wish to follow Jesus on the path of reconciliation, justice and peace.

3.6 Sixth step: Academic space: Deepening through insights from scholarly research

After the spontaneous, intuitive reading, after a phase of treatment and of reflective re-reading and the renewed meditative deepening that follows, we should once again in a sixth step critically examine what we have already learned and for this task make good use of the great treasury of scholarly research. I would like to illustrate the sense of this step by going back to the parable of the wellspring used at the beginning. A person who is thirsty is not interested in an analysis of water, but simply wants to drink. But analyses are helpful to insure that there is no pollution or to guard against the possibility of poisoning. Already a cursory glance at Church history shows what grave sins were committed by Christians by appealing to the Bible.³⁶ Used in a positive way scientific research can sharpen the understanding and lead to increase of joy in the water of the Word of God, which should in turn lead to greater gratitude and awe.

For reasons of time I must abstain here from the diachronic analysis and synoptic comparison of our text. Investigations of this kind can give important



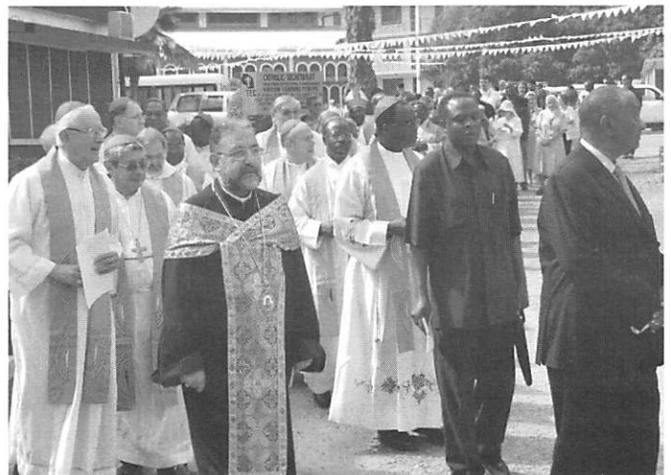
insights; yet, for the dialogue with the subjects of the other hermeneutical spaces, they are in my opinion not the most important treatment method. That is to say, while the text gives the reader no instructions to read it in layers and also does not suggest in any way that for a correct understanding of its meaning the knowledge of its sources would be necessary, the frequent, formally diverse allusions to the Jewish Holy Scriptures make clear that for the author and his first addressees these would have been the most important helps for understanding God's action in the past, present and future. The Gospel of Matthew refers with particular frequency to Old Testament pre-texts, partly by explicit citation, and partly through the borrowing of motifs. It is ultimately left to the reader whether he recognizes these pre-texts and by linking them with the text enriches and broadens the reading. In my presentation of the text for the group work sessions I cited a few of the Scriptural passages that have been identified by Scripture scholars as possible pre-texts.³⁷ Moreover, the investigations of biblical scholarship can also call our attention to narrative connections of the Beatitudes with other texts of the Gospel itself. Indeed this is the first contextual reference for the interpretation of individual texts. Thus, for example, there is a clear echo of the Beatitudes in the presentation of the final judgment at the end of the Gospel (Mt 25:31-46). Between these two texts there are also important correspondences in Mt 9:13; 12:7 (mercy); 19:21 (poverty); 22:34-40 (double commandment of love); 23:23f (righteousness, mercy, loyalty).

Insights that can be gained with the help of newer methods and approaches of biblical scholarship can open us to further perspectives and invite us to ever new readings. Among these newer methods are those of cultural-anthropological exegesis that have been developed by members of the "context group".³⁸ These methods can provide us with answers to the question raised in the first step, in dialogue with the insights from the community space, as to the extent to which the Beatitudes of Jesus represent a re-evaluation of Jewish cultural values of the first century.

3.7 Seventh step: Community space: Living commentary on the biblical text

The use of the Beatitudes in the liturgy pointed us to the lives of the saints as living commentaries on these texts. It is a widespread procedure to treat the life of Saint Francis as a commentary on the Beatitude of the poor in spirit.³⁹ In my homeland in Germany further suggestions for readers are found in church windows. As an example I would refer to a series of windows which were created by Marianne Hilgers from 1956–1958 for the church of St. Laurence in Mönchengladbach-Odenkirchen.⁴⁰ The following saints are assigned to the

individual Beatitudes: the poor in spirit: Francis of Assisi; the mourning: Mary Magdalene; the gentle: Conrad of Parzham; those who hunger and thirst: Augustine; the merciful: Elizabeth of Thüringen; the pure of heart: Maria Goretti; the peacemakers: Nicholas of Flüe; the persecuted for justice' sake: Stephen. Besides the figures who are venerated worldwide as saints, however, Christians, or even non-Christians of our own times can also be living commentaries on the Beatitudes. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) drew attention to the fact that "the inchoate reality of the kingdom can also be found beyond the confines of the Church among peoples everywhere, to the extent that they live 'gospel values' [i.e. the Beatitudes; R.H.] and are open to the working of the Spirit who breathes when and where he wills" (RM 20).⁴¹



Access to these "living commentaries" can be gained in the community space, especially among the poor and the suffering. The fact that the poor are the original addressees of the good news requires, as the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation emphasized, "that Christian communities read the Bible from the perspective of the poor."⁴² It recalled the statement of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, that the poor "can bring to its interpretation and to its actualization [sc. of Holy Scripture; R.H.] a light more penetrating, from the spiritual and existential point of view, than that which comes from a learning that relies upon its own resources alone."⁴³ In what does this preference for the poor consist? Carlos Mesters sees its basis in "connaturality", a kind of "natural affinity of the knower with the object of his knowledge act."⁴⁴ There would be a kind of connaturality of the poor with the suffering and marginalized people of God whose life was the original context of the biblical books.⁴⁵ Therefore, the theory goes, the lives of the poor today could lead even the biblical scholar and theologian to a deeper understanding of the Bible. Mesters describes this through an image: The biblical scholars would in their work be making something more or less like a map of the lives



of biblical people. Since most biblical scholars because of their social rank lead rather secure and comfortable lives, the roads drawn on this map are far too straight and inaccurate. Only by living with the suffering people, who walk these roads in their most dramatic ups and downs might the scholar come to recognize how imprecise his blueprints really are, and thus be able to make maps that would at once be more detailed and more user-friendly.⁴⁶ The same applies to preachers of the Word who are commissioned by the Church.



3.8 Eighth step: Beginning of a new reading, taking Ps 1 and Mt 7:13-14 as a starting point

The Beatitudes are the entrance gate to the Sermon on the Mount; they convey to us the great invitation of Jesus. A German Bible Group (Ostfildern-Ruit) interpreted this biblical text from the perspective of Psalm 1. The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, who would be reflecting on God's Torah, was himself like a tree planted near a stream of water. The recorder of the Togolese Bible group also alluded in his introductory essay to this Psalm as a pre-text for the framing of the Sermon on the Mount. As he begins his sermon, Jesus calls blessed those people who are totally open to the Lord's directives. At the end he challenges us to decision. Will we take the broad way traveled by the many or will we decide in favor of the narrow path that leads to life? In a reading of Mt 7:13ff we can reflect on our interpretation of the Beatitudes and come to a decision as to how we wish to respond to the Word of God in our behavior. What is the path that today leads to reconciliation, justice and peace?

(Translation: L. Maluf) ■

¹ P. Richard, "Word of God – Source of Life and Hope for the New Millennium," in: *Bulletin Dei Verbum* 50 (1999), p. 4-10, here: p. 6.

² Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, III.B.3. (Citation in the text is from the CDF, *Instruction Concerning the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* 21).

³ Cf. R. Huning, *Bibelwissenschaft im Dienste populärer Bibellektüre. Bausteine einer Theorie der Bibellektüre aus dem Werk von Carlos Mesters* (SBB 54), Stuttgart 2005, p. 238-240.

⁴ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, III.A.3.

⁵ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, III.B.3.

⁶ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, IV.C3; cf. *ibid.* III.B.3.

⁷ Cf. on this my own research: Huning, *Bibelwissenschaft* (see note 3).

⁸ Cf. Huning, *Bibelwissenschaft* (see note 3), p. 33-52.

⁹ *Ibid.*, esp. p. 393f.

¹⁰ W. Egger, "Wort Gottes für das dritte Jahrtausend. Die Bibel im Dialog der Religionen und Kulturen", in: *BiLi* 80 (2007), p. 193-201, here: p. 194.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 194f.

¹² Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, III.B.3.

¹³ Carlos Mesters has expressed this idea very pointedly: "The words of the Bible are like seeds: they reveal the meaning they have for us only when they are sown in the soil of life. There they transform life, and the blossom appears. From the blossom you discover the meaning of the seeds." (C. Mesters, *Introdução geral. Guia do dirigente* [Círculos Bíblicos; 2], Petrópolis 1973, p. 11).

¹⁴ J. Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, New York/London 2007, p. 78.

¹⁵ A forerunner of documentation of this kind was the description by the poet-monk Ernesto Cardenal of Bible discussions on the Nicaraguan Island of Solentiname. Cf. E. Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, Maryknoll, NY 1976. The conversations were, however, edited literarily by him, as Cardenal states openly in his auto biography: *Ibid. Die Jahre in Solentiname. Erinnerungen*, vol. 2, Wuppertal 2002, esp. p. 301-319. A striking approach to biblical interpretation from the community space was launched by the research project "Through the eyes of another", which was initiated by the Free University of Amsterdam, financed by the United Reformed Churches of the Netherlands in 2001-2004 and carried out with the collaboration of scholars and biblical pastoral collaborators from many countries. About 120 Bible groups from more than 20 countries with participants from a variety of Christian confessions took part and documented their readings of Jn 4:1-42 and discussed it among themselves. Some of the minutes of these discussions can be examined on the Internet site <http://www.bible4all.org>. A first scientific reflection on these documented records is offered by H. de Wit et al. (eds.), *Through the eyes of another. Intercultural reading of the Bible*, Elkart (Indiana) 2004. In 2007 a second phase of the project was begun, which is not yet completed. The following texts were offered as suggested readings to the participating groups: Gn 18:1-17; Jn 4:1-42; Lk 18:1-8; Lk 8:40-56.

¹⁶ For the description of these groups see www.c-b.f.org.

¹⁷ The steps suggested here correspond to the three phases of reading, as they are methodically ordered especially in interactive Bible-reading: "Die Phase des Aneignens und Entdeckens, die Phase der Distanzierung durch Nachverstehen, die Phase des Verstehens und kreativen Übertragung" (D. Dormeyer, "Handlungstheoretische Hermeneutik biblischer Texte", in: E. Arens, Edmund (Ed.), *Gottesrede – Glaubenspraxis. Perspektiven theologischer Handlungstheorie*, Darmstadt 1994, p. 6-28, here p. 23).

¹⁸ In collectivist cultures the individual is integrated from birth in strong, closed "we-groups", which give him identity and security, and which therefore demand of him unconditional, lifelong loyalty.



The first "we-group" is one's own larger family. In individualistic cultures, in contrast, the interests of the individual are given precedence before the interests of the group. The individual does not receive his identity through belonging to a "we-group", but must discover it in a process of "self-realization". In individualistic cultures the families are usually small families, in which the eventual autonomy of the children is the goal of education. Cf. G. Hofstede, *Lokales Denken, globales Handeln. Interkulturelle Zusammenarbeit und globales Management*, Munich 2001, p. 63-108.

¹⁹ Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), *Jesus* (see note 14), p.71-72.

²⁰ Benedict XVI, Sermon, Vatican Basilica, Nov. 1, 2006. URL: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20061101_all-saints_en.html (last checked on June 14, 2008).

²¹ The Reform Church's connecting of the Beatitudes with the Reformation Feast seems to me – from my Catholic perspective – to point in the same direction. On Reformation Day model characters are also remembered from their own Church history.

²² There are text-critical problems primarily in verses 4 and 5, which in the Western text witnesses are reversed. Many exegetes assume – with some substantive support – that the Beatitude of the gentle could be a later insertion. Because it is well attested, however, it is regarded as original by most biblical scholars. As for the order of the verses, the best manuscripts support the order given in the text of Nestle-Aland. In verse 11 it is impossible to decide text-critically whether the "lying" of the persecutors belongs to the original text or not. Cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament*, Stuttgart 1994, p. 10f; L. Sánchez Navarro, *La Enseñanza de la Montaña. Comentario contextual a Mateo 5-7*, Estella (Navarra) 2005, p. 36.

²³ For concrete examples cf. M. Leutzsch, "Probleme gerechter Bibelübersetzung", in: *JK* 63, 2 (2002), p. 31-39.

²⁴ "Ibamouin" (Bassar; Konkomba), "Tufelem" (Lamba), "Tuvulem" (Kabyè). I am grateful to Jean Prosper Agbagnon, svd, for this note.

²⁵ Cf. U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* vol. 1 (EKK I/I). Düsseldorf/Zürich/Neukirchen-Vluyn, 5th fully reworked edition 2002, p. 269. English translation: Matthew 1-7 (Hermeneia), Minneapolis MN 2007.

²⁶ Cf. K. Stock, "Die acht Seligpreisungen: I. Der Weg der Freude," in: *GuL* 62 (1989), p. 360-373, here p. 373.

²⁷ Cf. K. Berger, *Formen und Gattungen im Neuen Testament* (UTB 2532), Tübingen 2005, p. 247-252.

²⁸ Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Sermon for the Feast of All Saints 2006: "The Church's experience shows that every form of holiness, even if it follows different paths, always passes through the Way of the Cross, the way of self-denial. The Saints' biographies describe men and women who, docile to the divine plan, sometimes faced unspeakable trials and suffering, persecution and martyrdom." URL: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20061101_all-saints_en.html (last checked on June 14, 2008)

²⁹ Cf. Luz, *Matthäus I* (see note 25), p. 291.

³⁰ *Veritatis Splendor* 16 (Emphasis his).

³¹ Cf. B. Stoll, *De Virtute in Virtutem. Zur Auslegungs- und Wirkungsgeschichte der Bergpredigt in Kommentaren, Predigten und hagiographischer Literatur von der Merowingerzeit bis um 1200* (BGBE 30), Tübingen 1988, 136-143.

³² Luz, *Matthäus I* (see note 25), p. 291.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 291 (Emphasis his).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 292-294.

³⁵ John Paul II, Homily on the Mount of the Beatitudes, March 24, 2000, URL: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/travels/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20000324_korazim-israel_en.html (last checked on June 14, 2008)

³⁶ The task of biblical scholarship is to help the Bible reader to discern through critical distinction which among the possible interpretations of a text truly convey the Word of God and which may represent a diabolical seduction. This was illustrated in a pointed way by Daniel Patte, who uses the example of the exegetical discussion between Jesus and Satan (Mt 4:3-7). Cf. D. Patte, *The challenge of discipleship: A critical study of the Sermon on the mount as scripture*, Harrisburg 1999, p. 3-10.

³⁷ Cf. H. Frankemölle, *Matthäus Kommentar I*, Düsseldorf 21999, p. 207-215.

³⁸ Cf. B. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, Rev. ed., Louisville 1993; *ibid.*/R. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Minneapolis 1992; *ibid.*/J. Pilch (eds.), *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning*, Peabody, MA 1993. For a critical hermeneutical reflection on this approach cf. R. Huning, "La dimensión social del evangelio", in: *Asociación de Biblistas de México* (ed.), ABM 14, México D.F. 2005, 3-74, esp. p. 36-49.

³⁹ So, too, most recently, Pope Benedict XVI in his book on Jesus. Cf. Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), *Jesus* (see note 14), p. 108f.

⁴⁰ The images can be viewed at the Internet site of "Stiftung Forschungsstelle Glasmalerei des 20. Jh. e.V.", cf. URL: <http://www.glas-malerei-ev.net/index.php?action=projekte&proaction=kirche694> (last checked on June 14, 2008).

⁴¹ The remaining text of *RM* 20 calls attention to the limits of this extension: "But it must immediately be added that this temporal dimension of the kingdom remains incomplete unless it is related to the kingdom of Christ present in the Church and straining towards eschatological fullness."

⁴² Catholic Biblical Federation, *Final Statement of the Sixth Plenary Assembly*, III.2.6.

⁴³ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, IV.C.3; cf. *ibid.* III.B.3.

⁴⁴ V. Berning, "Das Prinzip der Konnaturalität der Erkenntnis bei Thomas von Aquin", in: *ThGl* 72 (1982), p. 291-310, here: 293.

⁴⁵ Cf. Huning, *Bibelwissenschaft* (see note 3), p. 224-236.

⁴⁶ Cf. Mesters, *Flor sem defesa. Uma explicação da Bíblia a partir do povo*, Petrópolis 1983, p. 80.

Information on the composition of the groups asked and directions on the group work can be obtained from the CBF General Secretariat (e-mail: gensec@c-b-f.org)



Catholic Biblical Federation & United Bible Societies

Joint Statement on Partnership in Biblical Ministry

Preamble

The Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) and the United Bible Societies (UBS) are “two organisations both committed to the goal of providing easy access to Sacred Scripture for all Christians as well as to adherents of other religious beliefs, in an effort to open the Bible for all.”¹

This document represents both a reaffirmation of the cooperation between the CBF and the UBS that has existed since 1969, and a call to the member organisations of both bodies to seek yet more opportunities to work in close collaboration in future in a common witness to the life-giving message of God’s Word.

History

“Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful.” This recommendation of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, expressed in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, was at the same time an obligation for the Catholic Church, and an opportunity for both the Church and the Bible Societies to enter into a new era of partnership around the provision and use of the Bible.

The flowering of cooperation between the Catholic Church and the UBS can trace its roots back to *Dei Verbum*: “since the Word of God should be available at all times, the Church by her authority and with maternal concern sees to it that suitable and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original text of the sacred books. And should the opportunity arise, and the Church authorities approve, if these translations are produced in cooperation with the separated brethren as well, all Christians will be able to use them.”²

1968 saw the adoption of the *Guidelines for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible*³ which opened the way for the preparation of interconfessional translations of the Bible.

For the UBS, the work of the Bible Societies was traditionally concentrated on making the Bible text accessible and affordable, and was a task performed almost exclusively by and for Protestant Churches. Cooperation with the Catholic Church was limited to informal scholarly contacts between Protestant and Catholic Scripture scholars.

This situation was changed by the Second Vatican Council and in particular by its Constitution *Dei Verbum*; a new quality of cooperation was given practical form by the foundation in 1969 of the CBF (until 1990, the “World Catholic Federation for the Biblical Apostolate”), whose founders adopted as a basic policy that there should be cooperation between CBF and Bible Societies wherever possible.

The Centrality of the Word of God

In 2004, the Bible Societies affirmed that “Translation remains at the heart of our task; service to all the Churches underpins the way we undertake our task, and partnership with Bible Societies and other agencies is essential to our ethos;”⁴ and: “the Bible Societies affirm that the Holy Scriptures belong to all Christian Churches, recognising that doctrinal interpretation of the Scriptures belongs to them.”⁵

In *Dei Verbum* the Catholic Church reaffirms her commitment to bringing the Word of God through Sacred Scripture to all God’s people and to seeing that “easy access should be provided for all the Christian faithful” (*Christi fidelibus aditus ad Sacram Scripturam late pateat oportet*).⁶ This “wide open access” presupposes the distribution of Bible translations but at the same time it requires hermeneutical tools and abilities to disclose the meaning of the Bible, thus allowing the biblical message to become the Word of God. The CBF fosters and promotes the awareness of the central role of the Word of God at all levels of ecclesial life and is committed to ensuring that the faithful may have a “wide open access” to Sacred Scripture and hence may experience the life-giving message of the Bible in their daily lives.

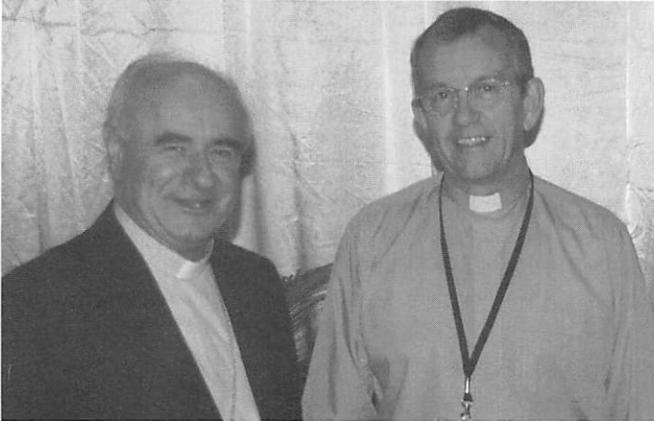
Purpose Statements

The United Bible Societies is a world fellowship of national Bible Societies, united for consultation, mutual support and action, in the common task of achieving the widest possible, effective and meaningful distribution of the Sacred Scripture; and of helping people interact with the Word of God. The Bible Societies carry out their task in partnership and cooperation with all Christian Churches.⁷

The purpose of the Catholic Biblical Federation is to foster and support the work of Catholic organizations for biblical pastoral ministry which, throughout the



world, collaborate with the bishops to make the Word of God available and accessible to all.⁸ As the Catholic Church's institution for biblical pastoral ministry it is affiliated to the Vatican through the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the vast majority of Catholic Bishops' Conferences worldwide are numbered among its members.



CBF President Paglia and UBS General Secretary Milloy after signing the statement

Principles of Collaboration

For the CBF, as advocate for the Bible in the Catholic Church, the promotion of "the study, understanding and use of the Bible among Catholic clergy and people" is one of its main purposes. Therefore, quite a few CBF member organizations commit themselves to the translation, publication and distribution of the Bible. Beyond this inner-Catholic collaboration the "cooperation in matters of mutual concern with the United Bible Societies"⁹ is seen as an efficient way to realise this purpose.

For the Bible Societies, partnership and cooperation with Churches and Christian organisations is an indispensable part of their ministry. Increasingly, Bible Societies recognise that something more than an inter-confessional translation of the text itself should be part of their service to the Churches if they are to take seriously the need to have people engage with the message of Scripture.

Therefore, Bible Societies' services to the Catholic Church may now include the provision of Bible editions in which the books are presented in the order of the Catholic biblical canon, and in which helps for readers to gain understanding of the meaning of the text reflect the Catholic Church's teaching and tradition. In order to guarantee the Catholic character of such editions, this closer collaboration will avail itself of the existing CBF-UBS channels by way of exchange of information and expertise and possibly of common planning. Due to the CBF structure, its General Secretariat (as the interface between the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and UBS¹⁰) will normally be the point of first contact for such exchanges.

Exhortation

In reaffirming their commitment to common Bible work, both CBF and UBS commend to their members the need to develop together, wherever possible, programmes which testify to our desire to make the message of the Sacred Scriptures alive and relevant in the lives of the faithful, and which speak to those outside the community of believers.

The path to a wider and deeper level of cooperation between CBF and UBS members and affiliates is open. Bible Societies can benefit from the CBF's experience not only in promoting physical access to Sacred Scripture, but also in providing the necessary tools of interpretation and in helping the faithful enter into a life-relevant dialogue with the Word of God. CBF members, in addition to the existing Catholic links, can make use of the Bible Societies' experience in the production of Scripture in print and other media, to benefit their work in the Biblical Apostolate.

Members of both organisations are encouraged to seek new and creative ways in which they can enter into partnership in the service of the Word. The terms of these partnerships will follow the principles defined in the present joint statement and their concrete realisation may be determined locally. CBF and UBS staff are available to provide expertise and advice.

With this joint statement, the United Bible Societies and the Catholic Biblical Federation reaffirm their commitment to further collaborate and to intensify their common endeavours in the service of the divine Word, so that today's world may ever more experience the promise of our Lord Jesus Christ: "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full." (Jn 10:10)

Stuttgart and Reading/Rome, October 2008

¹ CBF-UBS Joint Statement for Central-Eastern and Eastern European Churches on Partnership in Biblical Ministry, 1991.

² *Dei Verbum* 22.

³ Revised edition in 1987.

⁴ UBS World Assembly 2004: "Newport Declaration".

⁵ "The Identity and Ethos of the United Bible Societies" UBS World Assembly, Midrand, 2000.

⁶ *Dei Verbum* 22.

⁷ Cf. "The Identity and Ethos of the United Bible Societies" UBS World Assembly, Midrand, 2000.

⁸ Cf. CBF Constitution, Article III.

⁹ CBF Constitution, Article III, 1.2, 2.3.

¹⁰ Cf. art. 185 of the "Directory of the application of principles and norms on Ecumenism", 1993: "Through the CBF General Secretariat the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity maintains and develops relations with the UBS."



Learning from Paul: The Pauline Year 2008/2009

The fact that Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed the period from 28 June 2008 to 28 June 2009 the Pauline Year gives Christians throughout the world the opportunity not only to reflect on the writings of this missionary, but also to study in depth his personality and the societal, cultural and religious context of his time. Pope Benedict himself spoke on this in the general audience of 2 July 2008: "In this first meeting let us pause to consider the environment in which St Paul lived and worked. A theme such as this would seem to bring us far from our time, given that we must identify with the world of 2,000 years ago. Yet this is only apparently and, in any case, only partly true for we can see that various aspects of today's social and cultural context are not very different from what they were then." He concludes his remarks with the following statements: "Thus he grows in historical and spiritual stature, revealing both sharing and originality in comparison with the surrounding environment. However, this applies likewise to Christianity in general, of which the Apostle Paul, precisely, is a paradigm of the highest order from whom we all, always, still have much to learn. And this is the goal of the Pauline Year: to learn from St Paul, to learn faith, to learn Christ, and finally to learn the way of upright living."

In this and the next issue of the *Bulletin Dei Verbum* we would like therefore to feature a variety of articles that highlight the life, the work and the significance of Paul for Christianity and for ourselves. In this connection, we would love to receive your own personal ideas as well. So write to us, or send us an email; we are curious to know your personal image of Saint Paul.

THE PAULINE
YEAR
2008/2009

Approaching Paul

What Constitutes the Significance of Paul for Christianity?

Claudio Ettl

1. "Now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel" – legend and reality

*A man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness; for now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel.*¹



The Apostle Paul – Cappadocian fresco

This description of the Apostle Paul is found in an apocryphal writing of the late second century A.D., the so-called "Acts of Thecla". Certainly this literary portrait cannot be taken as authentic, any more than the fresco found in a Cappadocian underground church in modern Turkey that dates to the fourth century A.D. – if only because their composition or origin lie at too great a distance in time from the life-time of Paul.

Nevertheless such a legendary notice is not entirely without value if treated with the necessary historical-critical reserve. Because what is said here of Paul is based in part on statements that he himself made in his letters regarding his person. Moreover it reflects the image people had of the Apostle to the Gentiles and of his outward appearance through much of the history of early Christianity.

As for the great friendliness of Paul mentioned in this text, there would certainly be good reason to doubt this in part – for the authentic Pauline letters offer us too much data on the not always easy character of the Apostle. So for example Paul defends himself in 2 Corinthians against the reproaches of his opponents, and does not hesitate to utter some threats:

I, the man who is so humble when he is facing you, but bullies you when he is at a distance. I only ask that I do not have to bully you when I come, with all the confident assurance I mean to show when I come face to face with people I could name who think we go by ordinary human motives.
(2 Cor 10:1f.)

And shortly after this we read:

"He writes powerful and strongly-worded letters but when he is with you you see only half a man and no preacher at all". The man who said that



can remember this: whatever we are like in the words of our letters when we are absent, that is what we shall be like in our actions when we are present. (2 Cor 10:10f.)

A man “full of friendliness” with the “face of an angel”? Indeed, and also a man with rough edges, who could be downright unpleasant when it was his own thing that was at stake. A man of character, as we would say today.

Let us return once more to the above-quoted citation of the Acts of Thecla: so if the friendliness and angelic disposition of Paul seem to derive rather from his later appreciation and from the significance of his person for the early Church, the data concerning his external appearance (his bald head, crooked legs, distinguished nose) are more in line with his own statements. For it would appear that during his lifetime Paul was afflicted by a chronic illness, as we learn from another statement he makes in 2 Corinthians:

(...) I was given a thorn in the flesh, an angel of Satan to beat me and stop me from getting too proud! (2 Cor 12:7)

This thorn in the flesh is most often understood to have been a physical infirmity that Paul had to cope with on a recurrent basis. And the exhausting experiences that were a routine part of his missionary activity cannot but have left their traces. Once again we can allow the Apostle to speak for himself:

(...) I have worked harder, I have been sent to prison more often, and whipped so many times more, often almost to death. Five times I had the thirty-nine lashes from the Jews; three times I have been beaten with sticks; once I was stoned, three times I have been shipwrecked and once adrift in the open sea for a night and a day. Constantly travelling, I have been in danger from rivers and in danger from brigands, in danger from my own people and in danger from pagans; in danger in the towns, in danger in the open country, danger at sea and danger from so-called brothers. I have worked and laboured, often without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty and starving; I have been in the cold without clothes. (2 Cor 11:23-27)

An exciting person, an exciting life.

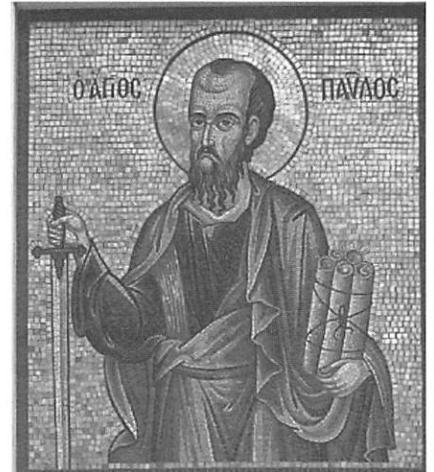
2. Missionary, theologian, writer: the significance of Paul

What is it, then, that makes Paul and his significance for Christianity special? There are a number of reasons that make a study of the so-called Apostle of the Gentiles worthwhile.

2.1 Literary Reasons

If we leaf through the New Testament, we encounter other names of authors for individual writings besides that of Paul: the Gospels are associated with the names Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; we find letters that are ascribed to James, Peter or Jude. The majority of the writings of the New Testament however name Paul as author – 13 letters all together. In recent times, following a long period of scholarly research and discussion, it is generally

agreed that seven of these letters are genuinely “authentic,” that is to say can be thought of as letters that were dictated by Paul himself (Rom, 1 Cor, 2 Cor, Gal, Phil, 1 Thess, Phlm). We can confidently ascribe these seven authentic letters to a concrete individual whom we know



Mosaic of the Apostle Paul

by name and about whom we have historical information. Though the other writings of the New Testament are also in part ascribed to specific authors, as for example the Gospels or the Catholic Epistles, these authorial data do not always represent reliable historical information. The writings in question were often belatedly ascribed to well-known individuals so as to enhance their authority and importance. (Catchword: pseudepigraphy).

It follows that Paul is the only author of New Testament writings who is known to us by his real name. While the profile of those theologians that stand behind other New Testament writings can be drawn for the most part only indirectly from the collected, elaborated and transmitted traditions they hand on, and while these authors also often hide behind their writing or behind a pseudonym, Paul puts himself forward in his letters as a really existing personality who even till today speaks to us directly out of his writings.

Another peculiarity lies in the fact that with the authentic letters of Paul we possess the presumably oldest writings of Christianity altogether, older than the Gospels or the Acts of the Apostles in the opinion of the majority of the exegetes. Paul as the author of these texts does not of course belong to the first Christian generation, to the generation of Jesus and the eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus, as do for example the Twelve and the disciples. But Paul is the only author of the New Testament who stems from the second generation.



2.2 Biographical Reasons

In the person of Paul three cultural realms of the ancient world coalesce – all of which were formative for the history of early Christianity and for the development of the early Church: Judaism, Hellenism and Roman culture. This is why it is indispensable for the question of the development of the Christian Faith to get to know better this multicultural man. To be at home, or at least to live among a variety of cultures is indeed a central characteristic of our globalized world today.

The work and the theology of Paul cannot be understood without a look at his biography, at his way of life. Life and theology mutually condition each other; the one is always to be treated in connection with the other. Central for Paul is the event of his call experience, which led to a totally new orientation. In modern terms, it amounted to a paradigm change in his life and his theology.

The personality of Paul is also of decisive significance for the history of early Christianity. Paul was active, so to speak, at a cross-point and intersection of the early history of Christianity. His work played itself out at the heart of a development in which the central question for primitive Christianity was whether the Christian faith would continue to be understood as a part of Judaism or whether an opening to non-Jews ought to be pursued. Paul is to a large extent responsible for the fact that this existential question for early Christian adherents was decided in the second sense. We owe it to him that the faith of Jewish-Palestinian character in the Messiah Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee did not remain confined to Judaism. Rather, it was translated into the culture of Hellenism that was the hallmark of the time both politically and culturally. The enormous achievement of inculturation that this transition implies is inconceivable without Paul.

2.3 Theological reasons

The theology of Paul is no clearly defined theory, no theological opus conceived and written down at one stroke which can be neatly arranged or systematized. Rather it amounts to “theology in process” (so Joachim Gnilka).

In his letters addressed to very concrete audiences – mostly communities or groups of communities – Paul develops the theological concepts that appear most central to him. In the process he can give free rein to his excitement and his enthusiasm as well as to his protests or even anger. This is what makes his letters still relevant and vibrant today. When we read the letters of Paul we are able even today to reconstruct how the theological positions of Paul were developed, from what concrete circumstances they arose and how he was able to further develop or even modify them in the course of his life. Paul is a theologian who till today allows us to share in his reflections and in his emotions.

We do not possess the theology of Paul, however, in the form of a comprehensive writing that spells out everything in advance. We must rather ferret it out from different letters, which were moreover written at different times, for different reasons and to different audiences. The Pauline letters are therefore occasional writings. With the exception of the Letter to the Romans perhaps, Paul has to take a stand in his letters on very concrete theological questions, which were often addressed to him by the community itself, for example on the question of divorce or the Lord's Supper in Corinth. So initially what we have is responses to concrete questions, and often, too, attempts to resolve special problems. Nevertheless this always takes place in a way that – in spite of its close ties to these peculiar circumstances – always remains focused on the centrality of faith in Jesus Christ as having universal validity. For this reason it would be false to think that Paul did not possess any overall theological understanding.

3. Learning from Paul: Paul today

It is perhaps better for this reason to speak of “Paul, the theologian” rather than of the “theology of Paul.” This makes better allowance for the circumstance outlined above: since we know of Paul only from occasional writings, composed in response to concrete circumstances, his theological ideas always remain tied to the associated configurations and situations. Theological thought and Pauline personality, theology and biography are thus always interconnected. Even Pauline theology is subject to development. This is precisely what makes this quest exciting, that the Apostle to the Gentiles allows us to see him not only as a successful missionary and clever theologian, but as a man totally convinced of his mission – as a man who bears the stamp of his own diverse religious and cultural roots, whose life is decisively shaped by his call experience and who in a creative and original way interprets and hands on to others his faith in Jesus Christ.

It is precisely in this way that the man Paul can be a model for every one of us. And this must be precisely what Pope Benedict is suggesting when, as noted above, he gives a central place to the leitmotiv of “learning from Paul.”

(Translation: L. Maluf)

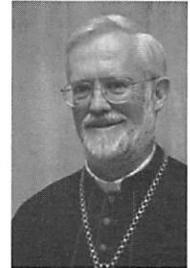
¹ Translation of Wilhelm Schneemelcher in Edgar Hennecke's *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher, cited in *The Writings of Saint Paul*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks, New York/London 1972, p. 199.



On the Unexpected Death of the Former CBF President, Bishop Wilhelm Egger

To everyone's complete shock, at the age of 68, the Bishop of Bozen-Brixen, Wilhelm Egger, succumbed to a heart attack on the evening of August 16, 2008. Just two weeks earlier he had welcomed Pope Benedict XVI in Brixen, where the Pope had spent his summer holidays at the local seminary.

As a recognized authority in biblical science and biblical pastoral ministry Bishop Egger was President of the Catholic Biblical Federation from 1996 to 2002. In this capacity he did much to promote Bible work around the world and he also engaged intensively in ecumenical dialogue. With Bishop Egger the CBF loses a critically benevolent companion who maintained his ties to our Federation even after his departure from the office.



Wilhelm Egger was born in Innsbruck in 1940. In 1986 John Paul II named him diocesan bishop of Bozen-Brixen. Both in the Church in Italy and also in the Universal Church Egger held important offices and was actively engaged, among other things, in the areas of biblical scholarship, biblical pastoral ministry and ecumenical affairs. In addition to his charge as President of the Catholic Biblical Federation he was also, among other things, President of the Commission for the revision of the ecumenical German Bible translation known as the Einheitsübersetzung. As recently as the beginning of this year Egger was also appointed Special Secretary of the Bishops' Synod on the Word of God.

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Austrian Biblical Association and the 80th anniversary of the periodical *Bibel und Liturgie*, on October 21st, 2006, Bishop Egger gave a lecture on the theme "Word of God for the Third Millennium. The Bible in the Dialogue of Cultures and Religions". In the following paragraphs we give a few excerpts from this talk – in memoriam of Bishop Egger:

We all have experience with discussions and dialogues. Many of life's circumstances and many statements we make call for clarification, discussion. In such discussions and dialogues we then become aware that we have too little understanding of many things. Discussion and dialogue can also help when it comes to understanding texts. Klaus Weimar says in his *Encyclopedia of Literary Science*: "One should never read alone."

One who reads alone is in greater danger of failing to get it right than is one who discusses what he or she has read with others. Dialogue and discussion serve to generate more self-assurance about the rightness of one's reading. Discussion can also help to clarify one's own presuppositions.

It holds true for Holy Scripture as well, that when we read it together we understand it more deeply and gain fresh insights into it. The presuppositions of dialogue are many: there are different participants in this discussion and there are many ways of reading Holy Scripture; there are a variety of approaches to the Bible; a certain pluralism of methods exists and there are different interests with which readers approach the Bible; and then there is also a fundamentalist reading of Holy Scripture. With reference to these presuppositions, I would refer you to the books on methodology and to the Document of the Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), which offers a kind of meta-methodology, that is, a reflection on the methods. What is needed today is a way of using the holy scriptures of the religions that is "dialogical and open to dialogue."

Through dialogue we ourselves, through the writings of other religions, can grow in self-understanding and perhaps also help others to understand our Bible and to read their own scriptures from new points of view. We can learn from one another. The question is: how can we learn and what can we learn? Our task is to introduce the Bible as the Word of God into the dialogue and to learn from others. (...)

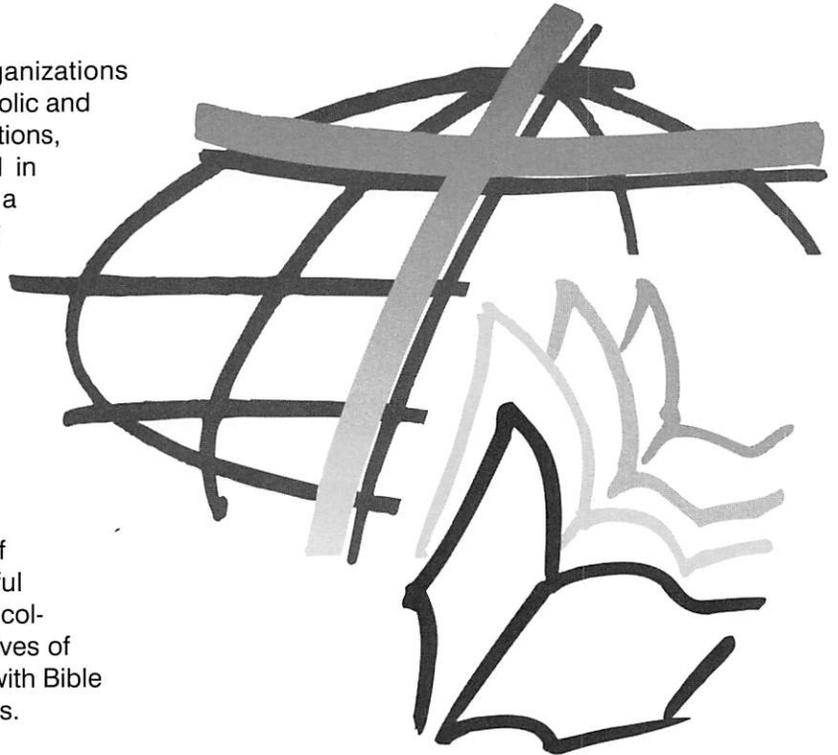
Nicholas of Cusa shows how difficult is the way of discussion with the different religions and what we may hope for. Immediately following the fall of Constantinople, so in a time of the most bitter disputes, he wrote in his Brixen period the brief tractate *De pace fidei*. In one exhibition he becomes a witness of a discussion in heaven between the representatives of the religions and peoples. The meeting is convoked by God himself. Nicholas imagines here an educated, arguing Christendom. Cardinal Karl Lehman comments on this passage: "what is reasonable in all religions is recovered in Jesus Christ. Every religion implies faith in Jesus Christ. This writing of Nicholas of Cusa contains in nothing short of eschatological passion the anticipation of a hope, which cannot be totally foreign to biblical and even to specifically Christian faith." The conclusion of *De pace fidei* consists of the statement: it was decided that there would be a harmonious gathering of the religions in the heaven of reason. The wise men should gather together in Jerusalem as the common center of all and in the name of all they should embrace the one Faith and on it they should build the eternal peace, so that the Creator of all, may he be praised forever, might be exalted in peace. And Cusa closes with an "Amen".

The complete text of the lecture can be obtained through the CBF General Secretariat. ■

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 96 full members and 236 associate members coming from a total of 134 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