

Holy Scripture in the Life of the Churches in Europe now and in the time ahead

The Biblical-Pastoral Meeting of European Bishops in Freising, Germany February 16-19, 1994

Approximately 50 people were addressed (including 20 bishops from the whole of Europe) during this meeting, who had been invited to Freising, Germany, by the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE). The aim was for representation of every European country by a representative of the Bishops' Conference and by one person responsible for biblical-pastoral ministry. The meeting was proposed and partly organized by the General Secretariat of the Catholic Biblical Federation and moderated by Bishops Wilhelm Egger (Bolzano-Bressanone, Italy) and Henryk Muszynski (Gniezno, Poland).

A result of the meeting was a joint parting letter to all Bishops' Conferences and Bishops and to all those responsible for biblical-pastoral ministry.

To all Bishops' Conferences and Bishops, To all who have responsibility for the pastoral application of Scripture

Dear Brother Bishops,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in the ministry of proclaiming the Word of God,

Between 16-19 February 1994 representatives from most of the European countries met, under the aegis of CCEE, in Freising to reflect on the pastoral application of the Word of God in the life of the Church. The starting points and constant reference points for those deliberations were:

- a) the passages in the Acts of the Apostles which narrate the story of the first evangelization of Europe and
- b) the guiding principles of Vatican II, especially chapter 6 of *Dei Verbum*. We wish to share with you the fruits of our deliberations:

1. The power of the Gospel

- 1.1 Given the present reality of deep divisions, of resurgent nationalism and of violent conflict within its borders, Europe urgently needs to experience again the saving power of God's Word.
- 1.2 In a world growing ever more fragmented the unifying power of God's Word is needed, a power that can reach across religious, social and other boundaries to build the unity of God's people.
- 1.3 At a time of cultural change when many searching people are beset by insecurity and when many are drawn into religious sects and similar groups, there is a great need for the clarifying power and wisdom of God's Word.

2. The treasures of Scripture can be discovered in different ways

The words of Vatican II spoke to us powerfully, "Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful" (DV 22). It is important that people be provided with an initiation to the Scriptures that dovetails with and complements their initiation to the Sacraments. This initiation can be provided at different levels and in a variety of pastoral contexts, e.g. in catechesis, in liturgy.

- 2.1 Without in any way devaluing other lines of approach, two ways of approach seem particularly helpful:
 - a) Different ways of reading the Bible which lead to a *direct encounter with God's Word*. Here, the practice of *Lectio Divina* suggests a useful way of proceeding, namely, that of allowing the Word of God to respond in a living way to the different hopes and aspirations of people. This direct encounter with the Word of God can take place at three levels:
 - *in the parish or in large groups* (e.g. Bible Sundays, - Weeks, - Months, - Years)

- in discussions about the Bible and its message *in small groups* (e.g. Bible reading in the family, Bible circles, courses on the Bible).
- *in a personal reading of the Word of God in faith.*

b) Making contact with the Scriptures through the liturgy of the Church. Particular attention needs to be given to the ministry of readers and to the formation of preachers. These ministries of reading and preaching are carried out most effectively when those involved first enter into an open and genuine dialogue with the biblical text. There is an urgent need both for the training of such ministers and for their enrichment of one another through meeting to reflect on the Word of God together.

2.2 In order that the Word of God may reach the widest possible audience it is appropriate to make use of different media and channels of communication to spread the Good News. In the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe there exists at this time a pressing need to make the Bible available in annotated editions and at reasonable prices.

2.3 We have gratefully taken notice of the most recent document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) which in view of the spreading fundamentalism adheres to the necessity of the historical-critical method, but has also recognized the importance of other methods and approaches to make Sacred Scripture as Word of God accessible to people today.

3. Competence in the service of God's Word

A great service is provided when "As many ministers of the divine Word as possible are able effectively to provide the nourishment of the Scriptures for the people of God" (DV 23).

3.1 It is our belief that the most effective ministers of God's Word are those who have been transformed themselves by that Word (personal witness), who are willing and capable of contributing to the upbuilding of the Church (ecclesial witness), who are able to handle biblical texts in a responsible and fruitful way (know the Bible and its culture).

3.2 For this reason it is important to foster dialogue with Scripture at personal and community level. We have experienced for ourselves the benefits of listening to the Word together and of relating its message to the issues of our times.

4. The need for all pastoral activity to be inspired by the Word of God

We noted again how, "Like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and ruled by Sacred Scripture" (DV 21).

4.1 In many places *institutions catering for the biblical apostolate* exist: there are regional, diocesan and national publishing companies. There are international institutions such as the Catholic Biblical Federation which is located in Stuttgart. These institutions are very valuable and deserving of support. Each makes a contribution towards ensuring that the Bible is given the place it merits in the life of the Church. It gives us particular joy to record that in the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe institutions which publish biblical material have already been established or are about to be established. One of the most important tasks of these institutions is, with financial support from abroad, to train and provide ongoing formation for those who are involved in the biblical apostolate.

4.2 The biblical apostolate should not be simply one particular activity alongside other pastoral activities. Rather, it ought to promote a situation where *all pastoral strategy and praxis* is drawing its inspiration and values from the Word of God. To this end, there is an ongoing need to assess pastoral planning and activity at all levels of the Church's life to see whether or not it is rooted in the values of the Gospel.

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

Our shared concern that the Bible be given its due place in the Church throughout Europe now and in the time ahead binds us in a unity that transcends borders and boundaries. It is our hope that this European meeting will be a positive step towards ensuring that all pastoral activity in the countries of Europe "is healthily nourished and yields fruits of holiness through the Word of Scripture" (DV 24).

Freising, 19.02.1994

On behalf of the participants

+ Henryk Muszynski
Archbishop of Gniezno

+ Wilhelm Egger
Bishop of Bolzano-Bressanone