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*Catholic Biblical Federation
10th Plenary Assembly
Mar Del Plata, Argentina*



The Plenary Assembly Closing Address by the CBF President

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April 21, 2023

Note: This text is a transcript of the audio recording of the Cardinal's speech. All arrangements, punctuation, and adjustments are the responsibility of the editor.

In the name of the federation, I would like to thank all of you, all the delegates from the various regions, for your ministry and for participating in the Assembly. Special thanks to Monsignor Gabriel Antonio Mestre, the Diocese of Mar del Plata, and the diocesan national and regional organizers. We thank Cardinal Kurt Koch, the prefect of the Dicastery, for the Promotion of Christian Unity, and Monsignor Juan Fernando Osma, our link to the Dicastery. I would like to thank in a particular way, the Administrative Board, the Executive Board, that just finished its term, presided by Bishop Matthew Madega. To our heroic secretary, Father Jan Stefanow. Special thanks. We thank our many donors, our many benefactors, funding agencies and the Friends of the Catholic Biblical Federation. And I am inviting you to remember, with gratitude, our great friend Mr. Holger Sichler. May he rest in peace.

For the first part of my sharing, I would like to just share with you what I have seen, what I have heard, what I have touched during the past years and what I have learned from the federation since. Joining it as president in 2015 in Nemi, I look back and thank God for the constitutions that we approved in Nemi in 2015. And a month ago, in March, we inaugurated the CBF secretariat at the office in the Vatican. Although there are still some legal matters that must be addressed, but this is a very big, big move. And during the past years, I simply marveled at the wonderful Ministry of the Members, of the Federation in the parishes in the homes, in the schools, in the small Christian communities in the dioceses and the regions. I believe that's where the life of the federation lies. And during the pandemic, I think the executive committee met more times during the pandemic than before the pandemic and I would really like to thank the members of the previous executive committee for their availability. We thank the members for the creative approaches, especially through social media and Internet, to share, to proclaim God's word among the families among those who were depressed and were looking for a

source of strength and. I believe that the requests for Bible formation are increased during the pandemic.

I thank the Federation, which is a sign and an instrument of the communion of the local churches. A communion forged by their respective Biblical pastoral ministry. And at the heart of the Federation is fraternal communion, fraternal cooperation; the marvelous exchange of ministerial initiatives and resources. I want to affirm that. And we thank God for that sense profound sense of ecclesial communion through the Federation.

And I invite all the Members to continue, strengthening that fraternal cooperation and fraternal spirit. Let us together own this fraternity, own this federation by contributing our talents, our resources, the wealth of the Biblical ministry present in the different parts of the world. Let us contribute to the ongoing cooperation now, which is universal now in the biblical ministry. Maybe we can look back a bit even before Vatican II, when we had the biblical liturgical renewal movements leading up to Vatican II and the great document day Verbum and then the synods of bishops leading up to the Synod of Bishop on the Word of God. That produced Verbum Domini. And then the recent teachings of Pope Francis and the experience of the synodal process bringing all of this together convinced us of the need to understand more deeply and to practice it more creatively. The call to make the word of God animate, animate the whole of the pastoral life of the church. As was repeatedly said during the deliberations, the Biblical, pastoral ministry should not be considered as just one of the other ministries, and sadly, not even just one of the many other ministries. Sometimes even just an addendum to the other ministries. That should not happen, that is not the orientation that we have received from the biblical renewal, that entered the Council and continues up to today.

If I be asked to reflect on it and make suggestions, this is just my thinking, then, if we look at the life of the church and the evangelizing mission of the Church, we realize that there are three foundations. First is the Word of God. Second is the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. And the third is the service of charity. Maybe we can reorder our dioceses and vicariates, and have these three as the as the foundations of all the other ministries. All three must be present in all the other ministries. For example, the youth ministry must be animated by the Word of God, by prayer and worship and service of charity. Family Life Ministry must be founded on the Biblical, pastoral ministry which permeates all the other organizations, all the other activities, all the processions, all the popular religious activities, together with sacrament and the and the service of charity. Healthcare, school education, human development, the promotion of the integrity of creation, all of them, must be based on the Word of God, the sacraments, and also the service of charity. I'm proposing this, knowing that it is not easy to implement. The experts among you and the more creative thinkers among you, could help reconfigure these ministries with the foundation on the three, the three pillars of the life of the Church and of its evangelizing mission, so this is the first part of my sharing.

The second part is my way of contributing or reflecting further on the theme, my contribution to the theme, which will not really produce anything new, having listened to some of the of the sharing and then seeing the main points of the final statement really this is just an affirmation. And maybe a new

one thing, or one place, one part or the other. This is a beautiful theme. I remember the meeting of the executive committee. Where we reflected on this and among different options to propose to the organizers proclaiming the Word, the proclaiming the word gift of life for a fragile world, based on Romans 8:22-23. Again I would like to thank the speakers, the panelists, and those who asked questions for your rich and profound exchange. I would just like to offer a few reflections, basically just making two points.

First, is on the experience of fragility, being fragile. Fragility is a condition which we relate to limitations, to being limited, or at the condition of weakness. And very often this condition is connected to an assault from outside. There are some forces from outside, limits that make us more vulnerable or weaker. And sometimes this is also connected to sinfulness. Although fragility and sinfulness are two distinct things that could be related, fragility is not always a sign of sinfulness, but they can be real. No matter what the costs or the perspective might be, fragility is something that is not appreciated in our world today. It is rejected. It is denied. It is camouflaged and it is ridiculed. You see this especially in the return in the world of politics, of the strong man leader. The moment you show some signs of weakness or you admit your limitations then you are not appreciated; they will reject you. And the discussions during the Assembly justly and rightly indicated the crisis, the disruptive behaviors that underlie the experience of fragility in creation, in the world. We think of the places where armed conflicts are raging right now. And also we experience of fragility in the Church. They are forces like corruption, weakening persons, weakening the will, weakening our relationships. And it is good that during the Assembly, a discernment process has been done to identify, to name those forces. I would like also to signal another aspect of fragility, the fragility of being a creature. By being a creature, we are, de facto limited, weak and vulnerable. A creature is a bundle of needs. That aspect of fragility is to be accepted as part of human reality. In fact, it might even be part of a good, of growth as a human person. To accept this is to be at home with our given fragility or limitations as human beings. So we can even say that fragility has an aspect of giftedness. It is part of the gift of being, a creature, a creation of the Almighty God.

The temptation or the offer of the serpent, the snake in Genesis 3:5 was, and I quote, "God knows, God knows well that when you eat of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, who know good and evil." The temptation was to enter this illusion that you could be the creator, that you could leave your wonderful and gifted state as a creature. But it was an illusion. It was the illusion of being all powerful, all knowing. That is at the root, or at least one of the roots of the destruction of human lives of societies and creation. Attempts to escape from this factor, the factor of fragility in order to pretend to be God, this is one of the roots that corrupt human life creation, human persons. Then existence becomes negatively fragile, fragile in a negatively oppressive way. Because it is destroyed or weakened by injustice, lack of respect. And when we look closely at it, it is promoted by people who fail to accept their de facto fragility and who lust for false omnipotence.

How does God look at our fragility at our frailty even when our frailty leads us to false choices or even sinful choices? Here I draw inspiration from Psalm 103:13. Where it is said, "as a father has compassion

on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear God. For God knows how we are formed. God remembers that we are dust." God the creator remembers our fragility. And God remembers how he said, "this is very good." This simple, fragile creature is filled with goodness. And when fragility turns into sinfulness, God remembers that we are made of dust, and God has mercy. God has compassion. Those who refuse to remember that they are dust and the others are dust, they will have no mercy. This is one point that that was triggered in my mind regarding fragility. It is both a gift, but also something that that could be a sign of corruption, and we navigate between these two senses. There is a healthy acceptance of and liberating and humanizing acceptance of fragility. But there is also the fragility that is the result of oppression and injustice on the part of those who pretend to be omnipotent.

This leads me to the second and my final point regarding the theme: proclaiming the word as gift for a fragile world. I propose something that has already been mentioned in the panel discussions and in the questions. I propose that we, as individual ministers and our parishes, our ministries, our dioceses, and even the whole Federation, that we proclaim God's word as fragile persons, as fragile cultures and as fragile churches, in the in the sense of in the sense of having accepted the beauty of creatureliness and fragility. We do not need to pretend to be stronger than others in order to proclaim the Word of God. And we cannot wait for the time when we have graduated from every sign of fragility and weakness of ignorance and lack of understanding, before proclaiming the Word. We cannot be utopic, saying that we will proclaim the word only when fully strong. In fact, we might be more profitable ministerially if we as individuals and as communities announce the word of hope while we are in an existential communion of fragility. A communion of fragile brothers and sisters to whom we proclaim the word within our limits, and even within our brokenness, our sinfulness.

I am always inspired by the four friends of the man who was paralyzed. They wanted to bring him to Jesus, but the door was blocked by the crowd. But that did not stop them. No, the situation was fragile. What did they do? They looked for other ways. They went up the roof and opened the roof. Yes, that is a part of fragility. Within our limits we look for where are the doors that are being opened, where are the possibilities? I am inspired by many figures in scriptures, like Jeremiah, chapter 20:7-9, as someone who was seduced by the Lord. He was fragile. He could not say no to the Lord. And he became more fragile because of the resistance and the derision that he got. So here is another type of fragility: the suffering inflicted on him by those who did not welcome the Word of God. And so he complained to God. But then he felt a deeper fragility. He could not resist God's word. He could not resist God's mission. There was a fire burning within his heart, imprisoned within his bones and he said "I grow weary holding back." Here is the blending of two types of fragility, the fragility of one who is in love and becomes helpless before the beloved, and at the same time the suffering, the fragility imposed on him by the enemies of the Word of God. But Jeremiah continued to proclaim in that context of the double fragility of life. Job is another such example, proclaiming only the goodness of the Lord faithfully, as he shared the experience of so many people who have lost family, property and then who suffered physical pain. I remember the Syrophenician woman suffering because of the sickness of her child, and then experiencing the fragility of not having anyone to turn to. And then she approached

Jesus, and heard are words from Jesus almost like comparing her to a dog. But then she expressed her faith, and Jesus marveled, Jesus marveled. Our Blessed Mother Mary, who stood by the Cross of Jesus according to the Gospel of Saint John. She was most fragile at that point, and she shared in the fragility of her son hanging on the cross. But at that moment, that is where she proclaimed not so much through words, but through her presence: "this is my beloved son." The others had left him, but she stood there fragile, and doubly fragile because of her son suffering, but proclaimed courageously "this is my beloved son." Jesus was fragile on the cross, he could not move. But as the movement of insult and mockery continued, he continued to proclaim: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they're doing; I say to you today you will be with me in Paradise." And with all the fragility of the world on his shoulders and in his heart, he cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is the fragility of someone who felt abandoned yet still addressed the one who seemed distant or absent. This is the fragility that becomes proclamation. We know the fragility of Peter. But then we know him also professing in a humble way, love: "You know Lord that I love you. You know, Lord, you know me better than I know myself. So I cannot say I know I love you. You know that I love you." And then Saint Paul. In 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 where he asked the Lord to remove this thorn from him in the flesh, the response he got was that "my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. I rather boast most gladly of my weakness in order that the power of Christ may dwell in me." And in the same letter, chapter 4:7, he says "we hold the treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us."

Then the fragility of the collaboration. We're talking about the synodal process and all the more we talk about it, the more fragile the Church shows itself in following the so-called synodal process. But it is not new. For example, Paul and Barnabas. Good friends, but also how fragile the collaboration was! Remember that it was Barnabas who introduced Saul to the other Christians who were suspicious of him in Acts ch. 9. It was Barnabas who brought Saul to Antioch, and introduced him to the community there. The lively community in Acts 11 in Antioch was in prayer, and the Holy Spirit asked the community to set aside Barnabas and Paul for a mission. They went and they took with them John, Mark. But halfway through the ministry, the mission Mark left them. And so, for the second journey, Barnabas thought of bringing John Mark along. But Paul refused and that caused a bitter disagreement; they parted ways, they split. Barnabas went with Mark and Paul went with Silas. But I don't know now, because in the second letter to Timothy, chapter 4:11, Paul considers Mark helpful. So probably there was some sort of reconciliation. But look, in their fragile relationship, they continued proclaiming the Word of God, they did not destroy each other. So the split, in a way, that fragile working together became an occasion to spread the Word of God to a wider audience. So proclaiming the word as a gift to the to a fragile world. But I would like to propose also proclaiming the word as a fragile co-journeyer, embodying Jesus' self-emptying, his solidarity with his brothers and sisters who were filled with limitations and even errors. That was his mode of guiding and teaching them, by being one of them, the shepherd, who is also the lamb. And I guess he was shepherd because he became a lamb, one of the sheep.

In one conversation that I had with some people and they said, yes, we often hear from Pope Francis a reminder that the shepherds among us, and not only the ordained, but all those who have some roles of responsibility should smell like the sheep. And we know the understanding that the Holy Father is telling us that the shepherds should be immersed in the life of the sheep. But I want to remind others that we should smell like the sheep. That should mean primarily that we, shepherds, should smell as sheep, because de facto we are sheep. And we should not forget that: it's not just to imitate them as if they were separate, as if the sheep are there and I am here because I am a shepherd. No, I am also a sheep, and that is what Jesus showed us: that it is as sheep that we could be shepherd to one another. As fragile sheep. Then with each other and with the rest of the human of humanity, and from within that common fragility, that shared fragility both as gift and as an assault, we proclaim the truth. He proclaimed the truth, the source of strength, the source of true power, the source of true peace.

Each person is fragile. And so we need other fragile persons to walk with. As I also walk with them, we go hand in hand, supporting each other and understanding each one's fragility. Each culture is fragile, and no culture can pretend to be stronger than the others. We need each other's wisdom, as we all share in giftedness, and also in sinfulness. Each parish, each ecclesial movement, each organization is fragile, so we need each other. We cannot shut off one another, for that will make our experience not anymore the type of fragility that makes us depend on God and on each other, and then discover the power that God gives, but it becomes a competition where we destroy one another.

When we as fragile sheep embracing the fragility of the rest of the humanity and from within, proclaim the word of life and hope, then we also expose the false power and the false strength that destroys humanity, that endangers creation, and makes the beautifully fragile creature of God really like a victim of inhumanity. So, I guess, before us is the choice. In Luke 18:9-14 we have the pharisees and the publican. The Pharisee who came before God really succumbed to the temptation to be like God, even better than God. He did not need God, he did not need to pray. The publican recognized his fragility and relied on God. Who went home justified? The fragile publican. The prophet Micah in chapter 6:1-8 tells Israel who, instead of repenting, started bribing God. "O'key God, you're angry. What do you need? How can we appease your anger? You need the harvest. You need rams, you need calves. You need oil. You need my first born?" Israel was pretending to be stronger than God. But God said, "you have been told, O mortal, O mortal, what is good and what the Lord requires of you. Only to do justice to love, goodness, and to walk humbly with your God. And walk humbly with each other." Thank you very much for your patience and I would like to thank all of you again for the wonderful experience of this Assembly. God bless you. God bless.