

The Final Statement of the Hong Kong Plenary Assembly

WORD OF GOD – SOURCE OF LIFE

1.0 We, 170 delegates of the members of the Catholic Biblical Federation, coming from 70 countries, gathered at the University of Science and Technology, Clearwater Bay, Hong Kong from 2-12 July 1996.

1.1 We had been invited to meet around the theme “*Word of God – Source of Life*”. This meeting gave us the opportunity to share our experiences, our richly diverse experiences, of the life-giving and also the death-dealing forces at work in our societies, and of the ways in which the Word of God, and our ministry of the Word, has been a source of life for us. We became increasingly aware that our world is profoundly marked by the challenges of social justice, of peace, and of the protection of creation. We were greatly encouraged in our work by the exhortation of Pope John Paul II in his Letter to the Assembly: “*As you pray and study, you are deeply conscious of the quest for divine life which characterizes men and women today, the deep longing for certainty and hope which fills many human hearts*”, just as we had been encouraged and confirmed in our choice of theme for the Assembly by the Pope’s passionate defense of the dignity of life, expressed in *Evangelium vitae* and in so many other places.

1.2 We reflected on the biblical text and on the ways in which it illuminates, and is illuminated by, our experience. In particular, we continued to return to the way in which the Gospel according to John presents the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-42). This text was the matter for our daily *lectio divina*. In this Final Statement we offer one *lectio* of this text and try to relate it to our ministry for the coming six years. Our *lectio* reflects the Asian setting of our meeting. It is influenced by Asian traditions which value harmonious wisdom, which find life in the “*cave of the heart*”.

2. “Jesus, tired out by the journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon” (Jn 4:6)

2.1 Our story begins at noontime, a busy part of the day already behind, a fruitful part yet to come. It was but a pause in Jesus’ life-journey, yet significant enough to affect us today. As members of the Catholic Biblical Federation, we have journeyed on from Bogotá and, as we look with hope to the future, we have paused at Hong Kong’s well. The people of Hong Kong are continuing their journey, pondering the opportunities and challenges of moving into a new Millennium under a new political dispensation. This is a fitting place for us to assess our own journey in biblical pastoral ministry, and to ponder its challenges and opportunities.

2.2 Jesus sits at the well, at the place of encounter (cfr Gn 21:22-34; Gn 24:10-27; Gn 26:15-25; Ex 2:16-22). Around the well people shared, evaluated and planned their lives. Here they told the stories of their struggles, made known their thirst for harmony and peace. Precisely at Jacob’s well, they were reminded of their ancestry, their age-old traditions, traditions of which we too are beneficiaries.

2.3 Jesus sits at the well, the place where the basic human need for water, for refreshment, is met. At the well we find the fresh water needed for life’s journey.

2.4 Here in Hong Kong that act of Jesus resonates with our experience. We sit in a place where East meets West, where the ancient wisdom and traditions of China live side by side with modern urbanization and commercial entrepreneurship. We sense here, as in so many cities, that people are hoping for, thirsting for, survival in the midst of so much consumerism and waste, for true community in the midst of loneliness and alienation. We see economic growth set in towering structures of glass and concrete, and we see people suffering as a result of the greed of the powerful few, and hoping that the benefits of growth will be shared with those most in need. We are conscious, especially in a University of Science and Technology, of how technological advance shows forth our God-given human ingenuity, of technology’s promise of relieving burdens and monotony. And we hope that this new world will be one in which human dignity and the integrity of creation are revered. We sense too a deeper thirst, a thirst for a continuing personal encounter with the God revealed

in Jesus. Empowered by God's Spirit, we desire to share this life-giving experience. In the noonday heat of today's often alienated world, we thirst for the abundant life which Jesus as Source can offer.

3. "If only you knew what God gives . . ." (Jn 4:10)

3.1 As we ponder this thirst for true life, we realize that God, the "*lover of life*" (Wt 11:26) has always been giving us life. God's creative Spirit has always been at work in the world, responding to our desire, our thirst, for survival, for bread, for shelter, for freedom, for community, for solidarity. God has been writing the book of life on the pages of different cultures, of different religious traditions, of the lives of ordinary women and men.

3.2 But we are easily blind to what God is doing. Our eyes need to be opened. We can easily stop short at superficial desires, desires that are still too self-centered. The Samaritan woman at first desired a world in which she would not have to come every day to fetch water. Her desires needed, as ours need, to be deepened and purified. The Word of God can give us deeper insight into reality, can help us to see God's hand at work in the splendor of creation, in communities striving for justice and peace, in the beauty of human life. Just as the Samaritan woman's desires were deepened and purified in her encounter with Jesus, so the Word of God can deepen and purify our desires, helping us realize that God's desire for us, the desire that "*they may have life, and have it in all its fullness*" (Jn 10:10) "*can accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine*" (Eph 3:20). The Word enables us to see our reality and our hopes with new eyes. At the same time that reality can give us a new lens through which to read the Word.

3.3 This deepening of insight and desire takes place gradually. Such a process of conversion is the task of a lifetime. Only gradually did the woman of Samaria move from seeing Jesus as a Jew who, to her immense surprise, spoke to her, to seeing him as a possible provider of ordinary water, to seeing him as a prophet, then as the Messiah, and finally enabling her people to see him for themselves as Savior of the world. Only gradually did she move from a desire for water, to a desire for an unfailing source of water, to a desire for the water that springs up to eternal life. Only gradually does she become a disciple and apostle (cfr Mk 8:22-38, Jn 9:1-41, Jn 11:21-27). Only gradually have we, in this Plenary Assembly, through our listening, our sharing of experience, our *lectio divina*, been led more deeply into the mystery of God's life-giving love.

4. "It is I who am speaking to you" (Jn 4:26)

4.1 "*In many and varied ways*" (Hb 1:1) God is present in life, in history, in the culture of people. How can we discover and experience this presence? How are we to read the Bible so that it reveals this fountain of life and truly becomes Good News, above all for the poor (Lk 4:18)?

4.2 Jesus revealed God as Father. His very food was to do the Father's will (v. 34). This was the wellspring of his mission: "*I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me*" (Jn 8:28). This is why he has a fresh outlook, which enables him to disclose the presence of God in life (v. 35). He is the gift God gives, the source of living water (v. 10). In his life, in all that he says and does, he lets us glimpse the face of God. "*The one who sees me sees the Father*" (Jn 14:9). He is the prism through which we discover the way that leads to the source of life.

4.3 Jesus was faithful to the culture and traditions of his people (v. 22). But his vivid sense of the presence of God as Father gave him great freedom with regard to laws and customs that were contrary to life and to brotherhood and sisterhood. Thus, he travels to Samaria (v. 3); though a man, he speaks openly to a woman (v. 7); though a Jew, he welcomes a Samaritan who was moreover an outcast, and enters into respectful dialogue with her (v. 9); he lived with Samaritans for two days, not inhibited by the rules on ritual purity (v. 40).

4.4 The presence of God gives him new eyes with which to read the Bible, to discover new meanings there (vv. 20-24), to understand in a new way the realities of life (v. 35), to see a source of life in people considered as heretics by his contemporaries, to enable them to see the gift of God in their lives (v. 14).

4.5 By living and by sharing life, Jesus reveals the face of God. But, at the same time, he lets people discover their own face, their own identity, their own ability to work together for a better life. In this way the Samaritan community was able to bridge the gulf that separated them from the Jews, and welcome Jesus the Jew into their midst.

4.6 This path that Jesus points out as leading to the source of life is a difficult path, a path beset by conflict. Today our path passes through the conflict between a culture of death and communities seeking the realization of life-giving love. It is not always a clear path, something that Jesus himself experienced in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman (vv. 4, 11-13, 15, 17, 19-20). But this is the path by which he revealed himself as Messiah, the one who would fulfill the hope of his people (v. 26). And in living together with him, the Samaritans discovered who he was in fact – the “*savior of the world*” (v. 42).

5. “. . . neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem” (Jn 4:21)

5.1 Jesus and the woman of Samaria argue about the place where God is truly worshipped. It is a dialogue that leads to the crossing, the transcending, of borders

- between cultures and religions (v. 9)
- between woman and man (v. 27)
- between the powerful and the powerless (v. 7).

This happens in the encounter between Jesus – hungry, thirsty and tired (vv. 4,6,8) – and the woman – thirsting for life (v. 15). It happens at the well, the place of everyday reality. It happens in a dialogue of faith, in which both partners experience at first difficulty and misunderstandings, but in which by listening to each other they are led to ever greater depths.

5.2 In this dialogue it becomes clear that the whole world and everyday life, and not merely some special holy places and times, is the place where God is worshipped “*in spirit and in truth*” (v. 23f.), and where Jesus first reveals himself as Messiah (v. 26). What is now decisive is life in the spirit of Jesus and in service to the truth, whose human face is the praxis of justice, is sisterhood and brotherhood, is living in compassion with the needy and suffering (cfr 1 Jn 4:20). This new life is shaped by attentiveness to the will of God, revealed to God’s own people, in accord with which Jesus himself lived (v. 34), and of which the Spirit ever reminds us (Jn 14:26).

5.3 A pastoral praxis that is inspired by and grounded in the Bible has much to learn from this border-transcending encounter and dialogue.

5.3.1 Biblical pastoral ministry is dialogical, sensitive to the real situations in which we live, sensitive to people’s thirst for life, ready to listen to and to respect those with whom we enter into conversation.

5.3.2 We need to learn that God can be encountered in utterly surprising and unfamiliar places, among people of other beliefs and of no belief, beyond the walls of the church, beyond holy times and places, and in all activities that truly seek the service of our individual or collective neighbor.

5.3.3 Many people live in a world where the struggle to survive is a daily reality. Many others are tasting the fruits of freedom after long oppression, and at the same time discovering the new challenges that freedom brings. Many too live in a world where people see themselves as secular and post-modern. But in each of these worlds people are seeking in the depth of the world an experience of the divine. Hence, biblical pastoral ministry cannot remain the business only of religious people, something carried on only within the church community. It needs to bring the Good News into conversation with all areas of life, so that women and men can come to experience and confess that the presence of God, made visible in Jesus, can bring salvation and liberation, peace and reconciliation to the whole world.

5.3.4 Such salvation and liberation, such peace and reconciliation, can come about only if we overcome both the tendency of many cultures and traditions (even of some Christian traditions!) to measure the worth of a person by his or her gender, race, religion, culture, economic status, or power, and the tendency to divide the world into the good and the bad, those for God and those against God.

5.3.5 This attitude of dialogue, of sensitivity to and feeling for “the other”, for people of different culture, different faith, different world-view, is totally incompatible with any religious arrogance and with any fundamentalist understanding of the Bible. The “spiritual narrowness” of such fundamentalisms has rightly been criticized (Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*).

6. “These are the true worshippers, whom the Father seeks” (Jn 4:25)

6.1 However much we long for life, however anxiously we seek it, God is even more eager to give it to us. The journey of humankind towards God is also God’s journey towards us. Our desire for true life meets God’s desire for true worshippers.

6.2 God “*the lover of life*” (Ws 11:26) “*meets God’s sons and daughters with great love and speaks with them*” (DV 21), and is ready to share the divine life with them through Jesus Christ, who is present where two or three gather in his name.

6.3 We see this life-giving, initiative-taking, God at work in Jesus as he meets the Samaritan woman, speaking to her heart, entering into the depth of her life, opening her towards the Father, introducing her to the infinite horizon of worship in Spirit and in truth.

6.4 Jesus spoke of his giving life to us as his “*food*”, the reason for his being in the world – “*My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete the work he gave me to do*” (v. 34); “This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life” (Jn 6:41); “*I have come that they may have life, life in all its fullness*” (Jn 10:10).

6.5 Today Jesus continues his “work” through his word. This word is no dead letter. It has a life of its own. It is not first the reader who analyzes, explains and discloses the meaning of the text. Rather it is the text itself that enlightens and reveals its truth. This attitude of respect before the living text resonates deeply with traditions in Asian cultures. It calls for both the effort of listening to God, and the awareness of God’s readiness to speak to us.

6.6 Hence, the reader comes in grateful wonder and sincere humility, in openness, in readiness to be surprised, to give praise, to be immersed in the infinite, to enter into God’s heart through God’s word, to be caught up in the fullness of life, a life which is walking in love and in light.

7. “We believe now . . . because we have heard for ourselves” (Jn 4:42)

7.1 The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan is no mere private conversation. It takes the woman back to her community. It leads to a meeting between, a sharing of life between, a Samaritan community and a Jewish community.

7.2 In a way which must have caused surprise, even shock, the fourth gospel presents a woman (traditionally an unqualified witness) as the first to whom Jesus reveals himself as Messiah. It goes further by presenting this woman, with all her unhappy history, as the apostle of her community. In inviting her fellow villagers to “*come and see a man who has told me everything I have ever done*” (v. 28) she continues the work of Jesus who is depicted a few chapters earlier as inviting his first disciples to “*come and see*” (Jn 1:39).

7.3 But then the woman steps back from the scene; she speaks not of herself but of Jesus, decreasing so that he may increase (cfr Jn 3:30). She not only shares her experience of Jesus, but enables the others to enter into the experience of Jesus for themselves. And as they do so, they come to an even deeper and broader insight – Jesus truly is the “*savior of the world*” (v. 42).

7.4 Such experience and insight is not instantaneous. It comes only after “*two days*” (v. 40), after a sharing not only of conversation, but of life.

7.5 The implications for biblical pastoral ministry are clear

- we, women and men both, are called to apostleship, to invite others to “*come and see*”
- we “*preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus*” (2 Cor 4:5)
- we engage in true dialogue when we do not just exchange words but share in solidarity in the realities of each other’s lives
- in such a dialogue we are both learners and teachers
- in this dialogue, this encounter, we hope to meet the other, and together to meet Jesus and to experience the ways in which he is the life-giving savior of the world.

8. “. . . look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting” (Jn 4:35)

8.0 A true vision of our mission has touched our minds, our hearts and our imagination as we have “read” the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. If this vision is to become more of a reality during the next six years, we have to move from vision to action. Hence, we make the following commitments in our mission of sharing God’s Word of Life:

8.1 The Catholic Biblical Federation commits itself to

8.1.1 further strengthening the process of regionalization begun in Bogotá, and seeking creatively new forms of networking

8.1.2 deepening our reflection on reading the Bible in context, and on the related hermeneutical questions

8.1.3 promoting the possibility of a Synod of Bishops on the Word of God, with particular attention to the reception of chapter VI of *Dei Verbum*, and being ready to contribute to the preparation for such a Synod; in particular, preparing, through the Executive Committee and sub/regional coordinators a paper on the “*Role of the Bible and of Biblical Pastoral Ministry in the Church*” in view of such a Synod

8.1.4 forming closer relationships with other groups in whose ministry the Bible plays or could play a central role, for example, liturgical institutes, catechetical and pastoral formation centers, commissions for justice, peace and the integrity of creation

8.1.5 seeking new possibilities for cooperation with the Pontifical Biblical Commission

8.1.6 networking with official national and local groups preparing for the religious celebration of the Third Millennium

8.1.7 working actively for the cancellation of international debts by the year 2000, in order to make it a real year of Jubilee, a lifting of burdens from the oppressed

8.1.8 promoting the role of women in all activities of the Federation, and promoting the use of inclusive language in its activities at all levels

8.1.9 approaching, through the Executive Committee and/or General Secretariat, the competent ecclesiastical authorities with a view to having included in the regular curriculum of seminaries and ecclesiastical faculties courses on “*The Reading of the Bible in the Church*” (with a historical, hermeneutical and pastoral approach), and on non-Christian cultures, religions and philosophies in view of fruitful dialogue between them and the biblical message

8.1.10 approaching, through the Executive Committee and/or General Secretariat, the competent authorities with a view to cooperating in the revision of the Lectionary

8.2 The individual members of the Federation commit themselves to

8.2.1 a continuing study of the Final Statement of Bogotá and of the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on the *Interpretation of the Bible*, in order to apply the insights of these documents in the different and plural contexts in which the members work

8.2.2 making explicit attention to biblical exegesis part of the workshops and meetings in which they participate, in order to provide models of the ways in which scientific exegesis and pastoral wisdom can be mutually enriching

8.2.3 making formation, of both lay people and clergy, for biblical pastoral ministry a high priority. Such formation programs will

8.2.3.1 include a grounding in sound principles of exegesis

8.2.3.2 not be confined to classroom situations, but prepare people through experience for the “*dialogue of life*”, with other cultures, with other faith traditions, with the poor and marginalized. Dialogue with the fragile cultures of indigenous peoples is of distinctive importance

8.2.4 for the liturgical celebration of God’s Word and for catechesis – working both to make existing forms more effective, and to develop new forms; being always attentive to the relationships between the Bible, life, and liturgy and catechesis

8.2.5 promoting a style of preaching that takes account of the community’s testimony to the ways in which God’s Word has been a source of life for them

8.2.6 creatively entering into the world of youth, so that the Word of God can become a source of life in their hopes and their uncertainties

8.2.7 making greater use of contemporary communications technology, for example, video productions, shared databases, the Internet

8.2.8 making a continuing thorough study of all the acts of this Plenary Assembly – the texts of the major presentations, the thematic papers on contexts of Bible reading, the workshop reports, as well as this Final Statement – and creatively applying the insights contained there in their biblical pastoral ministry.

8.3 These commitments are indeed many and varied, but they reflect our belief that the potential harvest is indeed great. At this moment in history, the suffering of the world and the challenges to the Church are all too obvious. We see challenges, however, as invitations to commitment and creativity, given hope by those words from the fourth gospel: “*Do you not say, ‘Four months and then the harvest?’ But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting*” (Jn 4:35).