

## THE WORD OF GOD: A BLESSING FOR ALL NATIONS

### BIBLICAL PASTORAL MINISTRY IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD

#### I. The Context of the 6<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly

**1. The journey of the Catholic Biblical Federation into the new millennium.** We, the 150 delegates of member organizations of the Catholic Biblical Federation from 70 countries have met near Beirut in Fatka, Ghazir, Lebanon from September 3-12, 2002 for our 6<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly. We have gathered here, mindful of our commitment and of our conviction that the Word of God is meant to be a “blessing for all nations” (Gen 22:18) and that God “shows us ways of life” (Acts 2:28).

Called and mandated in a special way to proclaim the Word of God unto the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1:8) unhindered and with boldness (cf. 28:31), we have come together to share, like Paul and Barnabas returning from their missionary journeys, what God has done through our ministry (cf. 14:27; 15:3), to reflect on today’s challenges of our biblical pastoral ministry (cf. 15:7b-12) and to recommit ourselves to our ministry in facing the new challenges with courage (cf. 15:22-41).

Our sharing, reflection and re-commitment have been inspired and guided by our daily encounter with the Word in the Acts of the Apostles, our encounters with one another coming from the four corners of the world, and the daily celebrations of our unity in diversity in the Eucharist, as well as our encounter with the Christian communities and people of Lebanon.

Thus we experienced ourselves anew as fellow-travellers with the Word in the Catholic Biblical Federation, continuing its journey which has been marked by the milestones of previous Assemblies in Vienna (1972), Malta (1978), Bangalore (1984), Bogotá (1990) and Hong Kong (1996). We gratefully acknowledge, in our journeying together, the many impulses these assemblies have given to the Federation; but also – and perhaps even more so – we are encouraged to face together the new challenges for the ministry of the Word and for the Federation at the beginning of the new millennium.

**2. We met in Lebanon:** a land of the Bible, visited by Jesus himself and his disciples (Mt 15:21); a land – between Jerusalem and Antioch – where the Gospel was preached by the first ministers of the Word; a country in which adherents of the three religions of the children of Abraham are at home; a country at the crossroads of cultures and religions; a country which has suffered from rivalries and wars and now experiences a new revitalization; a country in which “interreligious dialogue is a respectful and sincere meeting in which the encountering parties want to know each other, to learn from one another, to enrich each other and to love one another” (Message of the Synod of Bishops for Asia, n. 5); a country which is both a symbol and a message. In Lebanon we have remembered and have been inspired by that first Pentecost at the beginning of the first millennium.

**3. We are part of the pilgrim Church.** We recalled in Lebanon that the mandate of the Catholic Biblical Federation at the beginning of this new millennium arises from the vision and promise of a new Pentecost in our pilgrimage which began with the Second Vatican Council. We are inspired by the teaching of the Church, which reminds us in post-conciliar and post-synodal documents, especially in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, of its reason for existing and its primary duty: to listen to and to proclaim the good news of salvation (DV 1; NMI 39-40). We are grateful to Bishops and Church authorities for giving guidelines for the biblical pastoral ministry, among which the recent documents of the Pontifical Biblical Commission deserve special mention. We are part of the community of Christian Churches with whom we treasure together the Sacred Scriptures as Word of God.

#### 4. We live in a pluralistic world

**4.1** Our journey has made us increasingly aware that plurality is woven into the very fabric of our human family. There is a plurality of worldviews, cultures, religions and ways of organization of society. Today, close proximity and contacts among cultures, religions and diverse forms of spirituality

are a pervasive phenomenon. Thus intercultural and interreligious identity is becoming part of the contours of many nations in the world and plurality is being acknowledged as a constitutive aspect of our world.

**4.2** Our experience of plurality and diversity is also becoming painfully and increasingly ambivalent and ambiguous. On the one hand, diversity becomes enrichment; on the other, it is often perceived as an obstacle by some, leading to intolerance and suppression especially of the minorities and the weak. Understanding of and living with difference and plurality is a major struggle in many societies. This gives rise to tensions and divisions in civil society, Church and religions.

**4.3** Monolithic power structures especially in the economic and political arena tend to impose monocultural patterns of living with devastating effects on the poor who are systematically excluded from participation in decision-making and from their share of the goods of the world. The modern communication media, so powerful in bringing people together, often tend to become a tool in the hands of these forces, bent on creating a homogenous culture for the sole purpose of power and profit.

**4.4** Ecological violence and destruction is another area where the natural symbiotic relationship of creation has been severely affected by human greed. Globalization of the market is a major phenomenon of this ambiguity of our society. While in some places there is greater consciousness of the dignity and equality of persons, in others there is increasing violence, which often affects the poor and innocent people, in particular women and children; in addition women are still all too often excluded from socio-cultural and political decisions on matters affecting them directly. Diseases like HIV/AIDS wipe out families and ever-growing numbers of people, causing untold suffering and great anxiety.

**4.5** We have excellent international declarations on human rights and many initiatives to protect them, but unfortunately, these ideals are violated by oppressive and degrading practices in several parts of the world. Similarly, denial of religious liberty in several countries is a flagrant affront to human dignity.

**4.6** There is great regard for the value of religious tolerance, but fundamentalist religious and ethnic forces are becoming more and more rampant and violent in many parts of the world, reducing the space for minorities, crushing their legitimate efforts for recognition and justice, sometimes even annihilating them.

**4.7** Pluralism is a reality more and more present even in the Church, called since its beginnings to be one in diversity. But the Church itself struggles with difficulties because of a certain fundamentalist and exclusive mentality of some of its members. In the ecumenical context, the reading and interpretation of the Bible itself becomes a stumbling block on our way to unity.

**5.** It is within this context and faced with these challenges that we have come together to discern “ways” for us to walk as co-pilgrims with others in our ministry of the Word, especially the biblical pastoral ministry.

## **II. Interpretation of this Reality in the Light of the Word of God**

**1. Jesus our Way, the ways of Jesus.** When we attempt to discern the “ways of life” that we want to walk in our pluralistic world, we as Christians turn first of all to Jesus Christ who is *our Way*. Jesus proclaimed by word and deeds the universal Fatherhood of God. Therefore, his life was singularly characterized by solidarity with the outcast, sinners, the poor, the Samaritans and Gentiles (cf. Mt 15:21-28; 25:31-46; Lk 4:18-21). The kingdom of God that he proclaimed is opposed to any narrow ethnic or racial understanding of God’s saving presence and action in our world (cf. Mt 3:9). He envisaged a non-localized religion and worship in spirit and truth (cf. Jn 4:23), as we discovered anew in our Plenary Assembly in Hong Kong. The Gospels manifest to us the Jesus who transcended cultural and religious boundaries in order to be faithful to the plan of God for all people (Mt 8,5-13; 12:15-21; Lk 10:25-37).

**2. The ways of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles.** During our Assembly, we searched for the light of the Word especially in the Acts of the Apostles, wherein we read that the Holy Spirit constantly makes the disciples transcend boundaries. The variety of languages, cultures and nationalities to which the one Good News reaches out on Pentecost Day is a vivid affirmation of plurality as the design of God for humanity (cf. 2:6,8,11). In the story of the conversion of Cornelius, we also recognize another “conversion”, that of Peter, expressed in these words: “Now I see that God shows no partiality” (10:34). For he discovers that the Holy Spirit is at work in the “other” just as in himself (cf. 10:47; 11:17-18). By making them cross the boundaries of ethnicity, culture and language, the Spirit enables them to discover that all “are God’s children”, “living, moving and existing in God” (17:28).

**3. Going beyond.** We need to go beyond geography, nationality and ethnicity. No land is to be made absolute, no nationality, no ethnic group, no culture, and no language. The Spirit’s ways are unpredictable (cf. Jn 3:8). The Church has to always remain attentive to the dynamic movement of the Spirit for uniting people by new bonds. It is distinctively a movement for co-pilgrimage with the “others”, those who are different from us. In this sense, to be religious would also mean for us that we should seek the path of an interreligious approach to life and service. This demands willingness to know, learn from and relate with others.

**4. The figure of Abraham.** A re-reading of the Abraham traditions in the First Testament further corroborates this perspective. Jews, Christians and Moslems all consider themselves related to the patriarch Abraham. To consider one group as the exclusive heirs of Abraham is contrary to the plan of God manifested through Abraham. For God’s blessings to Abraham were destined for all people (Gen 12:2-3). But history testifies that Abraham had been and continues to be an object of dispute and division among his descendants. At this moment of history it is possible for all children of Abraham to go beyond the exclusive understanding and seek to discover in these traditions the seminal insights of the universality of God’s design that embraces all peoples. New courage is needed to do this re-reading which, if pursued with commitment, can set us on a course of breakthrough at the beginning of this new millennium.

This demands that we rediscover Abraham as a bridge among members of religions who have the common heritage of the faithful Abraham. We might thus find new energy to destroy the mighty barriers of fear, suspicion and violence that characterized our relationships in the past. We may thus prepare a way for a new future free from mutual distrust and become co-pilgrims with a common bond – Abraham who believed and obeyed God. The move from exclusive particularism to a more open universalism can begin when we search the deepest identity of Abraham as the one who believed and trusted in God’s Word. This vision will facilitate a movement away from a horizon of biological descent and geography towards the discovery of the faith and obedience of Abraham as his fundamental identity.

**5. The emerging ecclesial consciousness.** The emerging consciousness in the Church since Vatican II can be spelt out in the words of Pope John Paul II:

The Spirit’s presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, people, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of noble ideas and undertakings, which benefit humanity on its journey through history (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 28).

Religions are thus recognized also as an arena of the Spirit’s presence and action. Religions, insofar as they uphold and live human values, are signs of the presence of the Spirit in our world. In this sense they can be considered as gifts of God to humanity. We believe that they are all related at a deeper level in the mystery of Christ the Saviour who emptied himself for the wholeness of humanity and of the entire creation (cf. Col 1:15-17). This most important and compelling force drives us to seek ways of communion among all God’s children.

**6. A unifying vision.** At the end of this Plenary Assembly, we recommit ourselves to explore a new biblical and theological vision as well as approaches in quest of that spirituality of communion that should be the characteristic of the new millennium. Instead of being estranged from one another either violently or by mutual distrust or indifference, we need to engage in such a task for the sake of a future – a more united human family with its diversity. It is incumbent upon us not to repeat the mistakes of the past – of harmful and violent estrangement from one another in the name of God or Holy Books.

### III. The Power of the Word of God for Transforming the World and the Commitment of the Catholic Biblical Federation

#### 1. The power of the Word

**1.1** In designing our response to the reality as ministers and servants of the Word, we turn to the Word of God as the source not only of our vision, but above all, as **the source of divine power** (cf. Gen 1:3ff; Jn 1:3; Rom 1:16). The Spirit and the Word can overtake us as in the case of the Apostles and empower us provided we allow the Word to have a claim on our lives and on the life of the Church. The energizing power of the Word is felt only in an obedient surrender like that of Abraham and of the Apostles whose ministry we have contemplated as we read and prayed the Word in the Acts of the Apostles.

**1.2** The question Pope Paul VI posed in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, "... what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man's conscience?" (n. 4), continues to challenge us. 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 world**. Bringing about a change of consciousness, a change of behaviour and a change of structures is all part of the one mission of the Church. All activities of the Church are in one way or another ministry of the Word. Therefore the Church has the Word of God in the centre of all her life and mission. Without it, we would miss the lifeline of power and blessings.

**1.3** 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 transformation of life and society. Prayer accompanied by docility to the Spirit should become the hallmark of the ministry of the Word (cf. Acts 13:2). At this moment of history, we should listen to the pressing invitation of the Word of God for a **deeper conversion** of our vision, our attitudes and behaviour towards the "other" – religions, cultures and ethnic groups, and especially the poor, women and all those who are victims of exclusion and discrimination in our societies. A re-reading of the Word in such life-threatening contexts is an imperative that we can not set aside. For the Word of God comes to us with its power to impel us to live in solidarity. It is only when we feel the irresistible power of the Spirit that we can become effective instruments of transformation.

**1.4** We reiterate our commitment to **self-critique of our way of reading Scripture** in the Church – individually and collectively. Do we allow the power of the Word to have its impact on the contexts of society? Have we used texts of Scripture to legitimize attitudes of superiority, discrimination and violence towards others? Fundamentalist and purely spiritualistic interpretations of the Scripture are an ever-growing phenomenon in almost all Churches. Biblical pastoral ministry has an urgent task in this field in countering a sectarian and fundamentalist reading of the Word that builds walls of separation and discrimination. Along with this, we need to highlight the plurality that is a characteristic feature of the Bible: plurality of world-views, of interpretations of sacred texts, of theologies, of ecclesial structures.

**1.5** In order to achieve this, **contextual hermeneutics** will have to be developed in every area of our involvement. Biblical formation of laity and clergy should have such a thrust. In the light of our reflections during this Plenary Assembly it is important, wherever possible, to undertake a dialogic reading of the Word of God, letting the echoes and resonance of the various religious traditions, scriptural or otherwise, enrich our experience of the Word, mysteriously present in our world. This will enlarge our vision of God and promote a depth-level dialogue among religions. Such a reading might help us to see the multifaceted face of God the Father and Mother of all and the face of Jesus the Word incarnate.

#### 2. The Word of God itself determines our options for reading the Bible

The Word of God in Sacred Scripture releases its power if read appropriately. In fact the Bible itself teaches us the options for reading it properly and for living the Word. In this way, we are faithful both to the original message and to the people to whom it is proclaimed as Good News (cf. EN 4).

**2.1** We are committed to **an attentive and respectful reading** of the biblical text. Being a book of a different time and culture, it must first of all be respected in its otherness. It is to be read in its original – historical and cultural – as well as in its literary context. “Our reading of the Bible should enable the people to discover the true content. All efforts to interpret the Bible in order to justify political and ideological positions should be considered as a betrayal to the message” (Bogotá 7,3). Even people who are not able to handle scientific and scholarly methods can be guided in an attentive reading of the Bible, and this in order to avoid the pitfalls of a fundamentalist reading which refuses to take into consideration a historical and pluralistic character of the Bible (Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church [IBC], I.F).

**2.2** The Bible, in its canon as well as individual books, is a pluralistic phenomenon, an outstanding example of unity in diversity, a symphony of many voices. Convinced that “all the different ways of reading the Bible are not equally apt” (Bogotá 7) but also that no one method captures the richness of the meaning of the Scriptures, the Federation advocates a **plurality of methods and approaches** which “contribute effectively to the task of making more available the riches contained in the biblical text” (IBC Introduction).

**2.3** Reading the Bible and celebrating the Word **in community**: The Bible is the book of the community, an expression of its faith experience, and meant for building it. It has an important place in the liturgy and in catechesis. “The Scriptures, as given to the Church, are the communal treasure of the entire body of believers”. “All the members of the Church have a role in the interpretation of Scripture”. Even those who, “in their powerlessness and lack of human resources find themselves forced to put their trust in God alone and in his justice, have a capacity for hearing and interpreting the Word of God which should be taken into account by the whole Church” (IBC, III.B.3).

**2.4** Reading Scripture in the **life context**: The Bible is the book of life in as much as it deals with life in all its manifestations. God has given us two sacred books: that of creation and history, and that of the Bible. God’s Word enshrined in the latter is to throw light on and help us decipher the first. The Bible has “to be re-read in the light of new circumstances and applied to the contemporary situation of the people of God” (IBC, IV.A). Exegetes “arrive at the true goal of their work only, when they have explained the meaning of the biblical texts as God’s Word for today” (IBC, III.C.1). We are committed to this life-related reading of the Bible, as formulated in several of the Final Statements of the Catholic Biblical Federation. “We should start with the reality in which we actually find ourselves today, and we should allow the Word of God to throw light on this reality” (Bogotá 7,1).

**2.5** Mindful of the different contexts and cultures in which we live and having reflected on how the Word of God has been received in different cultures, we are convinced that we not only have to pay attention to the Word itself, but also to the different soils in which it is to be sown. The conviction that the Word is capable of being spread in other cultures “springs from the Bible itself ... in the blessing promised to all peoples through Abraham and his offspring” (Gen 12:3; 18:18) and extending it to all nations (cf. IBC, IV.B). An **“inculturated” reading** presupposes a respectful and in-depth encounter with a people and its culture and starts with the translation of the Bible into the language of the people, to be followed by interpretation which then leads to the formation of a “local Christian culture, extending to all aspects of life” (IBC, IV.B).

**2.6** The poor are the first addressees of the Good News (Lk 4:18-19; Mt 5:3). What God has hidden from the wise and learned, He has revealed to the little ones, to those of little or no significance (Mt 11:25). This fact demands that Christian communities read **the Bible from the perspective of the poor**. “There is reason to 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” (IBC, IV.C.3). Reading the Bible in such a way will lead us necessarily to taking an option for the poor.

**2.7** The Bible as Word of God can only be welcomed if we approach it also as the Church’s basic source of prayer and if we cultivate the **prayerful reading of Scripture** (cf. Bogotá 7.2; Hong Kong

1.2). *Lectio divina*, formerly cultivated mainly in monasteries and religious communities, is more and more appreciated by all the Christian faithful (cf. DV 25). The Pontifical Biblical Commission has devoted an entire section to *lectio divina*; in numerous apostolic and post-synodal exhortations; notably in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (no. 39) and in his Letter to the Church in Lebanon (no. 39), John Paul II has insistently invited us to make use of this ancient and still valid method of reading the Word of God. This form of prayer challenges, gives orientation to and forms our existence.

### 3. The mandate of the Catholic Biblical Federation

The mandate of the Catholic Biblical Federation is the biblical apostolate, the biblical pastoral ministry, the biblical “animation” of the pastoral life of the Church, providing the Church with spiritual nourishment, indeed with its very soul (anima). Its objective and mandate is “that the Word of God may become more and more the spiritual nourishment of the People of God, the source for them of a life of faith, of hope and love – and indeed a light for all humanity” (IBC, Introduction B). Its objective is “to make known the Bible as the Word of God and source of life” (IBC, IV.C.3).

The Catholic Biblical Federation is the organization of the Church, at the service of the local Churches (Bishops and Bishops’ Conferences), which has been given an official mandate to implement the directives of the Second Vatican Council concerning Sacred Scripture in the life of the Church. The Federation has recalled this in particular in its Bogotá Plenary Assembly, on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Dei Verbum*. On the occasion of this 6<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly, the members of the CBF renew their commitment to this mandate.

### 4. The priorities for 2002-2008

4.1 Taking into account both the challenges identified by this Assembly and the concrete life and needs of its members, the Plenary Assembly defines the following **general priorities** for the Catholic Biblical Federation, at its different levels, for the upcoming six years:

- the promotion of a greater awareness of the importance of the Bible within the life of the Church in general and among the Bishops and ecclesiastical institutions in particular
- the development of biblical formation programs for people at all levels of the Church and society at large, but in particular and urgently for the poor and those who are excluded from their rightful place in our societies
- the making available and accessible of appropriate, pastoral and affordable translations of the Bible, taking into account the cultural and socio-economic situation of our peoples, as well as the ecumenical and interreligious context of our Christian communities
- the development of biblical pastoral material which takes into account the particular social and cultural situations of the different groups of the world population and which will help them to participate in the construction of a world in which justice, peace and mutual respect contribute lastingly to human development
- the reinforcement of the communication and sharing network within the Catholic Biblical Federation, whether this be on the level of the regions, sub-regions or zones, or across the entire Federation
- reflection and research in regard to the fundamental issues of the biblical pastoral ministry in a cultural and religious pluralistic world characterized by the globalization of communications and economies as well as by extreme situations of political and economic injustice and religious intolerance.

4.2 The Plenary Assembly recommends that the members of the Catholic Biblical Federation **collaborate with other Church organizations, non-governmental organizations and other institutions in working towards economic justice in the world and the protection of the environment**. This will necessarily entail prophetically denouncing economic and social injustice, the violation of human rights and the denial of religious liberty.

4.3 The Plenary Assembly recommends that the various member organizations **collaborate with the World Council of Churches’ “Decade to overcome violence”** by developing biblical pastoral materials for Bible groups and organizing activities which help to identify the real problems behind

human violence and find lasting solutions permitting men and women of different cultural and religious origins to live with one another in mutual respect, fundamental justice and peace. In this regard, all possible measures must be taken to protest against oppression and persecution of Christian and other minorities in totalitarian countries.

**4.4** In response to requests coming from the Region of Africa and Madagascar, the Plenary Assembly recommends that the support of **the biblical pastoral ministry in Africa be a major priority** of the Catholic Biblical Federation at large during the next six years. In particular, the Plenary Assembly encourages the Executive Committee, in close collaboration with the bishops of Africa, to seek new ways of supporting the African efforts to implement the recommendations of *Ecclesia in Africa* (n. 58)

- in biblical pastoral formation for clergy, religious and laity,
- in the translation, publication and distribution, in collaboration with Catholic editors and the United Bible Societies, of affordable Bibles adapted to the African cultures,
- and in the further development of centres of the biblical pastoral ministry in Africa.

**5.** For the realization of these priorities, the Plenary Assembly makes the **following recommendations:**

**5.1** The Plenary Assembly recommends that communication within the Federation as well as public relations in general be further developed, in particular through an increased use of electronic media and other means of communication (website, Bulletin Dei Verbum, etc.).

**5.2** It is the responsibility of the different regions and sub-regions to define their priorities and concrete objectives for the next six years while taking into account the decisions of this Plenary Assembly and in foreseeing efficient methods of regular evaluation.

**5.3** The Plenary Assembly recommends the creation of a Standing Committee on “The Bible in the Life of the Church” in order to work towards a greater commitment of ecclesiastical authorities to the biblical inspiration of the whole life of the Church. A concrete action plan should be developed in this regard which sees as important steps the organization of a Bishops’ Synod and/or an official Church document on the role of the Word of God in the entire life of the Church.

**5.4** Financial responsibility within the Catholic Biblical Federation must be assumed at all levels of the Federation and should be guided by the double principle of subsidiarity and solidarity. In order to insure the necessary financial resources for the realization of the Federation’s projects in the future, the Administrative Board should intensify its efforts to find new methods of fund-raising.

**6.** In response to the appeal of its new President, the Catholic Biblical Federation meeting in Plenary Assembly has decided to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vatican II’s Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* for and with the whole Church by organising **an International Colloquium on “The Sacred Scriptures in the Life of the Church” in Rome in 2005.**

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In our quest for an adequate response to the invitation of God’s Word which we heard in Lebanon, we turn to Mary, the Mother of the Word Incarnate. For Mary not only believed in the Word but surrendered herself to that Word with her whole being (cf. Lk 1:45). Like her, we feel impelled to proclaim the God of history who “has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly”, who “has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (1:52-53). In spite of our inadequacies and limitations, we commit ourselves to be energized by the Word, believing that God’s Word is like the rain that does not return to God without achieving the end for which it has been sent (cf. Is 55:10-11). We make our own Mary’s dream of a world free of discrimination and exclusion, a world in which all will be recognized as God’s children, in accordance with the promise made to Abraham (cf. Lk 1:55; Acts 3:25).