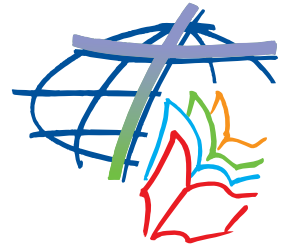

CBF Newsletter

Catholic Biblical Federation
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Dear friends of the Catholic Biblical Federation,

Our Christmas motif for this year, which comes from Zimbabwe, gives an impression of totally inward directedness. The ever un-fathomable Christmas message, that our God becomes man in the guise of a defenseless child is not represented here as an outwardly directed, magnificent event, but rather as a quiet, almost tender and internalized occurrence. With his outstretched arms Joseph enfolds Mary his wife, who is holding the new-born child in her protective hands. All three of them, father, mother and child, have their eyes closed and their whole focus is inwardly directed. A great sense of composure and peace is present in this depiction. It seems that nothing could ever intrude from outside to disturb the inner security of the family.

“He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.’ Now all this took place to fulfil the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, a name which means ‘God-is-with-us’. When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home and, though he had not had intercourse with her, she gave birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.” (Mt 1:20-25)

Perhaps the Christmas story of the Gospel of Matthew served the artist, the Shona sculptor Edious Nyagwete, as a model for his work. Perhaps the plain stylistic expression of his sculpture is inspired by the verbal simplicity and clarity of the Gospel text; and perhaps the closed, inwardly “listening” eyes of the family members are picking up on the dream of Joseph. What else can this work of art be than an artistic illustration of the sentence “and [Joseph] took his wife into his home”?

With this double edition of the CBF Newsletter we would like to recall once again the two great events that made the year 2008 a very special year for our Federation – events that will continue to reverberate for a long time to come: in the summer we were able to hold our Seventh Plenary Assembly. For the very first time this meeting which is convoked every six years took place on African soil. More than 230 participants from over 100 countries came together, to deal with the theme “Reconciliation, Justice and Peace”.

The second great event was the Bishops’ Synod on the Word of God, which took place in October. For the first time in the history of the Church such a synod dealt with the importance of Holy Scripture in the life of the Church. The fact that Pope Benedict chose this theme was also a result of many years’ preparatory work by the CBF. For this topic is, as all of you longtime supporters of the Catholic Biblical Federation know, a heartfelt concern and mainspring of our work.

And, finally, we would not want to withhold from you at this year’s end an event that is one of sadness for the Federation, the death of our esteemed former President, Bishop Wilhelm Egger, who died this summer completely unexpectedly. We would like to remember him as well in this issue.

In the above-cited Christmas narrative of the Gospel of Matthew the newborn child is given the surname “God with us”. May the upcoming Feast of Christmas hold for you personally the experience that God is with you, that we are not alone, but that someone is there, someone who will be with us “till the end of the world”, as it says at the end of the Gospel.

Today, the entire team of the General Secretariat greets you and wishes you a blessed Christmas holiday and all the best for the year 2009!

The Seventh CBF Plenary Assembly in Dar es Salaam

In the previous CBF Newsletter we already supplied extensive information on the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the CBF, which, as mentioned above, took place for the first time on African soil from June 24 to July 3, 2008. Here we would like to offer you a few excerpts from the Final Statement, which was approved by the more than 230 participants. The complete text can be read and/or downloaded from the CBF-Website www.c-b-f.org or may be obtained through the General Secretariat.

II. The context of the Seventh Plenary Assembly

(...) [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). (...)

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. (...)

[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, interreligious 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.

[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. ■



Powerful, creative, liberating: the Synod Fathers on the importance of the Word of God

At the end of the Synod on the Word of God, which lasted almost four weeks, the Synod Fathers released a message to the faithful of the world, from which we here record a few noteworthy excerpts. The full text can be retrieved, among other things, from the Website of the Vatican www.vatican.va

1. The voice of the Word: The revelation

(...) 2. The Divine Word is, however, also at the origin of human history. Man and woman, whom God created "in the image of himself" (Gn 1:27), and who bear within themselves the divine imprint, can enter into dialogue with their Creator or can wander far from Him and reject Him by sinning. The Word of God, then, saves and judges, penetrating the woven fabric of history with its tales and events: "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying (...) I am well aware of their sufferings. And I have come down to rescue them from the clutches of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that country, to a country rich and broad" (Ex 3:7-8). The divine is therefore present in human events which, through the action of the Lord of history, are inserted in the greater plan of salvation for "everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth" (1 Tm 2:4).

3. Consequently, the effective, creative and salvific Divine Word is source of being and of history, of creation and redemption. The Lord encounters humanity declaring: "I, the Lord, have spoken and done this" (Ezk 37:14). The voice of God then passes into the written word, the *Graphé* or the *Graphai*, the Sacred Scriptures, as it is said in the New Testament. Moses had already descended from Mount Sinai, "with the two tablets of the commandments in his hands, tablets inscribed on both sides, inscribed on the front and on the back. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing on them was God's writing" (Ex 32:15-16). Moses himself obliged Israel to preserve and rewrite these "tablets of the commandments": "On these stones you must write all the words of this Law very plainly (...)" (Dt 27:8).

5. Christian tradition has often placed the Divine Word made flesh on a parallel with the same word made book. This is what emerges already in the creed when one professes that the Son of God "was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man", but also a profession of faith in the same "Holy Spirit, who spoke through the Prophets". The Second Vatican Council gathers this ancient tradition according to which "the body of the Son is the Scripture transmitted to us" – as Saint Ambrose affirms (*In Lucam* VI, 33) – and clearly declares: "For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the Word of

the eternal Father, when he took to himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men" (DV 13).



Indeed, the Bible is also "flesh", "letter"; it expresses itself in particular languages, in literary and historical forms, in concepts tied to an ancient culture, it preserves the memories of events, often tragic; its pages not infrequently are marked by blood and violence, within it resounds the laughter of humanity and the flowing tears, as well as the cry of the distressed and the joy of those in love. For this, its "bodily" dimension requires an historical and literary analysis, which occurs through various methods and approaches offered by biblical exegesis. Every reader of Sacred Scripture, even the most simple, must have a proportionate knowledge of the sacred text, recalling that the Word is enveloped in concrete words, which is shaped and adapted to make it heard and understood by all of humanity.

This is a necessary commitment. If it is excluded, one could fall into fundamentalism which in practice denies the Incarnation of the Divine Word in history, does not recognize that this Word expresses itself in the Bible according to a human language that must be decoded, studied and understood. Such an attitude ignores that divine inspiration did not erase the historical identities and personalities of its human authors. The Bible, however, is also the eternal and Divine Word and for this reason requires another understanding, given by the Holy Spirit who unveils the transcendent dimension of the Divine Word, present in human words. (...)

IV. The roads of the Word: The mission

(...) 11. Communication now casts a network that envelops the entire globe and the call of Christ gains a new meaning: "What I say to you in the dark, tell in the daylight, what you hear in whispers, proclaim from the housetops" (Mt 10:27). Of course, the Sacred Word must have its primary transparency and diffusion through the printed text, with translations made according to the multiplicity of languages on our planet. But the voice of the Divine Word must echo even through the radio, the information highway of the internet, the channels of "online" virtual circulation, CDs, DVDs, podcasts, etc. It must appear on all television and movie screens, in the press, and in cultural and social events.

This new communication, in relationship to the traditional one, has created its own specific and expressive grammar and, therefore, makes it necessary not only to be technically prepared, but also culturally prepared for this task. In an age dominated by images put forward, in particular, by hegemonic means of communication such as television, the privileged model of Christ is still meaningful and evocative today. He would turn to the sign, the story, the example, the daily experience, the parable: "He told them many things in parables (...) indeed, he would never speak to them except in parables" (Mt 13:34). In proclaiming the Kingdom of God, Jesus never spoke over the heads of the people with a vague, abstract or ethereal language. Rather, he would conquer them by starting there where their feet were placed, in order to lead them, through daily events, to the revelation of the kingdom of heaven. (...)

13. Jesus, in his parable of the sower, reminds us that there are arid lands, full of rocks, choked by thorns (cf. Mt 13:3-7). He who goes forth into the streets of the world also discovers the slums where suffering and poverty, humiliation and oppression, marginalization and misery, physical and psychological ills and loneliness can be found. Often the stones on the road are bloody because of wars and violence; in the palaces of power, corruption meets injustice. The voices of the persecuted rise on behalf of faithfulness to their conscience and fidelity to their faith. (...)

This immense sigh of suffering that rises from the earth to heaven is continuously represented by the Bible, which proposes an historical and incarnated faith. It is enough to think only of the pages marked by violence and oppression, of the harsh and continuous cry of Job, of the vehement pleas of the Psalms, of the subtle internal crisis that passes through the soul of Qoheleth, of the vigorous prophetic denunciations against social injustice. Without extenuating circumstances, then, is the sentence of the radical sin that appears in all its



devastating force, from the beginning of humanity in a fundamental text of Genesis (chapter 3). In fact, the "mystery of iniquity" is present and acts in history, but it is revealed by the Word of God that assures the victory of good over evil, in Christ.

Conclusion

"Then I heard the voice I had heard from heaven speaking to me again. 'Go', it said, 'and take that open scroll from the hand of the angel standing on sea and land'. I went to the angel and asked him to give me the small scroll, and he said, 'Take it and eat it; it will turn your stomach sour, but it will taste as sweet as honey'. So I took it out of the angel's hand, and I ate it and it tasted sweet as honey, but when I had eaten it my stomach turned sour" (Rev 10:8-11).

Brothers and sisters of the whole world, let us receive this invitation; let us approach the table of the Word of God, so as to be nourished and live "not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Dt 8:3; Mt 4:4). Sacred Scripture – as affirmed by a great figure of the Christian culture – "has provided passages of consolation and of warning for all conditions" (B. Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 532 ed. Brunschvicg).

The Word of God, in fact, is "sweeter than honey, even honey that drips from the comb" (Ps 19:10), "Now your word is a lamp to my feet, a light on my path" (Ps 119:105), but is also: "(...) like fire, – it is Yahweh who speaks – is it not like a hammer shattering a rock?" (Jer 23:29). It is like the rain that irrigates the earth, fertilizes it and makes it spring forth, and in doing this he makes the aridity of our spiritual deserts flourish (cf. Is 55:10-11). But it is also: "something alive and active: it cuts more incisively than any two-edged sword: it can seek out the place where soul is divided from spirit, or joints from marrow; it can pass judgment on secret emotions and thoughts" (Heb 4:12). ■

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 Holy Father 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 periodical *Bibel und Liturgie*, on October 21, 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. ■