

# Thirsting for the Word

## Theological and pastoral reflections on the outcome of the survey

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“The Bible in the hands of humble and poor people”

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“Thirsting for the Word”: this could be a suitable synthesis of the outcome of the survey on «Bible reading» carried out in several countries last year. The survey, particularly rich in its contents, gives rise to reflections at several levels: spiritual, pastoral, theological, cultural and social. These pages are an opportunity to offer a first interpretation of this research. Leaving out technical and sociological considerations we shall focus on a theological and pastoral perspective. In order to facilitate the understanding of the information, I will divide these remarks in five sections. The first will concern the relationship between the Bible and Liturgy, since one of the most significant findings is that the majority of “practising” faithful listen to the Bible only during Sunday Mass. The second will focus on the link between the Bible and the Church: the majority of the respondents, believers and non-believers, believe they need somebody’s help in order to understand the Scriptures. The third section will concentrate on ecumenism: the survey reveals that there is no longer the difference there used to be between different Christian traditions in terms of understanding and study of the Scriptures, rather they face common problems that can be tackled jointly. The fourth section will look into the attitude of the respondents concerning the Bible: the answers reveal a great deal of attention to the Bible and the desire to have it explained at school; it is considered difficult to understand, however, as well as hard to put into practise. The last section will take up the challenge of envisioning a new spiritual humanism, and how the Bible can be a source of

inspiration. The conclusions mean to evoke a “new enthusiasm” for the Holy Scriptures, because its pages provide words and images for the very future of humankind and society alike.

*“The Bible in the hands of humble and poor people”*

Firstly, I would like to offer a general reflection on the survey. The study shows that the exhortation of the Second Vatican Council to make the Sacred Scriptures the soul of the spiritual and pastoral life of ecclesial communities was not disregarded. On the contrary, the ecclesial community as a whole embarked upon an extraordinary process of reacquisition of the Scriptures as called for by *Dei Verbum*, which affirms: “the Sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and since they are inspired really are the word of God; and so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology. By the same word of Scripture the ministry of the word also, that is, pastoral preaching, catechetics and all Christian instruction, in which the liturgical homily must hold the foremost place, is nourished in a healthy way and flourishes in a holy way” (DV 24).

The rediscovery of the Bible has profoundly characterised the life of the Catholic Church, which developed a “biblical movement” that, by comparison, had a stronger impact on the life of the Church than the one before the Council, at all levels. It is enough to give even a quick glance at the amount of texts on Sacred Scripture produced by the Magisterium or by other institutions, such as the Pontifical Biblical Commission. The disproportion between the documents issued before the Vatican II and the ones issued after is absolutely amazing<sup>1</sup>. And even running through the bibliography of these last 40 years on the relationship between the Bible, liturgy, theology and pastoral life, one is immediately aware of the wealth of developments in this respect. Only from a theological point of view, for instance, this movement was at the origin of a new discipline, fundamental theology<sup>2</sup>.

In 1993, presenting the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on the interpretation of the Bible, thirty years after *Dei Verbum*, John Paul II said: “It is a joy to see the Bible in the hands of humble and poor people, who can give to their interpretation and actualisation a more penetrating light, from a spiritual and existential point of view, than the one that comes from self-confident science”. And in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* again he focused on the primacy of listening to the Word of God as the source of spiritual renewal for the Church: “There is no doubt that this primacy of holiness and prayer is inconceivable without a renewed listening to the word of God. Ever since the Second Vatican Council underlined the pre-eminent role of the word of God in the life of the Church, great progress has certainly been made in devout listening to Sacred Scripture and attentive study of it. Scripture has its rightful place of honour in the public prayer of the Church. Individuals and communities now make extensive use of the Bible, and among lay people there are many who devote themselves to Scripture with the valuable help of theological and biblical studies. But it is above all the work of evangelization and catechesis which is drawing new life from attentiveness to the word of God” (39). And adding a pastoral indication that retains all its relevance even nowadays, he wrote: “Dear brothers and sisters, this development needs to be consolidated and deepened, also by making sure that every family has a Bible. It is especially necessary that listening to the word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever valid tradition of *lectio divina*, which draws from the biblical text the living word which questions, directs and shapes our lives” (39).

Facing this new biblical “movement”, which involves not only a select number of settings like the one before the Council, but the entire life of the Church, offering unexpected spiritual, theological and liturgical inspiration as well as stimulating pastoral action, the Synod is a real *chairòs* for believers, to let themselves be guided even more docilely by the Word of God. If this will happen, we may well apply even to this moment of Church history the prophecy of Jesus to Nathanael: “You are going to see greater things than that!” (Jn 1:50).

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<sup>1</sup> Among the latter, for their range and insight, the documents of the Pontifical Biblical Commission are particularly relevant: *The Bible and Christology* (1984); *Unity and Diversity in the Church* (1988); *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993); *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001); *The Bible and Morality. Biblical roots to Christian action* (2008).

<sup>2</sup> See S. Ponga, *L'Écriture ame de la théologie*, Paris 2008.

## THE BIBLE AND LITURGY

### *The Word of God and the Eucharist*

Having said this, the first reflection that stems from the survey concerns the relationship between the Word of God and the Eucharist. The information collected reveals that the majority of “practising” faithful listen to the Word of God only during the celebration of Sunday Mass. Also another recent research – carried out only in three traditionally Catholic countries (Spain, France and Italy) – reported that 80% of the faithful who do attend church services listen to the Bible only during Sunday Mass, and no more than 3% (again among “practising” faithful) read it more frequently<sup>3</sup>. These figures do raise a few questions and, above all, they suggest two pastoral considerations.

The first is the urgent need to help “practising” faithful to be nourished more often by the Word of God, not only during Sunday Mass. When asked whether they had read any passage from the Bible in the previous 12 months, more than 50% of the citizens of USA and the Philippines answered positively, as well as more than 30% in England, Holland, Poland, Russia and Argentina, and between 20% and 10% in Germany and Italy, France, Spain and Hong Kong. Among practising Christians the percentage of people who had read the Bible was higher and rose to more than 60% in countries with a significant protestant presence; it was still under 50% in Germany and in other European countries with a Catholic majority, such as Spain, Italy and Poland (*tables 1-2*). In all countries, however, the main approach to reading the Bible is personal reading followed, nearly everywhere, by listening to/reading it during the Sunday Liturgy. In most countries, though not in all, the percentage of the two methods among “practising” believers is more or less the same. Among practising Christians, therefore, as well as in the population in general, there is a certain interest for reading the Scriptures at a personal level. Perhaps sometimes this element is underestimated (*tables 3-4*). It must be said however that listening to the Bible on Sundays alone is hardly enough if we want the Word of God to truly inspire the entire spiritual life of the faithful. New approaches to increase these figures therefore need to be identified.

The second indication stemming from the survey is the need for Christian communities to make the Sunday Eucharistic Liturgy a clear priority in terms of their pastoral action. In the last two decades the interventions of the Magisterium (both of John Paul II and of Benedict XVI), and I am thinking in particular of the Synod on the Eucharist, were certainly appropriate. It goes without question, however, that the centrality of Sunday, with the Eucharistic Liturgy at its heart, does require greater attention than that which it is ordinarily given. In *Novo Millennio Ineunte* John Paul II wrote: “Following *Dies Domini*, I therefore wish to insist that sharing in the Eucharist should really be the heart of Sunday for every baptized person. It is a fundamental duty, to be fulfilled not just in order to observe a precept but as something felt as essential to a truly informed and consistent Christian life” (36). In this respect, the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis* of Benedict XVI continues to stimulate a renewed attention to the mystery of the Eucharist.

The survey does confirm the reception of what the Council affirmed concerning the unity of the two parts of the Eucharistic Liturgy: “The two parts which, in a certain sense, go to make up the Mass... are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship” (SC 56). It is clear that there has been considerable progress in terms of awareness among the faithful concerning the close connection between the first and second parts of the celebration of the Mass. A sacramental role therefore is *de facto* attributed to the Liturgy of the Word: there is no Sacrament without the “celebration” of the Word. Ruperto di Deutz superimposed the act of breaking the Eucharistic bread and the Word: “Jesus took the book and opened it, therefore receiving from God the entire Sacred Scripture in order to fulfil it... the Lord Jesus then took the bread of the Scripture into his hands, when he was made flesh according to the

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<sup>3</sup> See L. Diotallevi, *Donare la Parola*, Rome-London, 2006.

Scripture and suffered his Passion and rose again; then he took the bread into his hands and gave thanks, when fulfilling the Scripture he gave himself up to the Father in a sacrifice of grace and truth"<sup>4</sup>.

### *Liturgical lectionaries, a source of spiritual life*

In this context it is clearly urgent to refocus the attention of pastors and faithful alike on the *Lectionaries* and *Missals*, in which the texts are nearly all inspired by the pages of the Bible. We should bear in mind that the current *Lectionaries*, as well as the *Missals* and *Rituals*, constitute the most complete collection of biblical readings ever devised in the history of Liturgy. Unfortunately, they are not yet completely understood (nor much employed), and the spiritual and pastoral riches they contain are neither tapped nor enacted. These liturgical books embody the accomplishment of the words of the Council: "The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word. In this way a more representative portion of the holy scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years" (SC 51). The current liturgical books are a unique source for the spiritual growth of the faithful. The *Introduction* to the *Mass Readings* briefly and effectively describes the itinerary of spiritual growth that unfolds through the readings taken from the Bible. The rhythm of the liturgical year turns into an itinerary that helps believers to turn their eyes towards Christ, to form "the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself" (Eph 4:13). It is the sense of the Liturgy, identified by the Vatican II as *culmen et fons* of the life of the Christian community.

We should not forget, however, that though the passages of the Bible offered by the Liturgy may be long, they do not replace the reading of the Bible as a whole. Sunday *Lectionaries* offer only 3.7% of the Old Testament and 40.7% of the New, and contain only 57.8% of the Gospels. Daily *Lectionaries* reach 13.5% of the Old Testament and 71.4% of the New. Of course we cannot expect the liturgical cycle to complete the entire reading of the Bible, nor should we overlook the right and duty of Christians to live "on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). The generally scarce acquaintance with the Bible revealed by the data shows that in spite of considerable progress, there is still a long way to go in order to accomplish what Paul wrote to Timothy: "All scripture is inspired by God and useful for refuting error, for guiding people's lives and teaching them to be upright. This is how someone who is dedicated to God becomes fully equipped and ready for any good work" (2Tim 3:16).

A further observation may be of use at this point: knowledge of Scripture is aided also by the act of memorising it. We can all bear witness to the excellent habit of learning sentences of the Bible by heart, even entire passages, especially when the *Vulgata* was the only text available. Today the amount of different translations makes it harder, but it is still good – in order to facilitate a person's acquaintance with the texts of the Bible – that the Liturgical *Lectionaries* employ the same translation of the Bible as the one in the hands of the faithful. It helps to listen and memorise the pages of the Scriptures. The example of the Italian Church in this respect is important: from this year the Liturgical *Lectionaries* and the Bible will share the same translation. We know well that this project is not always immediately viable and there are difficulties in implementing it, but it is a perspective that deserves to be examined, even for its ecumenical and missionary implications.

### *The homily, a crisis of identity*

In this context the homily deserves a special mention, since the survey confirms it is the main channel by which the Scripture is communicated to the "practising" faithful, who consider it the preferable form of communication of faith and the most valuable time for the growth of their faith (*table 6*). Unfortunately, experience still confirms what a famous Italian writer, Carlo Bo, wrote a few years ago in a small volume titled unequivocally: "Preaching, the agony of the faithful". If we think of our homilies we are far from the reaction of the disciples of Emmaus after the long explanation of the Scriptures Jesus himself

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<sup>4</sup> *In Joannem*, VI.

had given to them: “Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?” (Lk 24:32). That is exactly what the homily should do.

Other surveys carried out on this topic show on one side a considerable progress, but on the other they reveal a severe dysfunction both in the contents of the homilies and in the way they are delivered<sup>5</sup>. This is certainly the result of unpreparedness in the past (ascribable to the lack of adequate courses during formation) and scarce knowledge of the texts of the Scripture from an exegetic and patristic point of view. Many indeed mistake homilies for an exegetic exercise, or a catechesis, or an explanation of the truths of faith and generic moral exhortations, overlooking the fact that the purpose of the homily is to carry the Word of God to the threshold of the listeners’ hearts, so that they may be touched by it and moved by it. The task of the homily is therefore not to expound a doctrine (which is the case of other instances, such as catechesis, teachings and so on), but to make meet the Lord who speaks and the person who listens. The *Instrumentum laboris* recalls a sentence of John Paul II in this regard: “the Liturgy of the Word is not so much a time for meditation and catechesis as a dialogue between God and his People” (34). And the Council itself stated: “Praesens adest in verbo suo, siquidem ipse loquitur dum sacrae Scripturae in Ecclesiae leguntur” (SC 7). The example of Benedict XVI is certainly significant in this regard: since the celebration at the beginning of his pontificate he has constantly shown a model of homiletic style every celebrant should uphold.

In response to Andrea Frémyot, Archbishop of Burges, who asked him for suggestions on how to preach, Saint Francis de Sales wrote a *Letter on preaching* observing, “The purpose of a preacher is to do what Jesus came to do: *Ego veni ut vitam habeant et abundantius habeant*. Therefore his purpose is that sinners who died to sin may have life, and the others who are righteous may have it even more to the full. And we must not only teach the truth, but also move the people’s hearts; we must give light to their minds and warmth to their hearts. That is why God sent tongues of fire to the apostles. They had to speak with a tongue of truth, but also set fire to the hearts”. And he warned against the danger of wanting “to please” the ears of the listeners: if a homily does not move the hearts it has failed, if it does not touch the hearts it does not serve the Word of God, because it will fall to the earth without bearing fruit. The homily is culpably understated, as a well known Italian parish priest of the XX century, Fr. Lino Mazzolari, used to say. To a priest who asked him why homilies were declining he answered: “We priests are the first who do not really believe in the importance of the Word of God”. That is why such initiatives are commendable – as there are in some parishes – where the priests of one district gather together every week to listen to the readings of the following Sunday, and comment upon them, reflecting on the situation of their communities. There are many other ways to prepare the Sunday homily and they certainly need to be supported and increased. We are facing one of the focal points of evangelisation at the beginning of this millennium.

We need to rediscover the *epicletic dimension* of the homily. The *Praenotanda* of 1981 for the Liturgical celebration of the Word of God affirm: “The working of the Holy Spirit is needed if the word of God is to make what we hear outwardly have its effect inwardly... The working of the Holy Spirit precedes, accompanies, and brings to completion the whole celebration of the Liturgy. But the Spirit also brings home to each person individually everything that in the proclamation of the word of God is spoken for the good of the whole gathering of the faithful. In strengthening the unity of all, the Holy Spirit at the same time fosters a diversity of gifts and furthers their multiform operation” (9). And with the rich spiritual wisdom of the Eastern Church, Neophitos Edelby, a great Bishop of the XX century belonging to the Melkite Church, said, “Scripture is a liturgical and prophetic reality, a proclamation before being a book, the testimony of the Holy Spirit on the event of Christ, whose privileged moment is the Eucharistic Liturgy”. He affirmed that

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<sup>5</sup> Among the various studies on the topic, which are increasing in numbers in recent times, see the survey carried out in the Diocese of Milan in the years after the Council, of which the results can be found in *Ricerca interdisciplinare sulla predicazione*, Bologna 1973, and the one performed in the diocese of Terni Narni Amelia in 2004 (see its first analysis in *La offerta omiletica delle messe festive nella diocesi di Terni Narni Amelia. Il Rapporto di ricerca*, Terni 2005. The same information was used also by E. Giroto, *Analisi di omelie tenute nella diocesi di Terni Narni Amelia. Fedeltà alla Parola ed efficacia comunicativa*, License Thesis in Pastoral Theology at the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy, Padua, supervised by Professor Chino Biscontin). The conclusions of the two researches both identify a crisis in homiletic praxis and a consequent scarce effectiveness of the homilies.

it was the controversy with the protestants that had led to see Scripture as a written norm; actually, at a more profound level, it is rather “the consecration of the history of salvation in the form of human words but inseparable from the Eucharistic consecration, in which all history is recapitulated in the Body of Christ”. And he concluded: “This consecration needs an epiclesis, and it is the Holy Tradition. Tradition is the epiclesis of the history of salvation, the theophany of the Holy Spirit without which this history remains incomprehensible and Scripture a dead letter”<sup>6</sup>.

The Daily Mass should also be included in this: a short homily should never be missing. By its very nature Sacred Scripture always requires an explanation, even short, to be in dialogue with the listeners. The production of material to help these short spiritual comments on the Gospel of the day is a good sign. It could be given also to those believers who do not take part in the Mass on a daily basis, so they may practise a short daily *lectio divina* even at home with their family. The example of Saint Francis of Assisi is eloquent in this respect: “He also had this Gospel Book transcribed so that on a day when he could not hear mass because of illness or some other insuperable obstacle he had the Gospel for that day’s mass read to him; and he continued to do this until death. For he used to say: when I cannot hear mass I adore the body of Christ in my mind’s eye in prayer in just the same way as I adore it when I see it at the mass. When he had heard or read the Gospel St. Francis always kissed the book because of his very great reverence for the Lord”<sup>7</sup>.

## THE BIBLE AND THE CHURCH

### *The Word of God “establishes” the Church*

Another point from the survey highlights the fact that listening to the Scripture promotes the gathering of the faithful. It is further proof to that bond between the Word of God and the Church expressed by *Dei Verbum* in its very first words “Hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with faith”. Joseph Ratzinger, a young theologian at the time<sup>8</sup>, commented upon this *incipit* noting that these few words summarise the very essence of the Church: a community that religiously listens to the one Word and faithfully proclaims it. There could not be better words – Ratzinger continues – to express “the superiority of the Word of God, being above all speeches and every action of Church persons”. The Church does not appear closed within itself, nor does it make itself the centre of its proclamation. It is entirely open “upwards... its full essence summarised in the act of listening, the only act its proclamation can stem from”<sup>9</sup>. Immediately after the *incipit*, *Dei Verbum* affirms that “This teaching office is not above the word of God (*non supra verbum Dei est*), but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed” (10).

The survey reveals that where groups of people listen to the Scripture together, a sense of ecclesial brotherhood grows, as if manifesting the power of communion that stems from the Holy Scripture. A negative confirmation to this comes from the fact that sadly, where such experiences have grown weaker, Christian communities have become idle and frayed. Unfortunately these are not only few isolated cases. The survey also shows that reading the Scripture together draws away from the kind of devotional individualism that still characterises the religious approach of many believers, even “practising” ones. The exhortation of Benedict XVI to overcome an individualistic idea of Christianity is strengthened by the rediscovery of the Word of God, listened to within the ecclesial community. The lack of spiritual reading of the Bible among the faithful in modern times has certainly favoured this individualistic devotionalism that

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<sup>6</sup> *Discorsi di Massimo V al Concilio*, Bologna 1968, p. 61-62.

<sup>7</sup> *Breviary of Saint Francis*, p. 2696.

<sup>8</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Kommentar zur Dogmatischen Konstitution über die göttliche Offenbarung*, in: LThK Vat. II, Bd. 2 (1967), 498-543 ;571-583. On the drafting of *Dei Verbum* see Riccardo Burigana, *La Bibbia nel Concilio. La redazione della costituzione «Dei Verbum» del Vaticano II*, Bologna 1998.

<sup>9</sup> *Ivi*, 504.

urgently needs to be overcome. The words of Benedict XVI to the youth gathered on St. Peter's Square, therefore, are absolutely appropriate: "Sacred Scripture introduces one into communion with the family of God. Thus, one should not read Sacred Scripture on one's own. Of course, it is always important to read the Bible in a very personal way, in a personal conversation with God; but at the same time, it is important to read it in the company of people with whom one can advance". And he added: "To read it in a personal colloquium with the Lord; to read it with the guidance of teachers who have the experience of faith, who have penetrated Sacred Scripture: and to read it in the great company of the Church, in whose liturgy these events never cease to become present anew and in which the Lord speaks with us today"<sup>10</sup>. These words clearly point out a challenge which needs to be addressed with much more energy than we see our Christian communities do today.

### *The Bible and prayer*

Another point the survey highlights is the fact that practising faithful seldom use the Bible in their prayers. This is not – as some may believe – due to secularization, but rather because of a lack of education in this respect. While the respondents show a solid religious sensitivity in their answers on faith in God (or some kind of religious identification), the same cannot be said about praying with the Bible. There is a surprisingly high number of people who say they believe in God: an average 80%, between a peak 99% in the Philippines and 60% in Holland, while in Hong Kong there is a top 58% of atheists or people indifferent to the subject (*table 7*). Still, the percentage of people who pray is significant, though there are significant differences between countries: 63% of the respondents in the United States say they pray every day, 56% in Poland, 42% in Italy, 37% in Spain, only 28% in Holland, 26% in Germany and 24% in England (*table 8*). But even where people tend to pray the most, prayer is seldom associated with Sacred Scripture. To the question "how do you pray?" only a low percentage answered "I read the Bible": among people who do pray (with any frequency), those who use the Bible for their prayers are 43% in the United States, 38% in Poland and more than 30% in Hong Kong. But the percentage is lower than 10% in three traditionally Catholic countries: Italy, Spain and France. The majority say they pray reciting prayers they know by heart or using their own words (*table 10*).

This reveals on one side a surprising level of religious sensitivity, but on the other a remarkable misunderstanding among the faithful of the spiritual sense of the Holy Scriptures. The Word of God does not seem to be the soul of our contemporary Christians' spiritual life, while the entire tradition of the Church goes in the opposite direction. It is sufficient to quote Saint Cyprian: "Pray assiduously or read; now you talk to God, now you listen to him" (*Ep. 1*); or Saint Jerome: "Do you pray? You speak to the Bridegroom. Do you read? He speaks to you" (*Ep. XXII,25*). And Saint Ambrose used to exhort in these terms: "Why not visit Christ once again, speak to him, listen to him? We speak to him when we pray; we listen to him when we read the writings inspired by God" (*De Off. I, 20, 88*). It will obviously require an extensive pastoral commitment if we want the Bible to become the prayer book of every believer.

In his above mentioned speech to the youth, Benedict XVI said: it is urgent to teach "that one must not read Sacred Scripture as one reads any kind of historical book. It is necessary truly to read it as the Word of God, that is, entering into a conversation with God", learning to pray beginning with the text, listening to it, reading it, meditating it. It is a primary objective that pastors must feel as their own: new energies need to be tapped in order to break new ground for the "schools of the Word", or "schools of the Gospel", that were experimented fruitfully in many places in the past, but are now going through a time of weariness in many cases. They need to be recovered and reactivated, providing them with new tools, to

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<sup>10</sup> Benedict XVI reaffirmed it in Paris in his speech at the Monastery des Bernardins: "The Word which opens the path of that search, and is to be identified with this path, is a shared word. True, it pierces every individual to the heart (cf. Acts 2:37). Gregory the Great describes this as a sharp stabbing pain, which tears open our sleeping soul and awakens us, making us attentive to the essential reality, to God. But in the process, it also makes us attentive to one another. The word does not lead to a purely individual path of mystical immersion, but to the pilgrim fellowship of faith. And so this word must not only be pondered, but also correctly read". The Pope recalls an ancient tradition rooted in the rabbinic schools.

increase the people's familiarity with the texts of the Bible. The experience of Cardinal Martini in Milan was rich in spiritual fruits, and likewise other experiences of daily prayer around the Holy Scriptures in many cities, such as, just to mention one, the evening prayer of the Community of Sant'Egidio in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere in Rome, which gathers several hundred people every day. *Lectio divina*, the richest and most ancient method of listening to the Scripture, which in many parts of the world is commendably practiced, must become the object of a renewed pastoral focus, in new settings and new forms, so as to be practiced not only by some particular groups, but by the Christian communities as a whole. We need to envision a popular method of *lectio divina*, to allow all the faithful to be nourished by the Word of God<sup>11</sup>.

### *Starting afresh from the Word of God*

Pastoral activities need to be urgently re-examined in the light of the Word of God, by reading the Scriptures directly, on a daily basis. On the contrary, often the weight of bureaucracy and structures, that easily engender a sense of fascination, produce a feeling that the renewal of a community depends from strategic or structural change. With extraordinary pastoral insight, in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* John Paul II admonished: "It is not therefore a matter of inventing a "new programme". The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a programme which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication. This programme for all times is our programme for the Third Millennium" (*NMI* 29). Starting afresh from Christ, from the Word of God, is therefore the imperative for pastoral care, as well as for the renewal of spiritual life.

The first step as regards the Scripture is very concrete: every Christian should have "his or her own" Bible, the one he or she reads every day and carries along wherever they go, on holiday as well as on a journey. One's own little Bible should never be missing in the believer's "suitcase". It could become one of the pastoral objectives for the beginning of this new millennium. And it is in any case the precondition for the primacy of the Word to be concretely lived by everyone. Pastors and faithful alike should feel the responsibility, for themselves and for others, to disseminate the Bible at all levels. In all the countries interviewed, with the exception of the United States and England, the data reveal that the Bible is seldom given as a gift<sup>12</sup>; it is a small sign that shows what little regard the Bible is held in, and consequently its scarce impact on the believers' behaviour. Normally, even in doing good, the majority of the faithful rely on their feelings of common sense, on good habits, or perhaps on a traditional set of religious beliefs and moral norms they have inherited, but not on the Holy Scriptures. People therefore seldom experience the Word of God as a source of support and comfort to their existence. Furthermore, without being familiar with the Bible it is truly hard to appreciate the "true" God, or see His "true face".

Fr. Men, a beautiful figure of Russian Orthodox priest, of Jewish origin, the last victim of the KGB in USSR in 1990, reminds us of the dream of the Gospel. In his last conference he said: "Only near-sighted people can suppose that Christianity has seen its time, that it is completely built up, some say by the end fourth century, others in the twelfth, others in other moments of history. Christianity has only taken its first, I would say timid, steps in human history. To this day many of Christ's words are incomprehensible... Christian history starts over and over again. What was done in the past, what we call Christian history, is in many ways a series of clumsy and unsuccessful attempts to bring Christianity about". Fr. Men points out that there is still much to discover and live in the treasure of the Bible. "Christian history starts over and

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<sup>11</sup> The initiative I am conducting in Terni is extremely positive in this respect. Every year a book of the Bible is distributed to all the families in the Diocese, with a short comment to each passage (up to now this includes the four Gospels, the Acts and the Catholic Letters). For many families it has become a daily reading that could easily be called a little popular daily *lectio*.

<sup>12</sup> This was the case of less than 20% of the respondents in Italy, France, Spain, Russia and Hong Kong, and less than 30% among practicing Christians interviewed in Italy, Russia and the Philippines (*tables 12-13*).

over again” because every Christian generation must listen to the Word of God and live it anew, in order to communicate it to the men and women of its time. The time we are living in is one that requires a new encounter with the Word of God, for the course of human history to be saved from the risk of general inhumanity.

## **THE BIBLE AND ECUMENISM**

### *The Word of God and ecumenism*

Another important element highlighted by the survey concerns the relationship between believers of different Christian traditions (Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants) and the Bible. The research intentionally included countries where different Christian denominations coexist<sup>13</sup>. The first reflection that stems from the survey in this regard is that the Bible is still the most effective “place” for Christians to meet. The Fathers of the Council were well aware of this when they wrote: “Moreover, some and even very many of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, and visible elements too. All of these, which come from Christ and lead back to Christ, belong by right to the one Church of Christ” (UR 3)<sup>14</sup>.

The research shows significant developments, especially among the Catholics: over the last 40 years the “gap” with the Protestants was bridged, and in European Russia the consideration Scripture is held in is astonishing. Compared with other countries that were included in the study, the attention given to the Bible in the United States of America, by Protestants and Catholics alike, is quite surprising. One point that certainly requires specific attention is the variety of approaches to the Bible in different countries, in particular with regard to the interpretation of the Bible in the immense Pentecostal galaxy. In his remarkable study on the subject, Ph. Jenkins<sup>15</sup> points out that the approach to the Bible of the Pentecostal communities of Latin America, Africa and Asia is significantly different from the attitude of the traditional Protestant denominations of the North. Jenkins believes it is not only a more “enthusiastic, direct and immediate” approach to the Scriptures, perhaps characterised by a fundamentalist streak, as opposed to a rather more individualistic and Enlightenment related reading of the Churches in the north of the world. It is actually a different way of conceiving the holy text – he concludes. And it is not by chance that one of the main themes of this interpretation is the clear awareness of these communities that they are a people, compared with the traditional communities in the north, rather scarce in numbers and limited in terms of influence.

### *Listening to the Scriptures together*

Furthermore, we need to underline that in ecumenical dialogue the Bible is certainly the field where the most progress has been made and where forms of concrete collaboration are still possible. Though there are problems, and some are even quite delicate, the Scriptures enable a more robust encounter between Christians to take place. In the past the Pontifical Biblical Commission spoke of an “ecumenical imperative... for all Christians... to turn to read the inspired texts once again, docilely, in the

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<sup>13</sup> In particular, in the case of the UK, the subsample of “practising” Christians is made up of people who declare to be Anglicans or Presbyterians, or to belong to other traditional Protestant Churches, in the case of Russia by Orthodox believers. Even in other countries (United States, Holland, Germany) the presence of Protestants is sufficiently well represented in the main sample.

<sup>14</sup> The *Instrumentum laboris* confirms this statement by reaffirming: “Generally speaking, it is gratifying to see the Bible being used today as a major point of encounter in prayer and dialogue between the Church and ecclesial communities. The faith that unites us and the differences in interpreting of the same Word are an invitation to rediscover together the reasons responsible for divisions. At the same time, progress done in ecumenical dialogue with the Word of God can undoubtedly lead to other benefits” (54).

<sup>15</sup> Ph. Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity*, New York 2006.

Holy Spirit, in charity, sincerity and humbleness, to meditate the texts and put them into practice, to bring about conversion in one's heart and sanctity of life. Together with prayer for Christian unity, these are the soul of the entire ecumenical movement"<sup>16</sup>.

The ecumenical sense of Bible reading, listening to the text synchronically and diachronically, is not yet well understood in all its richness. Where it is practised it summons a precious spiritual heritage, that brings considerable benefit to all. It is good to mention here the words of the Vatican II on Catholicity as an exchange of gifts: "In virtue of this catholicity each individual part contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church. Through the common sharing of gifts and through the common effort to attain fullness in unity, the whole and each of the parts receive increase" (LG 13). This rich common listening benefits everyone's spiritual growth, it makes people more audacious in cultivating communion, and steering away from the temptation of living one's own identity in complete self-absorption, it prevents from focusing solely on one's own tradition. By listening to the Scripture, the Lord continues to gather his people and make it grow in love and truth. The words of Gregory the Great concerning spiritual reading of the Bible ("*Divina eloquia cum legente crescent*") may be applied even to the field of ecumenism: "unity among believers grows with listening to the Scripture".

In addition, we should not forget that the act of listening together to the Scripture also calls for proclaiming the Scripture together. The very origin of the ecumenical movement confirms this. And today still – especially in non-European countries – there is an evident contradiction between Christian division and the obligation to provide a credible proclamation to the men and women of our times. Can we put off our common witness until the day when full communion will be re-established? In his Encyclical *Ut unum sint*, John Paul II touched this very sore point: "It is obvious that the lack of unity among Christians contradicts the Truth which Christians have the mission to spread and, consequently, it gravely damages their witness... How indeed can we proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation without at the same time being committed to working for reconciliation between Christians? However true it is that the Church, by the prompting of the Holy Spirit and with the promise of indefectibility, has preached and still preaches the Gospel to all nations, it is also true that she must face the difficulties which derive from the lack of unity. When non-believers meet missionaries who do not agree among themselves, even though they all appeal to Christ, will they be in a position to receive the true message? Will they not think that the Gospel is a cause of division, despite the fact that it is presented as the fundamental law of love?" (98).

Ecumenical dialogue will certainly bear richer fruits if focusing spiritually on the Word of God it will heed God's dialogue with all Christians. It would also be a way of overcoming those feelings of malaise that are perceivable here and there in the dialogue between Christians today. The Word of God admonishes all Christians against narrow-mindedness and encourages them on the path of unity. Benedict XVI insistently confirms it: "It is not we who act or who organize the unity of the Church. The Church does not *make* herself or live of herself, but from the creative Word that comes from the mouth of God. To listen to the word of God together; to practice the *lectio divina* of the Bible, that is, reading linked with prayer; letting ourselves be amazed by the newness of the Word of God that never ages and is never depleted; overcoming our deafness to those words that do not correspond with our prejudices and our opinions; to listen and also to study, in the communion of believers of all ages; all these things constitute a path to be taken in order to achieve unity in the faith as a response to listening to the Word"<sup>17</sup>.

The Fathers, who defined the Scripture as the *Logos* made flesh<sup>18</sup>, said that the Church lives of Scripture as well as of the Eucharist: they are both Body of Christ and nourishment for the soul. By listening to the Word of God, Christians not only ready themselves on the path of unity, but also receive new strength along the way. And perhaps the icon of Emmaus is the most suitable image of the path of ecumenism: long listening leads to the "breaking of the bread"; then our eyes will open up and we shall see the One who is risen. It is true that *lectio* is not the magical solution to every ecumenical problem, but it does seem to be the privileged way to bring about visible Christian unity today. On this path we must

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<sup>16</sup> *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, p. 1357.

<sup>17</sup> *The Osservatore Romano*, 27<sup>th</sup> January 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Philadelph.* 5,1; further references, to Origen in particular, in H. de Lubac, *Geist aus der Geschichte*, 401-404; and Hieronymus, *In Psalm 147*,14,4; 80,3.

quicken our pace: by its very nature the Word tends to full communion, at the table of the Eucharist and in love for one's neighbour.

### *Joint translations and distribution of the Bible*

There is a further element that may already unite Christians in view of a common goal: the translation and dissemination of the Bible. In 1968 the *Common guidelines for interconfessional cooperation in translating the Bible* were drafted, which were amended in 1987. Today the Protestant translations of the Bible are increasingly used by Catholics, and vice versa. In a few decades more than 300 common projects were completed. In the '90s the collaboration of the biblical societies extended to the Russian Orthodox Church and to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, thus attaining a higher and more effective level of cooperation at all levels (translation, printing and distribution of the Bible). The most important of these joint initiatives was the *Traduction oecuménique de la Bible (TOB)*, the fruit of the work of Protestant and Catholic Bible scholars from French-speaking countries involving, at a lesser extent, also the Orthodox Church and Orthodox Bible scholars. In 1972 the New Testament was published and three years later the Old Testament and deuterocanonical books, both in a single volume version of the united biblical societies with abridged notes, and an unabridged edition, longer and with extensive introductions to the books and notes. We should also mention the *Eineits Übersetzung*, in Germany, though it has faced some difficulties in recent times<sup>19</sup>.

In any case, the Bible societies and Christian Churches are engaged today in more than 800 projects of translation and revision of the Bible text in many different languages. Approximately 500 million bible texts are now disseminated every year (including Bibles, New Testaments, single Bible books or selections). In the '60s one specific joint project was initiated, involving the United Bible Societies and a number of Catholic scholars, to draw up a critical edition of the Greek text of the New Testament, the *UBS Greek New Testament*. Several Catholics were also invited to join the Committee in charge of analysing problems of textual criticism concerning the Old Testament, in view of a new critical edition of the *Hebrew Bible* (the *Quinta editio*).

The work carried out up to now is extremely precious, but there is still a great deal of road ahead. The Bible is already translated in 2454 different languages (completely in 438, the New Testament alone in 1168, and a selection of books, such as the Gospels or the Psalms, in other 848); there are still about 4500 languages waiting for the Sacred Scripture. And if the Bible Societies distributed about 26 million Bibles in 2006, it still means we have only reached 1% or 2% of the 2 billion Christians in the world. Facing the urgent call to disseminate the Bible, the two best known organisations, the Catholic Biblical Federation and the Bible Societies, notwithstanding their differences, find themselves on common ground concerning the dissemination of the Bible in the world. A recent agreement was signed by the two organisations to promote the translation and distribution of the Bible.

## **KNOWING AND LIVING THE BIBLE**

### *The Bible, loved but hard to understand*

Another set of reflections concerns the respondents' relationship with the Bible. The survey reveals that in spite of the process of secularisation (perhaps a stereotype has it too widespread in this respect, while it actually regards only a part of the Western world), the Bible is held in high regard by the majority of people. Not only do people often keep a copy of the Bible at home, but frequently they expect it to offer

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<sup>19</sup> In Germany, for instance, the Catholic-Evangelical collaboration for the revision of the "unitary translation" of the Bible for all the Christians in the country is at a stalemate. And in Slovenia difficulties have arisen concerning the choice of a single translation of the Bible. These difficulties, however, should not stop the progress that has been made up to now. The Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany reaffirmed that in any case "the Bible is and remains the strongest bond that unites Christian Churches".

them important words for their life. Among practising Christians the common opinion is that the Bible contains the Word of God, that it is an inspired book and it is capable of giving a meaning to one's life, with greater authoritativeness than the various teaching offices of the Church.

There is one point that gives rise to reflection, however: the great majority of respondents (even among "practising" Christians) point out that the Bible is hard to understand<sup>20</sup>, even though it is always thought of as interesting. This suggests that people do not approach the text superficially, simplistically or unilaterally, but they do identify it as difficult, and therefore require an explanation. The survey confirms the need for "someone to help" people to understand the Scripture, and the assertion "*sola Scriptura*" is denied by the majority of the respondents, both believers (of different Christian denominations) and non-believers. There is a *sensus fidelium* that deems it absolutely necessary to be helped in understanding the Bible. And this belongs to the very nature of the Scriptures, as Benedict XVI observed in the speech held at the Monastery des Bernardins in Paris: "Scripture requires exegesis, and it requires the context of the community in which it came to birth and in which it is lived. This is where its unity is to be found, and here too its unifying meaning is opened up. To put it yet another way: there are dimensions of meaning in the word and in words which only come to light within the living community of this history-generating word". It is surprising, however, that in countries of ancient Christian tradition some negative "prejudices" concerning the Bible still enjoy a certain degree of success. The contents of the Bible are considered "abstract" by 56% of the respondents in Holland, 36% in Germany, 50% in Spain, 57% in France, or "false", in Holland and France by 30% of the people interviewed.

The survey also highlights a considerable ignorance of the Scriptures. There is primarily a "material" ignorance of the basic notions regarding the authors of the various books of the Bible, its composition and contents. One typical example is that among practising Christians those who know that Peter and Paul did not write a Gospel are more than 50% (*table 23*). Generally, the highest score in the index of biblical knowledge, rating a person's acquaintance with truly elementary information concerning the Scripture, is reached by a percentage of respondents ranging from 20% among the Polish (17% in USA and UK) to 8% in Spain, 4% in the Philippines and 2% of the respondents in Hong Kong (*table 25*). The degree of biblical education is consistently low and requires substantial efforts in order to reach at least an average level.

Material ignorance goes hand in hand with what we could call spiritual ignorance, concerning the value attributed to Sacred Scripture. The great majority of the respondents, for instance, still believe the Bible is a book restricted to clergy alone, not addressed to the entire ecclesial community, and certainly not to every believer. A Cardinal at the time, Ratzinger affirmed quite the contrary: "The Christian people is the true owner of the Bible and therefore its true exegete"<sup>21</sup>. This concept is at the heart of a more effective "biblical pastoral care", for the Word of God contained in the Scriptures to truly become the "soul" of the life and mission of the Church. An anecdote I heard from an exegete friend of mine may be illuminating in this respect. A bishop came to him with the draft of his pastoral letter that was already complete and asked him "could you please add a couple of powerful sentences from the Bible?". It is a simple episode, but it does reveal a certain misunderstanding of the Bible, which is thought of as a source of quotations to be used at pleasure or to confirm one's ideas. The admonishment of Saint Gregory the Great comes to mind: "This unskilfulness of the shepherds doubtless suits often the deserts of those who are subject to them".

Some speak of "hegemony" of the Scriptures over the life of the faithful, and give the example of the first millennium when bishops, monks, pastors and faithful alike listened to the Scripture as the throbbing heart of their entire lives. Hegemony of course means not exclusivism, but to let the Bible inspire the whole life of the believer and of the Church. During the last international meeting of the Catholic Biblical Federation, held in June 2008 in Dar Es Salaam, after having observed the developments of these years of "biblical pastoral care" (which has up to now effectively performed a considerable service in terms of dissemination and knowledge of the Bible), we felt the urgent need to go from biblical animation to pastoral care by and large. It is what the Vatican II wished for: that the Holy Scriptures become the "soul" of the life and mission of the Church.

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<sup>20</sup> The attribute "difficult" always prevails over "simple" and "I do not know". The Bible is considered as difficult by more than 60% of "practising" Christians in Holland, Germany, France, Italy and Poland. Only in the Philippines and Hong Kong the number of practising believers who deem it "simple" prevails.

<sup>21</sup> *Il sale della terra*, p. 302

Saint Jerome warned that ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ. But we must admit that people luckily wish to know the Scriptures. What is cause for concern is the fact that we are missing an adequate response to quench this thirst for Christ. At times texts with only partial or even faulty information concerning the Bible attract the curiosity of millions of readers, even Christians. What happened around *The Da Vinci Code* has its root in this. We need to give a suitable answer to this yearning to know Jesus. The book of Ratzinger-Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, is an example of how to respond to this thirst for Jesus. There are other examples (and I am thinking of the volumes on Jesus by Berger and Puig), but works on Jesus need to be produced at all levels of learning, from arts to literature. And in any case we urgently need to find effective ways to bring forth the message that comes from Sacred Scripture.

### *Impediments, mistakes and opportunities in reading the Bible*

Another point that emerges from the survey concerns the impediments, mistakes and opportunities that come with reading the Bible. The impediments require some preliminary remarks. The study shows that the Bible is read by people who already read other books, especially books on religious subjects. The problem stems from the increasing number of people who choose to read very little, who allow themselves to be swept away by the convulsive rhythms of life, and the consequence is that it becomes difficult to stop and think, and therefore also to pray and meditate.

Sophrony, an Orthodox monk who spent many years of his life on Mount Athos and later in France and England, justly used to say: "The social environment we live in is against prayer, because it organises life with other goals, exactly opposite to prayer. Hostile spirits cannot bear prayer. But only prayer helps the creation be reborn after its fall". Unfortunately this situation has penetrated Christian communities: the faithful increasingly cut on the time for prayer and meditation. The number of engagements increases, and inner aridity likewise. The parishes often become a heap of activities of all kinds without any priority: everything is important, and therefore nothing is really necessary.

This situation favours the proliferation of religious practises and devotions, and it may undermine a renewed attention to Sacred Scripture, which cannot be postponed. These difficulties, however, do not diminish the opportunities given to Bible reading by the growing literacy rate<sup>22</sup>. French intellectual Emmanuel Todd observes: "Learning to read and write... is only one stage of the mental revolution that has spread to the entire planet". Indeed literacy is one of the "signs of the times" that must be carefully pondered by Christians, for they are called to communicate the Gospel to the very limits of the earth. We know well of the efforts made by believers in the past centuries, when illiteracy was widespread, for the Bible to be known. Suffice it to mention the use of paintings inside churches (the so-called *Biblia pauperum*)<sup>23</sup>. Nor should we forget that in the past the Bible gave the opportunity to codify a number of languages. Today the same thing can be done with other languages that are still not codified. It would be an operation of extraordinary pastoral foresight.

Speaking of the development of Christianity in the South of the world, Jenkins affirms: "The new Christianity advanced alongside literacy, in societies in which orality had been the traditional form of communication and knowledge transmission. As in the first Christendom of medieval Europe, the shift from orality to literacy gives an enormous symbolic power to the written text, to the Book, which in many cases might be the only actual book in a given household"<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> A few figures can help to picture the rapid advance of literacy in the world. In 1980 in China the literacy rate was 66%, it is now up to 85%. In Iran, at the time of the Revolution of Khomeini, the people who could write were 51%, in the year 2000 they had risen to 77%. There are also some cases that are truly remarkable. In Nigeria the literacy rate leapt from 33% to 64%, in Algeria from 40% to 63%, in Rwanda from 40% to 67%, in Ivory Coast from 27% to 47%. In 2010 it is estimated that the world literacy rate will be 83%, compared to 63% in 1970.

<sup>23</sup> Bisop Caesarius of Arles was so convinced of the spiritual importance of the daily reading of the Bible that he exhorted the illiterate rich to pay someone to read to them from the Scriptures: "If people who cannot read enlist the services of professional scribes to procure themselves earthly goods, you, whoever you are, who know not how to read and write, why not seek out someone who for a fee will read to you the divine Scriptures, so that you can obtain eternal rewards?"

<sup>24</sup> Ph. Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity*, New York 2006, p. 22.

In a previous paragraph we have already underlined the joint commitment of Christians for the translation and dissemination of the Bible. Other means of communication also need to be mentioned, from the TV (which many of the respondents indicated as their preferred means to listen to the Scripture) to computers (that are often used also by young people).

With regard to the dangers implied in reading the Bible, the data reveal that it is especially among those who know the Bible the least that the risk of a fundamentalist reading of the holy text persists. "True" fundamentalism does not show any authentic familiarity with the Bible, neither in terms of personal reading, nor in terms of generic biblical culture. When asked whether the Bible is direct Word of God and therefore should be interpreted literally, only in Poland (34%) and the Philippines (47%) did a percentage higher than 30% respond positively. In all the other countries percentages were lower (among others, Italy and Spain, respectively 23% and 17%, Germany 13%, United States 27%, England 9%) (*table 27*).

The majority of people believe the Bible is a book "inspired by God", which should not be all understood literally, word for word. Further analysis shows that fundamentalists simply handle the Scripture, they do not flip through its pages but rather tend more than others to make it an amulet, like a charm against the challenge of freedom and complexity that everyone faces in this "open" society. What needs to be understood then is the psychological context, and sometimes the underlying social and political causes, but in any case the extra-religious rationale of fundamentalism, without ever inferring a feeling of subjection or inferiority. In his speech in Paris, Benedict XVI said: "Christianity perceives in the words the Word, the Logos itself, which spreads its mystery through this multiplicity and the reality of a human history. This particular structure of the Bible issues a constantly new challenge to every generation. It excludes by its nature everything that today is known as fundamentalism. In effect, the word of God can never simply be equated with the letter of the text. To attain to it involves a transcending and a process of understanding, led by the inner movement of the whole and hence it also has to become a process of living. Only within the dynamic unity of the whole are the many books one book. The Word of God and his action in the world are revealed only in the word and history of human beings".

### *The Bible, hard to live*

According to the survey the majority of the respondents agree that the Bible offers important values, but they also believe it is exceedingly hard to live. The underlying pastoral challenge is clear: how to bring about a shift from being fascinated by the Scriptures, even in a secularised society, to making them a word that changes the hearts and lives of people. Of course, preaching does play a crucial role, but the lifestyle of Christians becomes even more important in this respect. The fact that someone lives the pages of the Bible implies that they are not only beautiful, but also liveable. A few years ago Cardinal Ratzinger wrote: "The Church is not the word, but the place where the word dwells and lives. This means it must truly be a place of life, and not a place of death for the word. The Church cannot allow the word to be lost in anyone's chatter, or in the words of constantly changing times, it needs to preserve its timeless identity. For the word to be preserved, however, the Church must live it, suffer it. It needs to subject the vital energies of an age to the judgement of the word, but even make new life available to the word, human flesh and blood. To limit itself to preserve the word would mean to avoid sufferance, and certainly not to carry the word into our current times"<sup>25</sup>.

A positive indication in this respect comes from the experience of the Movements that were born in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Suffice it to think of those that started before the Council, such as Taizè or the Focolari, or others born immediately after it, such as the monastic Community of Bose and the Community of Sant'Egidio. Many other experiences would be worthy of mention, like the ones related to charismatic and monastic environments. They all have one thing in common however: a fresh encounter with the Scripture. In the life of all these ecclesial experiences the Word of God is the heart of their prayer. By faithfully listening to it, it gathered them as living communities that bear witness to the beauty and joy of being Christians in the world. And the fruits are clearly visible in their extraordinary missionary spirit, in

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<sup>25</sup>*Dogma e predicazione*, p. 20

the exercise of charity, in ecumenical dialogue, in meeting with other believers and with those who are far from the faith these movements live.

### **THE BIBLE AND A NEW SPIRITUAL HUMANISM**

#### *A Book that educates*

The difficulties the survey highlights concerning a “personal” and “spiritual” relationship with the Bible do not undermine its extraordinary appeal as regards the values it offers. The widespread welcome of the proposal to study the Bible at school requires to be mentioned<sup>26</sup>. The Bible is attributed an extraordinary educational potential that necessarily captures our attention, since even non-believing intellectuals are involved. And it is patent that the Bible has had an impact on the shaping of languages and in the rich field of artistic expression, such as in painting, music, architecture, literature, theatre, cinema and so on. The Bible is considered a precious source of wisdom for its capacity to shape the hearts and minds of men and women, in addition to their faith<sup>27</sup>. We wish that the Bible could become more and more a Book that feeds the life of the people. And the Fathers of the Church justly presented the Bible as a fountain where anyone can come to quench his thirst. Saint Ephrem the Syrian, to mention one, wrote that the Bible is a source anyone can come to, to draw water that is never depleted. What is left in the fountain is always more than anyone can take away from it<sup>28</sup>. And the Bible can truly help men and women at the beginning of this millennium, to recover a light to find their bearings and wisdom to draw from. The contents of the Scripture comfort the profound anxiety of different cultures and of all peoples<sup>29</sup>.

The Bible and its words move the hearts of people to truth and to good, they put at the centre God, the Father of all peoples, who wants everyone to be helped and saved. That is why the Bible is opposed to narrow-mindedness, to withdrawing into oneself, and it protects from the temptation to harden one’s heart and estrange oneself from others. The pages of the Bible are replete with a moral force that enfolds anyone approaching them with an open heart. Reading the Bible, therefore, helps people understand who they are and commit themselves to dialogue with the Other and with others. Every single page is imbued

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<sup>26</sup> The percentage of people favourable to studying the Bible at school is higher than those who oppose it in all countries, except France. The margin between those in favour and those against it is always quite wide, except in the USA and Argentina where pros and cons are almost equal (*tables 29-30*).

<sup>27</sup> In this same perspective Cardinal Martini wrote a Pastoral letter, *God educates his people*. In the letter he mentions the fundamental stages of the path God guided his people through. It is a process that involves the people at a personal and community level, gradual and progressive, with break offs and leaps, rife with conflicts and energy, liberating and made by careful planning, bound to history and accomplished through a number of collaborations, fulfilled exemplarily in the life of Jesus.

<sup>28</sup> And he adds: “The Lord hid every treasure within his Word, so that every person could find richness in what he contemplated... If one receives one form of richness he should not believe the Word of God contains nothing except what he found. He should rather be aware that all he could discover was only one thing among many others. After being made richer by the Word, he should not believe it is impoverished by it, and being incapable of depleting its riches he should give thanks for its immensity. Rejoice, for you have been satisfied, and do not be sad because the richness of the Word overwhelms you” (*Comm. Diat. 1, 18-19*).

<sup>29</sup> This conviction has been rooted within the Church since ancient times: it has always seen Scripture as something that goes beyond us but nevertheless welcomes us. Gregory the Great wrote of the Scriptures in these terms: “Holy Scripture incomparably transcends every science and all teachings: having not regard for the fact that it proclaims the truth, that it summons us back to our heavenly homes, that it changes the hearts of those who read it so that they may turn away from earthly desires and embrace the things of heaven; regardless of the fact that its most obscure expressions train the strong, and the little are enticed by its demure speech; that it is not so closed as to intimidate, nor so open as to debase itself; that for the simplest of readers it is nearly perfectly known, while to the learned it seems constantly new; regardless therefore of its substance, Holy Scripture is above every science and all teachings by means of its very expression, for with one word it expounds the text and enunciates a mystery, and as a result it can tell what has been in the past in such way as to foretell what shall be in the future; furthermore, without changing the order of the discourse, by those very same words it is capable of describing what has been fulfilled and what is yet to be” (*Moralia in Job XX, I, 1*).

with an atmosphere of dialogue: they tell the story of the people of God progressively coming into touch with new cultures and ideas, partially absorbing them or elaborating them through an illuminated act of discernment. Today more than ever the world needs the wisdom that surfaces through the pages of the Scripture.

And through the words of the Bible Christians must penetrate the events of their times. The fabric of dialogue, with other believers and non-believers, must be weaved with the words and wisdom of Sacred Scripture. Encounter cannot only take place at the level of “values” or the “Declaration of human rights”, which are justly thought of as a common platform. The message of the Bible offers relevant instances that help define a truly universal vision. From the Bible not only do Christians receive their faith, but also wisdom, that belongs to God the Father of all human beings. Thirst for this wisdom must make us all more aware of the need there is of the Bible today. To make just one example, in a number of cases reading the Bible is associated to greater openness to foreigners, at least in principle.

### *The Bible and Christian action*

The survey shows a certain distance from Christian teachings in the people’s behaviours facing particularly relevant choices from a moral point of view. To the question “how do you establish what is good and what is evil?” a high percentage of respondents answered that they decide by means of their own individual conscience (only in the USA, Poland and the Philippines the percentage is lower than 50%). About 10% answered “through God’s law” and an average 20% “through conscience and attentive to God’s law” (*table 31*). There is a clear tendency to leave behavioural choices to subjective judgment. Reference to the Scripture is practically absent. In this respect, the text on *The Bible and Morality* (2008), published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, is certainly appropriate. In presenting it, Cardinal Levada wrote “For Christians Sacred Scripture is not only the source of the revelation, the foundation of their faith, but also the unavoidable reference point of morality. Christians believe that in the Bible one can find indications and norms to act in a morally upright manner and attain fullness of life”.

The document is extremely useful to understand the powerful ethical inspiration surfacing from the pages of the Bible. Ignorance of Scripture leads one to be even more at the mercy of the increasingly hegemonic culture that preaches complete rejection of sufferance and defines human dignity according to aesthetic norms. Frequentation of the pages of the Bible, on the contrary, cultivates the awareness of human dignity and gives rise to a rooted choice for life. It is surprising to see the consensus among the respondents in response to the question on euthanasia: “Should people who are sick and cannot be cured be able to choose when and how to die?”. The majority of people, more than 50% in all countries (only in Poland and the Philippines the percentage was lower) answered positively. And similar percentages were recorded in response to the question asking whether a woman can abort when there are risks of congenital deformity for the baby (*tables 33-36*).

These two topics alone would require a major reflection. The answers given to the questionnaire reflect a cultural atmosphere marked by an obsessive quest for wellness devoid of wounds, sorrow, weakness, limits and labour; a utopia misrepresenting the very meaning of life and humanity. Here lies the complex anthropological crisis leading to the current exasperated subjectivism. The frequentation of the pages of the Scripture helps to look at life from a different perspective, as bound to God and to the others, not only at the disposal of one’s “ego”. The pages of the Bible clearly reveal the centrality of the human being formed in the image of God and according to his likeness. It is this biblical monotheism that lies at the foundation of western humanism. The existence and actions of God radically mark the existence and actions of humankind.

### *The right to the Bible*

The survey reveals a general attention to the Bible, which involves not only Christians and is not limited to believers alone. And it is not by chance. For believers the Scriptures are clearly a gift to the whole of humanity. The Bible is not a book addressed only to a group people, perhaps the clergy, the religious, or

people consecrated to God's cause. The Bible is not only for Christians, nor only for the West; nor is not only for people coming from the Semite world. It is addressed to the men and women of all ages and every condition, regardless of their culture, race, language and civilization. We could say that there is a right, everyone's right, to have the Bible and to have it in one's own language; a right to read it, for oneself, for one's community and for the society at large. Of course, if this is everyone's right, there must be a corresponding duty of those who are its keepers to make this possible.

Christians know well that the Word contained in the Holy Scripture gives back a "heart" to those who listen to it, a sense to the lives of those who search for it, light to those who dwell in darkness, strength to the weary, love to the loveless, a path to those who are lost, consolation to the sad and companionship to the lonely. The entire scope of human existence, life and death, friendship and brotherhood, solidarity, sorrow, loneliness and sickness, love, family, labour and the secrets of one's heart, major human events, hunger, war, injustice, all is illuminated with a new light by Sacred Scripture. Even though it is full of elements and images from the Semite world (it is the world where it was written), the Bible penetrates the heart of humankind, that place where differences come together in unity. By filling with love the hearts of human beings, the Bible restores in them the truth of who they are. With great wisdom, Gregory the Great added: "We can often examine our inner secrets better by prayer than by discursive thought" (*Mor. 1*).

### *A new enthusiasm for the Scriptures*

We should all wish that the Synod may produce a renewed enthusiasm for the Bible in the entire Christian world, among Catholics as well as among the Orthodox and the Protestants. This necessity was clear to Cardinal Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli in 1956, when he wrote his pastoral letter to the faithful in Venice: "Though all the concerns of our pastoral ministry are equally dear to us and all urgent, we feel most necessary of all to arouse enthusiasm, always and everywhere, for the expressions of the divine book, which is made to illuminate the path of life from childhood to old age". Perhaps the time has come to give rise to a novel "*devotio*", a "devotion" to the Holy Scriptures, so as to make them the book of the entire Christian world. It is what Andrea Riccardi called for in his intervention at the International Congress for Forty Years of *Dei Verbum*, organized by the Catholic Biblical Federation. Sacred Scripture is like the tabernacle that contains the Word of God or, to use an image dear to the Fathers of the Church, God's love letter to humankind.

Modern Christianity is called – as it was at the time of the first Pentecost – to communicate to the seventy nations in front of the Cenacle the same Gospel each of us hears in his or her own tongue. John Paul II justly wrote in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: "This passion will not fail to stir in the Church a new sense of mission, which cannot be left to a group of "specialists" but must involve the responsibility of all the members of the People of God. Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves, they must proclaim him". This is the meaning of the words of Paul: "'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor 9:16). The celebration of the Pauline Year is a further opportunity to rediscover this missionary force. A new apostolic drive is needed, and it must be lived as a daily commitment by Christian communities and groups. We could say that we need more of Paul in our communities.

Of course all this must take place "with the respect due to the different paths of different people and with sensitivity to the diversity of cultures in which the Christian message must be planted, in such a way that the particular values of each people will not be rejected but purified and brought to their fullness. In the Third Millennium, Christianity will have to respond ever more effectively to this need for inculturation. Christianity, while remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root. In this Jubilee Year, we have rejoiced in a special way in the beauty of the Church's varied face. This is perhaps only a beginning, a barely sketched image of the future which the Spirit of God is preparing for us. (*NMI 40*).

The survey reveals that interest in the Bible is growing, as well as interest in its message. Christians should not only drink from this spring, they should become more aware of the consideration this holy Book is held in even by non-believers, for they perceive that the Bible contains words that come from the future.

The Bible gives visions to those who read it, to catch sight of a future for all human beings, and at the same time – but believers must bear witness to this – it gives the strength to live them. In the Scriptures there is a source that generates a new passion for life, for the world, to offer everyone a new future. Its pages hold the answers to human and historical issues, but most of all they unveil a new world: the world of God that he wanted to reveal to humankind.

I would like to conclude these reflections with the words that Benedict XVI addressed to the youth in Sydney: “Empowered by the Spirit, and drawing upon faith’s rich vision, a new generation of Christians is being called to help build a world in which God’s gift of life is welcomed, respected and cherished – not rejected, feared as a threat and destroyed. A new age in which love is not greedy or self-seeking, but pure, faithful and genuinely free, open to others, respectful of their dignity, seeking their good, radiating joy and beauty. A new age in which hope liberates us from the shallowness, apathy and self-absorption which deaden our souls and poison our relationships. Dear young friends, the Lord is asking you to be prophets of this new age, messengers of his love, drawing people to the Father and building a future of hope for all humanity. The world needs this renewal! In so many of our societies, side by side with material prosperity, a spiritual desert is spreading: an interior emptiness, an unnamed fear, a quiet sense of despair. How many of our contemporaries have built broken and empty cisterns (cf. Jer 2:13) in a desperate search for meaning – the ultimate meaning that only love can give? This is the great and liberating gift which the Gospel brings: it reveals our dignity as men and women created in the image and likeness of God. It reveals humanity’s sublime calling, which is to find fulfilment in love. It discloses the truth about man and the truth about life”.