

Catholic Biblical Federation

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Bulletin

*Sei
verbum*

**The Word
of God
as the
Source
of Life**

English Edition

The Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) is an international fellowship of Catholic organizations involved in biblical-pastoral work. The members foster mutual service among all local churches.

Translation and distribution of Catholic and inter-confessional editions of the Bible in simple language, in cooperation with Bible Societies throughout the world, is part of this service.

Furthermore, it is the intention of the CBF to promote biblical studies, support the production of pedagogical aids for a better understanding of biblical texts, and assist in the formation of ministers of the Word (such as biblical animators, lectors and catechists), suggesting ways to form Bible groups and recommending the use of both mass and group media to facilitate their encounter with the Word.

The Federation also wishes to promote a dialogue with people who believe only in human values, as well as to encourage an encounter with the sacred writings of other religions. Through such encounters, the revealed Word of God can offer a more profound understanding of God and of human life.

The Federation appeals to everyone to add their personal and community support to these great tasks.

+ Alberto Ablondi, Bishop of Livorno
President of the CBF

**"Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided
for all the Christian faithful"**
(*Dei Verbum*, 22).

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Editorial

"I remember a dream that I had: there was a small spring that became a river and there was a light that shone, light and the sun and there was abundant water. Esther was the river..." (Esther 10:3a ff).

The shadow regions in this world can seem enormous and the seeds of life very small in comparison. But there will always be light that dissipates the darkness.

You will find in this number the Word that helps to penetrate deeply this mystery of faith, from the perspective of the weakness that is the crucified and risen Christ. Some meditations are proposed by Prof. Maria Ko: *"I have come that they may have life and have it to the full"* (Jn 10:10b).

The term *life*, like all terms, is complex and can be used (is used) in an ambiguous way. Prof. Daniel Kosch speaks of the concrete content of the word *life* for the Catholic Biblical Association of Switzerland; it is inspired by the Final Declaration of the Catholic Biblical Federation in Bogotá (1990).

Sometimes on the path from Life to Bible and from Bible to Life places and texts appear unexpectedly that are significant in a new way. Thus it can happen with the caste system in India and Hosea (2:18-25) as presented by Prof. Devadass Ambrose. Likewise Prof. Thomas Staubli draws attention to such a relation in his "actualised" reading of the book of Wisdom 11.24: *"You love all that exists"* and its specific significance in view of Hong Kong.

You can also find some experiences and publications that illustrate similar realities to the above mentioned from a more practical perspective. There are concrete projects which come to us from America, Africa, Asia and Europe.

We publish a prayer for the next Assembly which Bishop Ablondi, President of the CBF, called for and offers to the members of the Federation and to the Church.

We believe that all this can help the members of the CBF as they prepare for Hong Kong and the Plenary Assembly in 1996. *"... And all of the dream came true."*

Pilar de Miguel

READING HOSEA 2:18-25 IN THE CONTEXT OF VARNASHRAMA DHARMA OR THE CASTE SYSTEM.

Dr. M. Devadass Ambrose is a professor of the Pontifical Theological Institute of St Peter in Bangalore, India. Among the interesting suggestions that his study brings to the text of Hosea in the context of India, we think it interesting to highlight what the author calls "Bases for the liberation of the 'untouchables'".

Basis for the liberation of the «untouchable»

The Indian Christians numbering around 15 million live in the midst of around 600 million Hindus. Hence they are in a way influenced by certain ideas and practices. One of the basic belief of Hinduism is *Var-nashrama dharma* or caste system, which maintained that the «casteless» people don't form the part of the body of Hari (God).

Hence they have no right to associate with the caste people and they have no right to enter into the temple. They were considered as impure and they lived outside the village called «cheeri». They were usually landless people and daily wage workers and were exploited by the caste people.

In the history of India, one can very well notice that there were constantly move-ments against the caste system and its discrimination. None of these movements was able to eradicate this caste system in India.

When Islam entered India it has abolished this caste system and considered that all the Muslims are Allah's children and they are bro-

thers to one another. But Christianity, when it entered into India, has failed to achieve this goal, though there were sporadic infusion of egalitarian ideals. Probably egalitarian ideals and endeavours were eroded to accommodate both caste and casteless people in the church.

Hence it has indirectly perpetuated the caste system of the Hindu society. There were missionaries for the «caste people» and there were also «missionaries» for the «untouchable». So much so, there were partitions in the church to separate the «caste people» from the «casteless people». There are still areas in India, where there are walls in Christian cemeteries which separate the section of the «caste people» from the section for the «casteless people».

Hos 2:25, speaks of the promise of Yahweh that he will accept unconditionally the sinful Israel as his «people» and will enter into communion with them in love. This offer of Yahweh for a new relationship to Israel is not based on any merit on the part of Israel. It is a pure gracious condescension of Yahweh to Israel.

St Paul quotes this text in a different context (i.e.) the pure grace of God

leads to the acceptance of the gentiles as «God's people», just as it leads to the acceptance of the Jews. Hence all are «children of God», not because of human merits but because of the divine grace. St. Paul has already spoken that distinctions on the basis of race, sex, social status have no value and all are one in the new economy of salvation: «For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body-Jews and Greeks, slaves or free-and all were made to drink of one Spirit» (1 Cor 12:13).

The study of Hos 2:18-25, which speaks of God's unconditional love to human beings, and they are accepted as partners in relation, is very relevant in the present context of India. The casteless people were usually voiceless people in the Hindu society and so they were conveniently ignored in all levels from the main stream of national life.

One of the reasons why they embraced Christianity is that they expected that Christianity would make them, who were «No people» as «People of God», giving them «human dignity» and an «identity». But they were disillusioned. Today, they have become conscious of their status in the society and in the Church and so they claim equality and in certain cases they have become violent. In this context there is also an emergence of «Dalit Theology» in India.

There are two options before the Church and the emerging «Dalit Theology» to achieve this goal (i.e.) integrating the Dalits into the main stream of Indian society and thereby giving them «human dignity» and «identity» as people of God. The first option is the way of the Naxa-

lites, which induces hatred and violence against the oppressive structures and exploiters.

There is another way, which M. K. Gandhi, the «father of the nation» has used i.e. one of love, which is manifested in *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Satya-grahah* (protest for truth and justice). He was indeed, being inspired by the message of the Gospel. In the process of social reformation of the Indian Society gave a name «Harijan» to the «casteless people». It means «Hari» = God and «jan» = people (gens). Hence «Harijan» means «people of God». By this name, he wanted to give an identity to the people (i.e.) they too form the body of Hari (God).

Opposing the *Varna* theology, which provided the doctrinal basis of discrimination and hierarchy, Gandhi, provided a religious justification for equality and human dignity for the casteless people. It is, in fact, a religious and a social revolution. He translated his conviction in action. He, being a «caste» man established his «ashram» in a «Harijan» village.

The path of love is not merely a naive solution of the pietistic people to the problem of «Dalits» in India. Indeed, there can be no real love without justice. The demand for justice by violence is not a lasting solution to the problem. It leads only to anarchy and breeds hatred and revenge.

In this context, the study of the marriage metaphor in Hos 2:18-25 gives a new vision and direction to the Church of India. God has loved Israel in spite of her infidelities.

Hence everyone, the oppressor and the oppressed, the sinner and the just, the good and the bad has a right to love and to be loved as God's partner in love. This does not mean that God approves their actions. Here Gandhi's non-violence to change the unjust structures, commitment to justice and truth and love for all makes us to see Hos 2:18-25 with a new light.

Jesus does not speak merely of «justice» but he went beyond it. St. Paul speaking of the charisms says that they are given for the edification and building of the church (1 Cor 14:12). The prophetic activity in the church

should not create anarchy and disorder, «for God is a God not of disorder but of peace (1 Cor 14:33).

The Indian Church, the hierarchical leadership and the charismatic leadership should see the signs of the time and translate into action the «Good News» that «*ALL ARE GOD'S PEOPLE*», and «*ALL ARE HIS PARTNERS IN LOVE*», not because of their merits but because of his merciful love.

It is not merely human action but it is essentially a divine action. When this is realized in history, it is the Kingdom of God on earth.

FOR REFLECTION

The Word of God as the Source of Life

"You love everything that exists!"

Dr. Thomas Staubli offers in this article some timely reflections on the Old Testament Wisdom literature and their relevance in the actual context.

Those of us who took part in the fourth plenary meeting of the CBF in Bogota, know that at its heart was the scripture based paper calling us to action presented by the Carmelite Carlos Mesters, who in outstanding fashion brought to life the slogan of the conference and introduced us into a tradition of constant renewal geared towards fuller life. In the following reflections, and with a view to Hong Kong, I should like to present an idea of how we can take up and further develop Masters' call to action.

1. From Us to Deutero-Isaiah, from Deutero-Isaiah to Jesus, from Jesus to us.

Starting from the fundamental changes on our planet which have called forth a world-wide crisis, Mesters showed how the prophets of the school of Deutero-Isaiah attempted to cope creatively with the crisis of the Exile. "Behold I make all things new" (Is 43:19) was for them no empty publicity slogan but rather a real and liberating experience.

Further, Mesters showed how Jesus was influenced by the new meanings and methods developed by this school, when in the synagogue at Nazareth he read aloud their texts and interpreted them (Lk 4:16-22), and when he announced that these things were starting to be realised in the Kingdom of God, growing on earth like a mustard seed.

Finally, as a result of Mesters' reflection, the meeting set out in the Bogota document with which we are all acquainted, useful and humane decisions for our own circumstances.

2. The Law and the Prophets as the Whole of Scripture?

For Jesus Scripture - which he interpreted and fulfilled - consisted of the Torah (directives) and the Nebiim (prophets). As we know, there is another part of the Tanakh (the Hebrew designation of the scriptures), namely the Ketubhim (the remaining writings, which are often also referred to as Wisdom writings). This part of the canon, however, was only compiled and recognised as binding after the First Jewish War and hence after Jesus' death.

The cosmopolitan collection of wisdom writings contained in this third part of the Jewish canon was cultivated after the Exile particularly among Jews of the Diaspora. Here general expressions of wisdom, love, hope and piety figure prominently, whereas nationalistic militancy is little emphasised.

In other words, in the Wisdom books the momentum generated by Deutero-Isaiah is taken up and further developed. Long after the Torah had

been recognised as binding and the living tradition of the prophets had come to a standstill, "Wisdom" formed the most active branch of Israelite piety.

While the Law and the Prophets were carefully interpreted, new and unheard-of ideas were daringly included among the Wisdom writings while apparently insurmountable boundaries were crossed.

3. The Wisdom of Solomon as an Example of Contextual Theology.*

A bold concept of Wisdom theology is found in the so-called Wisdom of Solomon, also known more simply as The Book of Wisdom. It was drawn up by Jews in Alexandria c 30BC. Composed in Greek it was directed to a readership with a Hellenistic education.

It deals with the question of how a person can live in accordance with wisdom. To answer this question it takes up themes in Israel's history but in such general terms and without explicitly using Jewish names, that those acquainted with Judaism could understand the allusions while those unacquainted could still find a meaning in it.

In chapters 6 - 10 the love-affair between the wise man and Wisdom is described in ways that are strongly erotically suggestive. Moreover - and this is new - the erotic language is carried over to describe the relationship between God and Sophia. Thus in 8:3 Wisdom is described as God's beloved and his partner.

In his prayer (9:4) Solomon asks God for the Consort enthroned at

His side. This concept and the picture of the enthroned couple, however, originate in the polytheistic religions of Egypt and Greece. The compilers of the Book of Wisdom had no scruples about getting involved in such images as a means of grasping the divine reality in its various facets.

They reacted to the Isis cult, which was widespread in Egypt, not with icy polemics but rather by constructive integration - namely, by outlining one form of Wisdom which could absorb a large part of the Isis image. And so Egyptian and Hellenistic and Jewish elements were successfully combined in the personified figure of Sophia. The quest for knowledge and education is seen as workable common ground and as the basis of an intercultural dialogue.

4. «You love everything that exists» (11:24)

Wisdom leads people to a just life and justice preserves and supports life. It is life that the merciful God loves: «Yet you are merciful to all, because you are almighty, / you overlook people's sins, so that they can repent. / Yes, you love everything that exists, / and nothing that you have made disgusts you.» (11:23f). In these few words the main idea of the Wisdom of Solomon could be summarised very briefly.

This is an inspiring idea for those who have committed themselves to the ecumenical and conciliatory process for justice, peace and ecology - groups, for example, like the one which began with a great meeting at Basle on Pentecost Sunday 1989. It contradicts the universally prevailing model of progress.

Our parents' generation still understood by progress such things as economic development, political understanding, spiritual, social and sexual emancipation. But this word "progress" turned out to be white-wash for a band of cannibals, propped up by the worldwide rule of a totally deregulated market.

It was achieved with the blood and sweat of the so-called Third World; by sacrificing the right to work, education and even life of countless men and women; under the aegis of the politics of national security; thanks to the oh-so tolerant postmodernist culture of the personal whim; with money accumulated through extreme greed; and by means of powerful arrogance of a few individuals.

These last-named are exposed in the Wisdom of Solomon as cynics who - relying on the strength of the laws which they have themselves enacted, dishonour the just, abuse widows and despise the old. They believe in nothing save in chance and thus by their works offer up everything that lives as a sacrifice to death (chs. 1-2).

The circumstances depicted and analysed as mystagogy by the Wisdom of Solomon are those of the Roman Empire which, by the 1st. Century BC had reached the East and colonized it.

5. Jesus as Wisdom

It was precisely in Jesus' day that Wisdom was at its height. It is no exaggeration to understand the gospels and - even more so - the letters of the New Testament as a part of Wisdom.

Wisdom in fact had provided a religious language which united people in the Mediterranean area which itself had shrunk as a result of its inclusion in the Roman Empire.

In addition, what was special about Christian wisdom was that it was proclaimed - and proclaimed loud and clear - not as the wisdom of the learned but as the wisdom of the ordinary people, something which aroused anger among the Jews and ridicule among the Greeks, as Paul reports (1Cor1:23).

There was not simply a small elite network of scholars possessing exclusive information, as is the case today with the Internet in the field of computer science.

On the contrary, Christian wisdom was aimed at overcoming not only cultural but also class divisions; Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, men and women were all to accept and understand this wisdom in order to be set free (Gal 3:28).

As the two examples above show, Wisdom was made concrete in Christ. At their Baptism when they put on Christ the way they would put on a garment, Christians put on Wisdom.

So becoming a Christian has something to do with religious education - i.e. education which leads out of economic dependence (Exodus); which sets out rules to protect freedom in place of laws which exploit it (Sinai); which enables all men and women to live in their own land (the Promised Land).

Jesus presents himself as the new Wisdom. In the Book of Jesus Ben

Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) Wisdom speaks in the tradition of the oriental tree goddesses: «I am like a vine putting out graceful shoots, / my blossoms bear the fruit of glory and wealth. / Approach me, you who desire me, / and take your fill of my fruits.» (24:17ff).

In John Jesus says: «I am the vine, / you are the branches. / Whoever remains in me, with me in him, / bears fruit in plenty.» (Jn 15:5). And in Matthew: «Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest.» (Mt. 11:28)

There are many such links with the Wisdom School. In contemporary theology Jesus is presented above all as a prophet, fulfilling and renewing the Torah. But he is not only the new Moses and Elijah come back to earth, he is also, and perhaps especially, the new Hokhmah/Sophia/Wisdom, which plays such an important role in the scriptures of his day.

Bearing in mind this background, Jesus' Transfiguration on the mountain takes on new meaning. Would it not be conceivable that he - between Moses, the teacher of the Law, and Elijah, the prophet - represents Wisdom and thus completes the threefold form of the Jewish scriptures which in the first century AD was taking canonical shape?

Only an exclusively patriarchal presentation of Christ as man renders these ideas impossible. To say that Christ is Wisdom (which is feminine in gender), God's beloved Partner, would not sound absurd to oriental ears of that time.

6. Wisdom as a prominent part of Catholic Culture

Nothing could better illustrate the early Christian consciousness of Wisdom than the fact that the first centre of eastern Christianity in Byzantium was called «Hagia Sophia» (Holy Wisdom). Right up to our own day in the Eastern liturgy when there is reading from sacred Scripture it is announced with the authoritative cry: «Wisdom!»

Even the architects of the great French Gothic cathedrals, in searching out accurate measurements for their churches, had recourse to divine Wisdom and its way of ordering the world in terms of size, number and weight. They understood the church building itself, with the seven-pillared naves, as the house that Wisdom had built herself (Prov 11:21).

In the West, where Sophia-theology appeared theologically incomprehensible, the Wisdom typology was transferred to Mary. And so, until the Second Vatican Council, on the important Marian feasts, appropriate texts from the Wisdom Books were read (e.g. Prov 8, Sir 24).

The Jews and later on also the groups of Reformers in Europe faced divine Wisdom with a certain amount of scepticism, for they saw in it a latent threat to their strongly guarded (patriarchal) monotheism. In Judaism Wisdom continues to be honoured in the feast of Simhat haTorah.

Social critics within the church in almost all ages felt themselves akin to the prophets, not only the Reformers but also the Second Vatican

Council. They encountered the Wisdom writings with the wary suspicion that these only legitimised the «status quo».

Yet it was Luther who recommended the reading of the Wisdom of Solomon to powerful individuals, probably aware of the critical stance of the text: «The powerful fellows especially should read it / those who rage against their subjects / and who storm against the innocent for the sake of God's Word.»

And it was the Dominican, Bartolome de las Casas, whose eyes were opened to the atrocities of the Spaniards in Latin America, thanks to an extremely socially critical text in Sirach (34:18-22).

7. The Meaning of the Wisdom Texts for Hong Kong

Finally I should like to draw a few stimulating and practical conclusions from these considerations for the forthcoming plenary meeting in Hong Kong.

a) The line drawn by Mesters in Bogota from Deutero-Isaiah to Jesus leads us to Wisdom. Wisdom sets out enthusiasm for the God of life in a new and unheard of way, which in every respect broadens our horizons. It is religious language which has epitomised the principle of inculturation.

b) The language of Wisdom can protect us from patriarchal Christianity. It is the Judaeo-Christian opening to those religions which do not (yet) have the feminine element in the Godhead.

c) The international language of Wisdom is a good basis for dialogue with the great religions of Asia, which likewise have formulated their insights into the divine in the language of Wisdom. To put it into a picture: Jesus - Wisdom - can sit at the one table with Confucius, Buddha and LaoTse to laugh and argue with them. Jesus - the martyr - dies alone and silent.

d) Wisdom sees the starting-point of liberation, like today's social sciences and a critical economy, in terms of education. Since, on the contrary, fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, I see here the starting-point for a solidarity between theology and economy.

This is how I understand the motto: The Word of God as the source of life. Bible study is first of all a work of education - education of a consciousness which knows how to distinguish the powers of life from the forces of death.

e) The themes of the Wisdom Book are highly topical, from the criticism of powerful rulers in the Wisdom of Solomon to the feminist creation story of Proverbs, and from the ecotheology of the Psalms to the praise of erotic delight in the Song of Songs.

I recommend, therefore, that the preparatory committees of the 5th. Plenary meeting in Hong Kong attach importance to the Wisdom texts in their daily bible work.

*Cf. SCHROER S., "Dokumente interkulturellen Lernens in der Bibel", in *Concilium* 30 (1994), 4-11. ◆

HONG KONG 1996

Women: Bestowers of the seed of life

**«I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full»
(John 10:10b)**

*Meditations by Salesian Sister Maria Ko, Professor of Sacred Scripture
and one of the speakers during the V Plenary Assembly of the CBF to be
held in Hong Kong (BDV 35)*

There is a Chinese proverb that says «All the darkness of the world, the most acute, the most dense, could not overcome the light of one frail candle». The shadow areas in this world may appear to be vast, and the seeds of life very small, in comparison, but life will always dissipate the darkness and they will not suffocate life. The Risen Christ guarantees this: «Be courageous, I have conquered the world» (John 16:33).

Seeds are always small, hidden, silent; so, too, the seeds of life. The Lord loves to make the fullness of life spring from humble persons, from deed of little account, from forgotten places, from insignificant circumstances. It is the law of the wheat grain, the mustard seed, the yeast in dough. The Bible is full of these examples.

In this meditation we want to focus our reflection on the seeds of life incarnated in some female figures. Woman, as *Mulieris Dignitatem* says, has a «prophetic characteristic» (MD 29) in God's plan. She it is where newness is gestating, the womb of the future, the land of God's coming, a fruitful field for the seeds of life. The women we are going to reflect upon today are Moses' sister, Namaan's slave girl, Rachel, Judith, Esther. They are women of different ages, belonging to different epochs, from different social positions.

Some of them are very famous but we do not even know the names of some of the others. What they all have in common is that they are the source of life for others: a sister who kept watch over the life of her baby brother; a slave girl who showed the way to life to her foreign master; a mother who died giving life to her son; a widow who saved the life of her people; and a queen who interceded for the life of her compatriots.

1. A sister who watches over life (Exod. 2:1-10)

Moses, who would lead Israel through the Red Sea, is himself «saved from the waters». And, that, largely due to his sister. The Bible does not mention the name of the girl who, hidden among the rushes of the Nile, observed what would happen to her baby brother in a small basket floating in the river. Jewish tradition, however, has no hesitation in identifying her with Miriam, the prophetess who collaborated with her brother in the exodus and in the journey through the wilderness.

The whole scene in Exodus 2:1-10 is moving, rich in human warmth and with feminine delicacy. Three women are involved in saving the life of little Moses: his mother, his sister, and Pharaoh's daughter. It is the sister who acts as intermediary between the other two, and

her action unites that of the other two. She stays some distance away, in a place where she can see, watch, guard and help. Her keeping watch over what would happen to her baby brother is full of tenderness and responsibility.

This is the counter scene to Genesis 4, the story of the first pair of brothers. After Cain killed his brother he gave an irritated reply to God: «Am I my brother's keeper?» Now Miriam is her brother's guardian, and she does it with love.

I have seen in China, in a house where they took in abandoned children, a photograph of a small child who was carrying on her back a little boy, almost as big as she was, who was wounded and with a bandaged foot. From the attitude of the little girl one could see that the weight was too much for her frail body, however, she had a proud face and a smile of satisfaction. Beneath the photograph was written: «Don't wonder! He's my brother.»

Miriam keeps watch because in that basket is the brother she loves, and she waits patiently so that she can look after her brother's life. And through her love for him she exposes her own life to danger.

When she notices that circumstances are favourable, she comes from her hiding place, and, with courage and intelligence, confronts Pharaoh's daughter, puts forward a bold and convincing proposal. Thus the life of the future liberator of the people of Israel is saved by a small child, by a sister who loves him.

2. A slave girl who points the way to life (2 Kgs 5:1-15)

A young Israelite girl, who was kidnapped and carried off from her homeland and her loved ones, transported to a foreign land and into slavery, is too small and insignificant to be recorded by name. Certainly her sorrow was no less than that of her leprous master.

Namaan was an influential person, highly thought of by the king, and surrounded

by the affection of his family, but the little slave girl had to bear her suffering all by herself. She counted for nothing; her sad story, so common among foreign slaves, attracted nobody's attention. Her past was ignored and no one was interested in her future.

But the little slave girl had a big heart, capable of giving to others what she had not received herself. «What a marvel that someone can give like that what she did not possess herself; O sweet miracle of our empty hands», was how the curate of G. Bernanos' friend put it.

«If only my lord would go to the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy.» With the simplicity and discretion which are typical of the humble and the small, the young girl offers her good offices, her participation in another's problems; she offers the seed of life that springs from her absolute trust in God.

It is a seed of life that passes from person to person, making everyone vibrant, and so creating a bond of solidarity: the girl, Namaan's wife, the king of Aram, the king of Israel, and Namaan's servants.

In the end Namaan goes to Elisha's house and is cured; but not only that; he also discovers the true God: «Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel». All this was started by a young girl, who, having sown life and hope, disappeared once more into silence, and is not mentioned again.

3. A mother who dies giving life (Gen. 35:16-20)

Rachel died giving birth. The account is simple enough and quite natural, but, for all that, dramatic. The death of the mother at the birth of a child is something that can happen, and happened, not rarely, in those times. The Bible records two cases of this kind: Rachel and the wife of Pinehas, daughter-in-law of Eli the priest (1 Sam. 4:19,22).

In the second case the Bible gives an explanation: the wife died because of the

trauma provoked by the death of her husband and of her father-in-law and news of the ark of the covenant being captured as booty.

For Rachel, however, there is no explanation. She died simply and solely because she was giving birth to a son. It is the grain of wheat sown, prelude of the great paschal mystery.

Rachel was barren and suffered because of it to the point of crying out: «Give me children, or I shall die» (Gen. 30:1). And God remembered her; he opened her womb, and she became the mother of Joseph. Now, at the birth of her second-born Rachel dies. The fecundity given by God had snatched her from death and now she dies precisely through this gift of fruitfulness.

It is something of a mystery, of a paradox. Rachel is something of the sign that will accompany the whole history of Israel. Sterility and fecundity, death and life, darkness and light, delusion and hope, sorrow and joy are woven together throughout the whole journey of this people.

In the same act, in the same gift the two faces of the mystery are united. The son also, fruit of this union of death and life, bears the sign. Ben-On («son of my sorrow»), becomes Benjamin («son of my strength»). Rachel's is a fruitful death, a death which generates life, a sorrow which produces strength.

The tomb of Rachel, of which pilgrims today still find a record in the neighbourhood of Bethlehem, is a monument to life which springs up from death. In various parts of the world monuments exist to babies unborn, babies whose lives are suffocated by the egoism of their parents; here, however, we have a monument to the mother, who made life begin and grow by sacrificing her own.

Many centuries after Rachel's death that tomb will inspire a dramatic utterance of Jeremiah: «A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping. Rachel

weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because her children are no more» (Jer. 31:15). It is an allusion to the tragedy of the people who were exiled in Babylon.

For Jeremiah there always goes forth from Rachel's tomb the weeping of a mother who sees the children suffer to whom she has given life. The gospel of Matthew will, in its turn, evoke this lament in the account of the slaughter of the innocents (Mtt. 2:18).

Rachel is the mother who weeps for every child who dies. That tomb, which stands to this day on the Road to Ephrata, is the sign of the mother who loves life and promotes it at any cost, of the mother who weeps and protests at every life killed, oppressed, undervalued, right down to the present day.

4. A widow who saves the life of the people (Judith 8:9-14)

In the first half of the book of Judith there is impressively described the contrast between the great power of the enemy army that wants to destroy Israel and the smallness of this people who are afraid.

Just at the moment when Israel sees all hope vanish of being saved from the enemy and believes that they must die and be tragically annihilated, behold Judith, a young widow, rises up to enkindle hope and sow the seeds of life.

At this point, Israel is resigned and has fixed the day their inevitable end: «Five more days and then we surrender». This is also an ultimatum aimed at God. It is as if Israel said to him: «We give you five days to save us; if you do nothing in these five days then we will disown you».

It is Israel's constant and incorrigible weakness: she wants immediate results. She has a trader's mentality: handing over the money with one hand and taking back the goods with the other.

Already at the time of the Exodus Moses had to labour much since the people

never ceased «putting God to the test». And in the time of Jesus, also, Israel will be strongly reprimanded because they demand signs and miracles as is their wont.

Now Judith, with her wise and authoritative discourse, invites true faith which does not consist in dictating laws to God but in accepting what he wills. Salvation will surely come, the when and how are in the hands of the Lord.

It could also be that salvation will come in a way totally different from what people expect. And that time it was just so. God defeated Israel's powerful enemy by means of a woman. He brought victory in weakness. Here happens what Mary will announce in the Magnificat: he has exalted the lowly and put down the mighty.

God does not now intervene with tremendous prodigies as at the Red Sea; here victory is brought about in the secrecy of the tent, in the secrecy of a woman's plan who, in her total trust in God, carried out an act beyond her strength. The situation is reversed. The cause of the threat of death is destroyed and Judith, in the littleness of her being a woman and a widow, reveals that true life lies in absolute trust in God.

5. A Queen who intercedes for the life of her compatriots (Esther 4:15-17)

Esther is another example of how the seeds of life grow in weakness and in secret. The figure of Esther, in some way, recalls that of Joseph and of Daniel. They are all persons who find themselves in positions of great importance, according to the mysterious and providential disposition of God. Because of this, their influential presence at the court of a foreign king is advantageous to Israel, but above all there comes the recognition on the part of the foreign people that Yahweh is the one true God.

Esther, too, in her fear and her weakness, trusts in God and is at one with her compatriots. She is conscious of the

danger, but ready to risk her life: «If I perish, I perish».

Like Judith, Esther confirms the mysterious force hidden in weakness whereby she trusts in God. Life revives and joy is reflected in the faces of Israel through the words and the person of a woman. Esther remains in the Hebrew tradition as a living sign of joy and hope. It is she who puts back the will to live in the hearts of a people devastated and worn out; it is she who introduces into the dense darkness the flash of light; it is she who discovers the seed of life in the shadow of death.

It is what her adopted father, Mordecai, asserts at the end of the book: Esther is life a stream of fresh water that makes everything fruitful and flourish. Mordecai says: «All this is God's doing. I remember the dream I had about these matters, nothing of which has failed to come true;

the little spring that became a river, the light that shone, the sun, the flood of water.

Esther is the river... Through her the Lord has saved his people, the Lord has delivered us from all these evils, God has worked such signs and great wonders as have never occurred among the nations» (Esth. 10:3a-3f).

At the end of our reflection on these women who were bestowers of fruitful life we cannot not be mindful of Mary, the Woman through whom life came into the world.

In this humble woman of Nazareth God accomplished great things, he caused life in abundance to spring from her. Mary was compared by the Fathers of the Church to the tree of life; she is invoked by all generations as «our life, our sweetness and our hope».

«That they may have life»

Dr. Daniel Kosch has for the past three years been Head of the Biblical-Pastoral Work Centre of the Swiss Catholic Biblical Association whose headquarters are in Zürich.

In 1985 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of its existence the Swiss Catholic Biblical Association chose the text "That they may have life" (Jn 10:10). Ten years later - and looking forward to the plenary session of the Catholic Biblical Federation in Hong Kong which has adopted the same text - I should like to investigate the question of how this text has moulded biblical-pastoral work. Such reflection seems to me to be important because great theological concepts like «life» are often used in a very general, not very precise sense, by all kinds of people and with all kinds of meanings.

Life: a blossoming, the tree of life, open hands

The logo illustrated above also belongs with the text of the Swiss Catholic Bible Association. It possesses several symbolic dimensions, simultaneously depicting a blossoming, a tree and two open hands. The promise of "life in its fullness" is meant not only for the eschatological future of believers, but also includes the whole world.

If our biblical-pastoral work is characterised by the effort to perceive in as concrete a way as possible the world in which we live and moving on from there to read the bible, then it is more than a teaching method. It is the expression of our conviction that the God of the Bible loves the world (cf. Jn 3:10) and loves life in all the forms in which it appears (Wis 11:24-26).



Life: Recognising the Signs of the Times

With the text "that they may have life", however, there also belongs the Manifesto published in 1987, a paper on fundamentals which, against the background of the present situation, formulates the following crucial points:

Biblical study comes to terms with God's word in relation to life and history. Starting out from and leading back to the observations and questions of human beings of today and leads back again to them, it really comes into its own.

We are bound by the methods and results of biblical science. Historical and critical quest becomes productive where men and women take their own life-experience seriously and no longer accept without question allegedly self-evident positions.

A productive contact with the Bible is best ensured when we are unhampered in our investigations, open to new attempts at explanation and prepared to dialogue with divergent opinions.

Where the diversity of the Bible's talk about God and to God is discovered and experienced, pluralism and tolerance can grow; where its narrative is spun out, hope can flourish; where its complaint is heard, suffering and distress come up for discussion and solidarity with God's specially favoured, the poor, grows; where its praise continues to ring out, Christian celebration can prosper.

This is not to close our eyes to the fact that time and time again even biblical texts have been presented in order to legitimate and cement patriarchal, repressive and exploitative positions in the name of a threatening and punishing God.

These crucial points protect the text from a fundamentalist or individualistic mis-interpretation as well as from the danger of its becoming a source of arbitrary and eventually trivial postmodernist religiosity.

That the promise of «life in its fullness» is meant especially for those whose life

is threatened and endangered is made clear in the Manifesto, in those places where it sets out its sympathy for women, the poor both at home and in the third world, those who are engaged in the ecological question, foreigners and victims of persecution, awkward individuals, the handicapped and the suffering.

It is precisely at this point that the limits of all Manifestos and papers setting out specific programmes become clear. Manifestos and papers can indeed encourage and inspire, but they cannot replace praxis.

Life: Encounter and Celebration

The text defines not only the programme but also the concrete forms and methods of our work.

- More important than the distribution of as many bibles and written work-aids as possible is our work in Bible circles, in biblical courses, in trips to the biblical lands, and in communities «at the coal face», so to speak. This is based on the conviction expressed by Martin Buber: «Every real life is encounter.»

In our country, stamped by the Reformation, life-oriented bible-work leads very frequently to ecumenical projects. A special mention must be made of participation in the Ecumenical Circle for Bible Study where men and women, specialists in the field of biblical interpretation, Catholics and Protestants put together material for Bible weekends on a specific text (e.g. Jeremiah) or theme (e.g. meeting Jesus) as well as publishing workbooks for use in biblical study in the community.

In this circle there has also arisen a method frequently employed in all the German-speaking lands. In the encounter with biblical texts it provides for three steps:

1. Approaching the biblical text
2. Listening to the text
3. Taking the text further

A further ecumenical project is the year-round sending out of material to all Christian communities to be used on a «Bible Sunday».

What is important for us is not only the contact with Protestant fellow-Christians, but also dialogue with Jewish brothers and sisters which is fostered through regular courses on «Letter, Spirit and People of the Hebrew Bible» and also through travel to the lands of the Bible.

To our text we also add the desire to celebrate the God of Life. Thus, in the title «that they may have life» we have published comprehensive material for bible-study for Church services, to help groups and parishes to focus on the Word of God.

Life: Struggle against Resignation

When we re-read what is said about «life in its fullness» in its context (cf. Jn 10:1-21) it becomes patently clear that this life must be preserved and protected and defended. Form the final document of the 4th Plenary gathering of the CBF in Bogota (1990) we have obtained many ideas.

In the life of our rich and heavily institutionalised church the commitment to life is always a struggle against numbness, apathy and what Dorothee Sölle has called «the luxury of hopelessness».

The exchange encouraged by the CBF with the poor but living church in Latin America and elsewhere is for that reason very important for us, because it is a question of preventing our text «that they may have life» from becoming an arbitrary or even empty expression. So it is with great interest and high expectations that we look towards the forthcoming plenary session in Hong Kong.

Doubtless it will help us to understand out motto better and more profoundly - in the context of a multi-cultural and multi-religious world which, given the countless threats it faces, will long for nothing more than life in its fullness. ♦

LIFE OF THE FEDERATION

Mgr. Ablondi invites to Prayer

An assembly before the Assembly

As we turn our minds towards the next Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation, I think it is fitting to invite all members who will take part to prepare for it with profound prayer. Members, in turn, will spread this invitation to their communities and co-workers.

To give focus to the prayer, the theme of the Assembly should be framed by the needs of the world and of the Church.

The Word of God, after all, is always the Word addressed to the world, indeed, that continuously strives to embody Itself in the world.

For this reason, in a certain sense, it is prayer that already today is the true beginning of the Assembly.

This will be a spiritual assembly that will take visible shape little by little as people get together and as the realization of its importance continues to grow right up to the actual days of the meeting in Hong Kong.

We begin our reflection, then, with the theme of the assembly; "The Word of God as the Source of Life."

Why pray?

Prayer surely ought to help us understand the life to which modern man aspires, to help understand the life that God offers, and to help God's Word produce the fruit of life.

The theme of the Assembly already suggests the worth of life and all its needs: "life for the world". Perhaps never before has this theme held the importance it holds today when we find ourselves face to face with a world that is truly new and poor.

Who ought to pray?

Prayer already creates an assembly in spirit, a much vaster assembly, in fact, than the one to be held next year. Prayer unites many who will not actually participate in the Assembly in Hong Kong.

For this reason this invitation to prayer should be addressed to individuals and to dioceses, as well as to religious communities and associations. I would further like it to be addressed to those religious communities dedicated to prayer, so that they might join in prayer with us now, and with even more zeal during the Assembly itself.

Pray in what way?

In this case, imagination is going to have to play an important role. Any suggestion I might put forward will be little more than a hint. It will be like leaven to help give rise to your own thoughts.

The Federation center can distribute a short prayer that can be included with other intentions during the "Prayer of the Faithful" during Mass.

With its simplicity it will have a universal appeal.

But what time could be more appropriate that the celebrations of the "Liturgy of the Word", proclaimed in various settings according to local needs, all toward strengthening the theme of the Assembly?

Could we not have a "biblical three days" (if not a whole week) enkindling ourselves with the theme of the Assembly, presenting and circulating the way to pray biblically, especially in families.

By doing this, we can advance from prayer for the spread of the Word of God to the Word of God that itself becomes prayer. This would also provide the opportunity to engage in "Lectio Divina" based on biblical passages inspired by the Assembly theme.

Prayer to what ends?

It does not take much effort to realize that in both the Church and the world there is a great need to meet ... Jesus. It is that simple. Sometimes His presence is misunderstood, unrecognized, overlooked. Only attentiveness to His Word can reveal to us the presence of Him who is not only the Source of Life, but "very Life itself".

If, however, the Word is to become the "source of life", besides knowing Christ we need to receive from him two great virtues that modern man lacks; truth and love.

In fact, there has never been more communication and never so little truth; never more gestures of love and so little genuine ability to love. It is in His Word that we will find the source of these two virtues which can shape material life, physical and spiritual life, the life of individuals and communities.

It is the Word of God, after all, that reveals to us that even the human word is full of life. In fact, people today need to realize the beauty of everyday human speech that God has made possible for them.

The very dialogue between God and man should make dialogue among men both possible and creative.

These directions that I have outlined can, I believe, not only facilitate prayer but also the activities needed to promote it. Granted, they are a remote preparation for the Assembly, but one that can be most efficacious.

With a warm greeting and the hope to be included in this prayer.

Livorno, September, 1995

+ Alberto Ablondi
Bishop of Livorno

In his writings Bishop Ablondi has suggested that the General Secretariat formulate an intercession.

Instead of that we should like to recommend the use of the following prayer from China which is a good reflection of the concern of the Plenary Session.

*O God, source of life, you are life.
You are the rice which we eat every
day and on which we live.*

In every bowl of rice you come to us.

*O Christ, you came that we might
live and have rich abundance.
We should like to make a gift of this
abundance and share the basics of
our lives with others.*

*We should like to work for that day
which brings us a step nearer your
kingdom of love and righteousness.*

Stand by us. Amen.

2) it is an alternative to inculcation of the Bible that counts on the help of pragmatic linguistics;

3) it is a work that unites Biblical Sciences and Pastoral in order to seek guidelines for action;

4) it is a manual for formation in seminaries that integrates the advances of exegesis;

5) it is a response to the demands and necessities of the Biblical Pastoral ministry;

6) it is an instrument of ecumenical dialogue;

7) it is a sign of ecclesial communion through its intercultural and interdisciplinary perspectives;

8) it is an echo, at the Gospel level, of life;

9) it is a help for bible reading and preparing homilies;

10) it is the beginning of a series which intends to comment on all the books of Sacred Scripture.

Experiences

Santafé de Bogotá: Evangelium et Cultura

Intercultural Exegesis Project.

The Association «Gospel and Culture» with the «Intercultural Exegesis Project» is a member of the CBF.

We are a group of biblicists from various countries - some of them Latinamerican - which has been working for some years on a project of intercultural exegesis, whose heart and head has been Professor Fritzleo Lentzen-Deiss, S. J., professor in the Biblical Institute and in the Gregorian Pontifical University.

We are looking to offer a translation, configuration and explanation of the biblical text which integrates the results of linguistics and the communication sciences, the biblical sciences and pastoral, in such a way that the text is revealed as a model of

action which offers new guidelines that will help both at the exegetical level and the theological, spiritual and pastoral levels.

A concrete example of this work is the *Gospel of Mark: a model of the New Evangelization*, published in collaboration with Celam, as a service to the universal Church. It has the characteristics that stimulate our work.

1) It is a concrete proposal for the New Evangelization, with new methods, new expressions, and a new ardour in the biblical field;

Hearing the Word from Calcutta

The Word-Mission Experience, a project proposed by the Claretian Congregation, of whom we have spoken in this Bulletin, already has a little history. Severiano Blanco (Spain), a member of the preparatory team, relates his experience when preparing the third year (Synoptics and Acts: The Kingdom has arrived)

The first meeting of the team took place in Madrid, in February 1993;

the second, in Guatemala, in March 1994; the third, in India, in February 1995.

Why in India?

The centres of gravity of the Congregation have been shifting to other latitudes. But it is not only this. In order to gain access to the profound message of the biblical text, the point of view or the situation in which the reader places himself is decisive. And, in this sense, during the last years, the accent has been placed on the service that can be offered from the perspective of the poor.

India, with its immeasurable spiritual and religious richness, and with its experience of poverty and suffering, provides, perhaps, a privileged viewing-point for contemplating the drama of the God-humanity approachement, about which the Bible wants to give testimony.

The Meeting of the Word-Mission Team in Barrackpore

This took place from 1st-15th February 1995. The members of the group came from Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, Brazil, Italy and India. Our meeting took place in Barrackpore, about twenty-five miles from Calcutta.

The rich experience of the participants had a threefold character. In the first place, the contact with the Claretians in India. Secondly, contact with the reality that is India.

The teeming crowds in the streets, the pollution in the atmosphere, the hectic commercial activity, the po-

verty and the children, all made an impression.

But what impressed especially was the meeting with Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a venerable old lady of eighty-four years, with a pacemaker and various surgical operations, but who remains agile as a squirrel, and with extraordinary vivacity in her look and her words, and as dedicated as anyone, to look after the poor who call at her door.

Also in the city of Barrackpore we had the chill of visiting one of the places on the river bank where they brought Gandhi's ashes; we also visited a Hindu temple where a goddess was fêted; they presented us with fruits and the friendliness of an oriental welcome.

It would be ingenuous to think that in two weeks we got to know the oriental spirit and that we already had another perspective for reading the Bible; but there was unquestionably a good proportion of humanity and a broadening of horizons.

In third place, the work of the team. It was the third session, and involved arriving at an acceptable method. The first task was the appraisal of the «Word-Mission» experience, through one's own experience and enquiries carried out within the organizations of the Congregation. Taking all this into account we began a new work.

First of all the division and distribution of the themes within the biblical books was the object of our study (Synoptics and Acts). Each Biblicist elaborated schemes around

the appropriate theme or themes and appraised the rest.

Thus a definitive scheme was arrived at which each one had to edit for printing.

The presentation of each biblical section followed the same scheme: literary level; historical level; theological level. Having prepared the biblical work proper, the last two days were dedicated to the Claretian, situational and existential keys.

The procedure was as varied as the participants, the experience of living for some days in a mixed ambience, the spirit of the group and the listening to the elaboration of the themes... without doubt this brought about a broadening of the perspective of reading and an enormous mutual enrichment.

We hope that this enrichment of the team members will be equally a source of disquiet and of life for all who make use of our humble aids.

Water of life

*Fr. Jacek Pawlik, SVD,
expert in African Anthro-
pology shares his ex-
perience*

In the evening of a hot April day all around the town of Bassar in Togo can be heard a muffled, gurgling noise. The last drops of water are collecting in the deep wells. Now there is no more water.

After six months of drought the deep wells - which provide the city (with

a population that doubles every 30 years) with water - have dried up.

«What do we do now?» ask the women whose task it always is to fetch the water. The nearest ponds and streams are dry. Five miles away is the only remaining hope - the river Kamaka which flows the whole year round.

The women will lose no time. They set off right away. Despite the fact that it is twilight, they march in single file through the bush, their buckets and dishes on their heads. During the dry season water is the main concern of the women of Bassar, since they have to look after the whole family.

Day after day, as they await the rain, all eyes are turned to the sky; those of the women, because catching the rain-water in basins puts an end to their continuous running to and from the well; those of the men, because they can begin their work in the fields.

This is the time when Easter is celebrated in Bassar. In the Easter Vigil liturgy water is especially important. On this night the catechumens are baptised after a three-year period of preparation.

The liturgy for the Vigil includes eight varied readings, but the reading from the Book of Exodus, which tells of the passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea, seems to be most closely connected with baptism. The Israelites leave the land of slavery and become free men and women.

The waters obey Moses' command, they open up a dry passage through

it, then they close it up again. Just like the Israelites passing through the sea, so the catechumens pass from the slavery of sin to the freedom of the children of God.

The water of baptism symbolises the Red Sea. After this I have added a supplementary rite, to underline the meaning of water for the baptismal liturgy. First of all I turn to the congregation and say: «Dear Friends, in our Easter Vigil ceremony we are approaching the moment of baptism. It is clear to us that we need water.

And so, I should like to ask six women to take the jugs standing here in front of the altar and to fetch water from the river.» The young women line up in front of the altar, the jugs on their heads, ready to set off.

Then I stretch out my hands over them and bless them - in the same way that the elders in Bassar do before people set out on an important journey. «God be with you. May you meet no snakes on your way. May the evil spirits leave you in peace. Come back safe and sound. We await the water for the baptism.»

The women leave the church and the liturgy continues. After the sermon we interrupt the celebration, which lasts for several hours, and during this pause the excitement rises.

Everyone waits for the return of the water-carriers. In the distance can be heard a song. It is the women with their jugs full of water. They are happy. With a song on their lips, their whole bodies moving to the rhythm, they dance.

Their whole being is a clear expression of joy, the joy of work accom-

plished, the joy of baptism, the joy of the Lord's resurrection, which is announced on this Easter night.

The women approach the altar. The water is poured into the baptismal font. For the candidates for baptism Christ's promise is realised. Water becomes the sign of new life.

«I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.»

The end of the three-year preparation period has arrived. Christian life begins.

On the following day the women will again carry water, for their children, for their parents, for their relations. Will they do it with fresh strength, a strength consolidated by the hope of regular rainfall, by the hope of the resurrection?

In countries where the climate is more temperate, people can hardly imagine how important water is for everyday life. Recently in Europe the cause of concern was not a shortage of water but flooding. Many Europeans are not aware of the fact that for a large part of the earth's population water is a great problem.

Christian solidarity begins, when you put yourself in the place of other individuals, when you take the trouble to understand them, when you share with them life's joys and cares.

This solidarity is based on the water of baptism, which has given new life to every Christian in the world. The water brought by the women of Bassar during the Easter Vigil is a sign and a reminder of that. ◆

News

Africa

Nairobi

Seventh Congress of the Association of Pan African Catholic Exegetes.

The seventh congress of the *APECA* took place from the 23rd -28th July in the Centre des Dimesse Sisters de Karen, Nairobi, under the presidency of Monsignor Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya, archbishop of Kisangani, Zaire, president of the Association, and Monsignor Cornelius Esua, bishop of Kumbo, Cameroon, vice-president of the Association.

Twenty-two exegetes attended (bishops, priests and laity) from twelve countries: Burkina-Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Kenya, Nigeria, Central African Republic, Tanzania, Uganda, Zaire and Zimbabwe, and also an exegete from Belgium.

The opening ceremonies took place under the patronage of Cardinal Maurice M. Otunga, archbishop of Nairobi. In his message of welcome, the Cardinal reminded the congress members of their particular vocation in the Church of Africa and asked them to help Africa to make itself daily more African and more Christian.

In his allocution the president reminded the participants of the importance of these high-level meetings for biblical study and for sharing experiences of the biblical pastoral ministry in their respective countries.

The theme of the congress was «Biblical Salvation and Revelation». It

sought to discover how salvation is experienced in the Bible and what are the implications that follow from this for Africa. The theme had been chosen with a view to the special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of bishops and which should deal with the evangelising mission of the Church in Africa for the year 2000; and this from the double dimension of the proclamation of the word on the one hand and human advancement on the other.

During the five days the participants attended eight conferences: Salvation in St John; Salvation and Revelation in the Letter to the Ephesians; The Flight of the Young Man in Mark 14:51-52; Pauline Theology in the Letter to the Romans in the Nigerian Context; Salvation through the Annunciation to the Shepherds in Luke: A Saviour has been born to you today (Lk 2:11); Salvation in Acts 20:28; Salvation in the Prophetic Preaching; Salvation in the Letter to the Romans from the perspective of Solidarity.

In addition to the theme of the congress the participants attended an exposition on the project of translating the Bible into basic French. Through the conference they were invited to participate in the effort to make a translation accessible to all.

They also took the opportunity to visit the headquarters of *BICAM-CEBAM*, Biblical Centre for Africa and Madagascar; the department, *SCEAM*, is entrusted with the promotion of the biblical pastoral ministry in Africa.

America

Bolivia

September 1995 was the month of the Bible in Bolivia. «I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full» (John 10:10) is the principal motivation.

The Episcopal Commission for and Catechesis and the Bible sought, in this way, to link up its reflection with all the members of the Catholic Biblical Federation during this year of preparation for the Plenary Assembly in Hong Kong in July, 1996. It has published some material which may be of interest in other places.

For more information: Casilla 7857, La Paz, Bolivia.

Venezuela

In January, 1995, the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference made public the exhortation *COMMITMENT TO LIFE* showing «with distress how human life in our country is constantly disrespected» (Exhortation n.2). The bishops invited us to orientate «our actions, reflections and commitment» towards an awareness, defence and proclamation of the gift of life (cf. Exhortation n.8).

To this end, *TEOLOGIA IUSI* has accepted the invitation and contributed a reflection analysing the principles that sustain such an invitation, recalling some ecclesial positions taken up in recent times for the defence of life, and commenting on its influence in pastoral

ministry. All this with the object of promoting the commitment and the life of the Christian communities of Venezuela. *TEOLOGIA IUSI*, n. 14 (Jan-June) 1995.

Edited by the Instituto Universitario Seminario Interdiocesano, Santa Rosa de Lima, Caracas, Venezuela.

Asia/Oceania

Continental China/Shanghai

Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian visited Stuttgart in April, 1995. He has translated the New Testament (JB version). Besides the Bible he wants to publish the missal and the lectionary. «There is a great need», he commented, and his hope is that there would be a Bible group in each parish.

Hong Kong

The annual meeting of co-ordinators from Asia/Oceania took place in Hong Kong from 18th-25th of June. Together with matters proper to the regions and sub-regions matters related to the next Plenary Assembly were also on the agenda for consideration by the local preparatory committee.

Vietnam

The first Vietnamese participant in the *DEI VERBUM* course at Nemi has organised a group of religious, priests and laity to promote the biblical pastoral ministry in the country.

Europe/Middle East

Barcelona

A congress on The Bible and the Mediterranean took place in Barcelona from 18th-22nd September. This congress was organised by the Spanish Biblical Association (ABE) and the Biblical Association of Catalunya (ABC). Likewise, Biblical Associations from the Mediterranean region were especially invited within the framework of collaboration in the zone, which already has some small history and a rich future. One might single out especially the presence of the Biblical Association of France (ACFEB) and the Italian Biblical Association (ABI). The CBF in Stuttgart was also represented.

The general papers were given by professors L. Alonso Schökel, *The Bible and the Sea*; B. Renaud, *The «Great Sea» in the Old Testament: from Geography to Symbol*; J. Treballe, *Textual crossbreeding of the Bible in the Mediterranean*; A. Puig, *The Mediterranean Diaspora*; R. Penna, *Wine and its metaphors in classical Greek, in ancient Israel and in the New Testament*; Bruce J. Malina, *Mediterranean Cultural Anthropology and the New Testament*.

In addition to the general papers, four lecture rooms were used for more than forty communications of varied interest on four specific topics: *Cities of the Mediterranean*, *Languages of the Mediterranean*, *Cross-breeding and Syncretism in the Mediterranean*, and *Christian Theologies of the Mediterranean*.

The splendid welcome and organisation by the host city, Barcelona, was added to for the almost two hundred strong congress members by the intense experience of a day organised in Monserrat.

The Benedictine Abbey, so well known for its influence in the world of culture and especially, too, in the field of biblical studies, welcomed the participants in their own typical style, which made the guests feel at home.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission's document *on The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* mentions the existence and importance of «The Approaches that use the Social Sciences» and, more expressly, «The Approach through Cultural Anthropology».

Since 1991 there has been ongoing collaboration between Prof. Bruce J. Malina and the Context Group and some Spanish biblicists due to the interest which the application of anthropological studies to the Mediterranean region and its consequences for the interpretation of the New Testament aroused amongst them.

This line of investigation, so current in more anglophone methods, has gained interest on the Iberian Peninsula and already has borne some fruit there. This is the case with a pioneering work in Spanish, *Lamesa compartida: Estudios del NT desde las Ciencias Sociales* (The Shared Table: Studying the New Testament through the Social Sciences), ed. Sal Terrae. Presencia Teologica, Santander, 1994. The author is Prof. Dr. Rafael Aguirre, an internationally

known exegete and Director of *ABE* for the last six years.

It is confirmed as a fruitful and thought-provoking line of investigation. It shows how recourse to the social sciences enriches the theological understanding of the texts, and biblical studies enter into dialogue more realistically with

contemporary culture. Translation into Spanish of works which emphasise this trend has begun, backed by the organisers of the Congress and in collaboration with the publishing house, Verbo Divino. We hope that all this will contribute to a greater proximity between the Word of God and the experiences of the people of today.

And today, through the media, that importance has not only not diminished but has increased. Therefore, this recovery of women should be made equally in word and image in a plurality of styles.»

Publicaciones Claretianas, 1995, Juan Alvarez Mendizabel, 65 dpdo., 3. 28008 Madrid. Tel. (91) 547 05 02.

Books and Materials of Interest to the Biblical pastoral Ministry

"Bible street": Finding out the Word of God (Franz Kogler)

Road signs (new arrangement) on the title page of the Brochure already prepare us for what it is about: rules for getting access to the living Word of God. This is how the editor approaches the questioning search of his contemporaries towards: Reading the Bible - but how?

He assembles concrete rules for reading, fixed by signs that are known from traffic: Parking; Priority; Designated footpaths; Building-site; Prescribed direction... In this way the reader is more easily able to reach the real goal: a fruitful reading of the Bible and biblical texts for everyday life.

The second part of the Brochure contains further recommendations and concrete proposals: Bible reading plan; reading Holy Scripture; Reading the Bible alone or in groups; Bible school; Bible correspondence course; cassettes, and so forth. In addition there will be books in German on the Bible (10 titles) and on Bible Work (8 titles) as well as 8 periodicals.

The Brochures are aimed at each one who wishes to make his or her personal journey with the help and stimulation of the Bible.

Katholisches Bibelwerk, Kapuzinerstr.84, A-4020 Linz, o. J., 50 pages, sS 15, — (1 free copy for every 5) A (coloured) short version of the reading rules (sS 2,—; 20 copies: sS 30,—), as well as posters (sS 4,—) can also be ordered.

Distinguished and Distinct (Women in the Bible and in history), Carmen Bernabé, Pilar de la Fuente, Mercedes Navarro and Felisa Ugalde.

Two biblicists and two artists are the authors of this very interesting work. It is important for its exegetical approach to the biblical texts (OT and NT) as well as being thought-provoking for group reflection and discussion. It is especially novel for its inclusion of women from later tradition (Egeria, Hildegard, etc.). Worth mentioning is the effort taken to introduce a new iconography. «Throughout the centuries visual representation (painting, sculpture, theatre) was the privileged channel of evangelisation and catechesis.

A Key to the Future? (Questions and Answers on the Apocalypse), Juan Ignacio Alfaro.

The excellent reception that the public gave to his work on «Questions and Answers on the Bible» has encouraged the author to prepare this second book on the anxieties and questions that people have about the Apocalypse.

The questions are arranged in such a way that through them one is given a general view of the book of the Apocalypse and the reader will perceive, at the same time, that invitation to hope and happiness which emanates from that enigmatic book, and a Christian and comforting vision of the «end» of the world.

Ed. Verbo Divino, 1995. Avda. Pamplona 41. 31200 Estella (Navarra), Spain.

Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Dignity of Women (1995). The episcopal commission for biblical pastoral ministry in Mexico (with contributions from Juanita Rizo, S, CJC, Emiliano Valdez and Carlos Marciel).

This is a detailed instrument for producing a Bible week or Bible

month programme. This year the theme corresponds with the the *UNO* Conference on Women in Beijing, and, in addition, the First Centenary is being celebrated in Mexico of the Crowning of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Both of these topics lie behind this pamphlet.

Lindavista n.109, Col. Tepeyac Insurgentes, 07020, Mexico D.F. Tel.577 22 36. Fax. 781 40 24.

Report of the Fourth Bible Congress of the Middle East (Lebanon).

The report of the Bible Congress held in Jall-ed-Dib (Beirut) from 22nd -29th of January 1995, which we reported in the previous Bulletin, has been published.

The book has four partes: the first part contains the inaugural greetings and presentations; in the second part are to be found the studies (we recall that they worked on the Acts of the Apostles, the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document on The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, and the letter of Michel Sabba, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem on Reading the Bible in the Land of the Bible). In the third part are the texts, and the fourth part contains topics related to the biblical pastoral ministry. Reports of previous Congresses are also published. The Information Bulletin (N.5, April 1995) of the Saint Paul Institute (Middle Eastern Subregion of the CBF) gives full information about these matters.

We would like to draw attention to the work of the Saint Paul Institute (Harisa, Lebanon) and particularly to Paul Féghaly, co-ordinator of the Subregion and author of several

commentaries on the New Testament in Arabic (Acts of the Apostles, Gospel of Luke, Gospel of John).

For more information contact P. Féghaly, Middle Eastern Subregion of the CBF, Saint Paul Institute, Harisa, Lebanon. Tel. (09) 831259. Fax. (09) 918447.

The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church. The Pontifical Biblical Commission's document is very important of the biblical pastoral ministry. Therefore, the editors of the review Palabra Hoy (CBF, LA) has decided to publish the text (with permission) as a service to the members of the members of the CBF of Latin America and to the whole of those engaged in biblical pastoral ministry in general. It will be the next number (a double number 77-78).

For more information contact, FEBIC para América latina y Editor de la Palabra Hoy, P. Gerardo Mellert, Calle 65 No.7-68/A.A. 51513. Tel. (00-57-1) 4287853. Fax. (00-57-1) 2104444. Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia.

The Gospel of Saint Mark. A model for the New Evangelization. After a long process of reflection the Intercultural Exegesis project, promoted by Fr Fritzleo Lenzen-Deiss (deceased 1993), is presenting a book that Celam (Colección de Autores N. 8) has published under the title The Gospel of Saint Mark: A Model for the New Evangelization. Santafé de Bogotá, May 1994.

This exegetical reading of the Gospel according to saint Mark is based on an analysis of the pragmatic structure of the text, a method that goes a

step further than the historico-critical and structural methods that have marked Catholic exegesis in recent years. Exegesis of the pragmatic structure of the text favours a living dialogue between the author and the reader in attempting to modify a fixed position.

The presentation is both agreeable and opportune for the present time through its lively and precise views. The work is not divided into thematic chapters but rather, following the order of the gospel, takes certain well chosen pericopes and addresses them in three ways: the shape of the text; explanation of the text; guidelines for action. It is not necessary to read the whole book in order to profit from any particular pericope, since each one is complete in itself. It could be a useful instrument for classes of Sacred Scripture, Bible circles, prayer groups, and for the promotion of Christian life in general.

Reading the Bible. *La Documentation catholique* has dedicated a special number to a collection of *Questions actuelles* in reading the Bible. This number has been prepared in collaboration with the French Catholic Bible Service, *Evangile et Vie*. The content consists of three parts: Scripture in the Catholic Church; a balanced reading of Scripture; and, the biblical animation of pastoral ministry. It is a very useful document for biblical work and reflection. *Lire la Bible, Hors série de la documentation catholique, une 1995.*

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