



# Catholic Biblical Federation

**Word of God - Source of Life**

**Final Statement**

**of the V Plenary Assembly of the CBF**

**Hong Kong 2 - 12 July 1996**



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**T**he Catholic Biblical Federation is a world-wide union of Catholic organizations feeling obliged to serve the Word of God in various ways. At present the organization has 88 full members and 219 associated members from 123 countries.

The activities of this organization include Catholic and interconfessional Bible translating, the propagation of Bibles and helping people to get a better understanding of Holy Scripture.

The Biblical Federation promotes the biblical-pastoral activities of these organizations, provides an opportunity for world-wide sharing of experiences, searches for ways to promote the joyful experience of the Word of God among the faithful and promotes undertakings beyond the means of individual organizations. The Biblical Federation promotes co-operation with representatives of biblical scholarship and the Bible societies of various confessions.

The Biblical Federation particularly tries to promote a reading of the Bible which mirrors every-day reality and help the many servants of the Word to read the Bible in this way.

Service of the Word of God is a service for unity and communication between people. For it is precisely a world which grows together through the communication media - while still demonstrating many symptoms of hate and destruction - that needs the Word of peace and community with God and with peoples.

**Wilhelm Egger, Bishop of Bozen-Brixen  
(President of the CBF)**

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

The Catholic Biblical Federation is an "international Catholic organization of a public character" (cf. Code of Canon Law, 312.1.1).

Editorial

Clearwater Bay is in sight however one has passed the time ... the more fortunate say that at dawn it is lilac. Who understands about colours. My neighbour remembered her water-colours with nostalgia. It didn't occur to her to bring them ... and it is a water-colour landscape, she said. In the end, she decided she would make a sketch with what instruments she had, perhaps only some pencils, she did not even know if they were coloured ones. When she returned home she would use the sketch to aid her memory and complete her water-colour landscape. I do not know yet if she has done it. I think I shall ask her some day. My neighbour, as you already suspect, was one of the delegates at the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Federation. The dormitory building of the University of Science and Technology where we stayed overlooked the South China Sea.

This gave me the clue for presenting this extraordinary number of the Bulletin. It has somewhat more colour. We have changed the form and we sincerely hope that the result is a little more agreeable. We did it at a propitious moment, as we understand it, since, after a Plenary Assembly there is always a new epoch. It does not nullify what went before, but it gives impulse to another way or the same way but moreso.

Each delegate took home his or her sketch, made with the instruments they brought, certainly not including everything necessary, and even leading to some new things. We know that many have already begun to unpack it and have been able to walk purposefully in the different directions indicated by the Final Statement. There are already fruits. Already we are beginning to share all this, also with this Bulletin.

This number is dedicated completely to the Plenary Assembly. Beginning with some of the most significant moments, we want to contribute to the memory and the sketch of whoever and to put in place our grain of sand so as to complete the picture.

It must be thrown into relief Maria Ko's lecture relative to the Asiatic context that helped us to study in depth. Lectio divina was also present every day conducted by Carlos Mesters expertise. It was a question of evaluation and balance. It could be found in the report of the President. We said goodbye to Alberto Ablondi, Bishop of Livorno and President of the Federation for the last twelve years, and he said goodbye to us. We are grateful for his dedication and sympathy. We welcomed Wilhelm Egger, Bishop of Bozen-Brixen and new President of the Federation. He expressed his desire to serve the Federation with eagerness and we wish him well in his new undertaking. We present this in outline in these pages. Some new co-ordinators and members of the Executive Committee were elected; we introduce these. The Pope sent his regards to the Assembly as well as words of encouragement, and the Assembly sent thanks and appreciation. Both letters appear in these pages.

As we continue to complete our own pictures we shall have time to admire the exhibition. Doubtless there will be much diversity. I am sure that not everyone believes, like my neighbour, that it is a water-colour landscape. Some will have painted in oils or made line drawings or engravings or set their images to music or in dance form. Life is like that multifarious and manifold ... And the Word is the source of life. May the colours not be forgotten.

Pilar de Miguel

CONTENTS

William Egger - New President	4
Presidential Address	6
Letter from the Pope to Bishop Ablondi	8
Letter to the Pope	9
Report of the CBF President	9
Reading the Bible in an Asian Context	11
Final Statement of the V Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation	17
La lectio divina: Carlos Mesters	25
Addresses	
- Executive Committee	34
- Subregional Coordinators	35
Courses of Biblical Interest	36

## William Egger, Bishop of Bozen-Brixen

### Profile of the New President of the Federation

Born 14 May 1940 in Innsbruck (Austria); grew up in Bergen near Traunstein; after the death of his father in the war in 1945, he moved with his mother and twin brother Kurt to Vipiteno (Alto Adige, Italy);

Attended secondary school (ginnasio) at the Capuchin School of "Salern" near Bressanone;

In 1956 he entered the Capuchin Order; after his noviciate he attended grammar school (Liceo) at the "Vinzentinum" in Bressanone;

In 1960 he obtained his leaving certificate; he studied philosophy and theology in the Order's House of Studies in Alto Adige;

29 June 1965: priestly ordination a Bressanone;

1965-71: theological studies at Friburg (Switzerland), at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and at the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem;

In 1972 he was awarded a Doctorate in Biblical Sciences

1971: chair of New Testament at the philosophical-theological Studium of the diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone at Bressanone;

He gave lectures at the "Antonianum" and the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome and at the Theological Studium in Erfurt;

1975-86 he taught Introduction to the New Testament also in the Theological Faculty of the University of Innsbruck;

1981 University teaching qualification for exegesis of the New Testament at the University of Innsbruck;

1982-85 dean of the philosophical-theological Studium at Bressanone.

He has given particular attention to methods of New Testament research and to "Wirkungsgeschichte" (history of the effects of a text, the latter with particular relation to Francis of Assisi)

Lectures on biblical questions in various countries in central Europe, Africa, the far East, giving the fruit of his scholarship in various languages (apart from German and Italian, also English and French).

29 July 1986: nominated bishop of Bolzano-Bressanone;

31 August 1986: Episcopal consecration in the cathedral at Bressanone.

Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone: 7400 Km<sup>2</sup>, in the north of Italy; the territory coincides with the Autonomous province of Bolzano-Alto Adige;

445,000 inhabitants (66% German, 30% Italian, 10% Ladin); 99% Catholic; 280 parishes; 426 priests, 200 male religious, 900 female religious.

Fulcrum of pastoral activity in the years 1987-89: "At the school of the Word of God".

Dedicated to this theme also was a series of 39 transmissions "The Bible and its World" on Sender Bozen (German language transmission) of RAI (Italian Radio), which have also been transmitted in Austria from ORF.

To promote Bible reading in the family Bishop Wilhelm Egger also published a "Sunday Bible" which was richly illustrated (Bolzano 1991, 2nd ed, 1992).

Another central point of pastoral work was "Peace, Justice, Safeguarding creation".

In 1987 Bishop Wilhelm Egger began pastoral visits. Up to the summer of 1995 about 250 parishes were visited.

From 1990-95 he was president of the Commission (of the Italian Bishops' Conference) for the Consecrated Life and Commission for Collaboration between Bishops and Religious, and since 1989 he has been a member of the Group working on a revision of the official Italian translation of the Bible.

Of the pastoral letters (published in German and Italian, with a summary in Ladin) the following may be mentioned:

"At the School of the Word of God" (September 1987);

"Our responsibility for justice, peace and the safeguarding of creation" (September 1989);

"Pastoral Orientations" (September 1989);

"Pastoral Indication on Marian Cult" (October 1990);

Social pastoral Letter "Remember the five loaves..." Our duty towards man and creation.

"Pastoral Letter for completeness in the community" and "The child with five loaves", a letter to children (both September 1992);

"What will become of your dreams?" - Personal Letter ... To the young people of the diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone (September 1994).

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## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

*The new president of the Catholic Biblical Federation speaks to the members for the first time. In his discourse he emphasizes the necessity of not forgetting the objectives of the Federation. As regards the way he wishes to lead the Federation, he says he is inspired by the Greek term (συν, "together with") which he learned from Saint Paul.*

### Dear brothers and sisters,

Participating in the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the CBF has been a great experience for me. I thank all of you for taking part and for helping in the organization.

Hong Kong is important to me personally. In Hong Kong Blessed Joseph Freinademetz, svd, first learnt Chinese, before going to work in mainland China. I come from the same diocese as Blessed Joseph.

He learnt Chinese in what is now the Parish of the Sacred Heart from where Fr. Dominic Chan comes. I was delighted to visit that Parish on Sunday.

I am now assuming my task as President, so I would like to present myself and present how I would like to give my contribution to the Federation.

### Visions and Dreams

To explain what I think we can do together in the Federation, I would like to present a dream (to use the word of the General Secretary) and indicate how the itinerary of the Federation might evolve.

During these days we were able to develop this vision by sharing the text of Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

### 1.1 On the way with those who are weary and burdened proclaiming a Saviour who is tired.

Let us look once again at John 4. The itinerary of the Samaritan woman leads to people to acknowledge Jesus as the Saviour of all.

The story commences by presenting Jesus as a tired man. He is a Saviour who shares the human condition: he is tired, thirsty and hungry.

To a humanity that is thirsty for life, that is in search of life, we present a Saviour who shares our condition. Jesus is healing, but he is a wounded healer.

The Final Statement invites us to continue our reflection and prayer on this text so that we may detect in the water of the well the face of Jesus and our own face.

### 1.2 The alphabet of the biblical-pastoral ministry

Another dream - this too deals with the itinerary of faith and life - is expressed by two Greek letters: **A-Ω**

What is the alphabet of the biblical-pastoral ministry?

Cardinal Roncalli, later pope John XXIII, wrote a pastoral letter on the Bible, where he said: (he was speaking of priests, today I am sure he would speak of all of us, lay people and priests together) "Our main ministry is

proclaiming, explaining and teaching the Good News.

*This is the Alpha of our ministry. The Omega is the Eucharist. Between these two letters there are the other letters, the letters of human life ..."*

Now insert the other letters yourself! Some letters I shall hint at: **N** is for need, **S** for suffering, **C** for context of life.

You can add the letters of personal names, of the continents, and so on.

Let us spell out this alphabet in our biblical-pastoral ministry. Let us learn to read: to read in the book of life, and to do this in a way that leads to an encounter with Jesus the source of life.

## 2. A Community Gathering around the Bible

A vision comes to life when there are people, and especially when there is a community who shares their visions and dreams.

The future of the Federation depends upon that common work and on the community established by the Federation.

This can be done if we are a community gathered around the Bible.

This second vision of a people gathering around the Bible, we see in a drawing from Korea.



The Bible becomes a book around which the Church gathers, reading and observing the chronicle of the family.

The Church should be a great Bible sharing group in which many take part: those who know how to express themselves, but also those who have no voice, the poor, the oppressed, the simple ones.

There are married people, single ones, lonely ones. There are the poor and the rich, young people and old ones.

In this dialogue and sharing the experience of life is brought in, to understand life through a careful common reading.

**a.** This way, the Bible is the meeting place for the Christian people, for families, for small ecclesial communities, for the whole Church.

In our time there is a great desire for change, also in the Church. There are many and varied opinions and proposals.

Thus, we need a common point of reference to which all can refer. That is the Word of God.

Promoting the biblical-pastoral ministry we help the Church on its way, uniting everybody's efforts.

**b.** The Bible is also the meeting place for Ecumenism. *"The Bible is the best assistance for reconciling separated brothers and sisters."* (Juelicher). The Bible has given a decisive impulse to ecumenism.

Working together in inter-confessional cooperation, especially with the United Bible Societies and linked to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, we work for ecumenical understanding.

**c.** The Bible has a role in Interreligious Dialogue.

There are other communities gathered around their holy books. How shall we relate with them?

The Bible is one of the great religious texts of humanity, and we may offer that rich heritage to others.

Sometimes that dialogue might start as did the events in John 4: simply asking others to give us their gift.

Thus, we do not build closed communities, but open ones.

### 3. The Functions of the President ΣΥΝ

Now a few words on the functions of the President of the Catholic Biblical Federation.

When I began my ministry as Bishop I said to the artist who prepared the crozier, the Bishop's staff, to put the Greek word *συν* on it, that means together, with each other.

I learned this word from saint Paul. This is an important word for the diocese where I live.

There are three language groups living in the Diocese and naturally there are problems between the communities.

In my diocese I have learnt: it is important to respect the identity of each group, but also we have to facilitate dialogue between the groups.

This idea, expressed in the word *συν* will guide me also in my work as President of the Federation.

This means I shall support the individual identity of the members and the regions and the subregions of the Federation, but I shall also be supporting dialogue with all those who are interested in the biblical-pastoral ministry.

According to the Constitutions Art. VI, the functions of the President of the Federation are: to preside over the Federation, to inspire and guide the Federation, to represent the Federation to the Holy See.

To me, presiding, inspiring and guiding means helping the Federation to attain its established goals, the goals of the general policy as decided on by the Plenary Assembly.

The Paper on the Strategy of the Federation is very helpful. I would like to repeat some of its phrases:

***Let us not forget the goals of the Federation.***

Let us not forget the goals of the Federation. One of the goals not to be forgotten is to insist on a careful reading of the biblical texts.

Respect for the Word of God requires a careful reading. Exegesis is nothing else than a careful reading (and exegetes are supposed to have both the time and the tools for that careful reading).

Careful reading (and a spiritual attitude of openness and dialogue) is the only help against fundamentalistic interpretation of the Bible.

But I also repeat: Let us not forget life, let us not forget the context.

***Let us look for allies.***

Another phrase I would like to repeat often is: Let us look for allies.

As a bishop, I often say to collaborators: did you speak with that one or the other one? Quite often there are people whose contribution is very helpful.

There are many who work outside the Federation in the biblical-pastoral ministry and there are many in other fields of theology and pastoral work or human science who could help us, for example in the fields of liturgy, communication and so on.

Another task of the President is to represent the Federation to the Holy See.

I shall try to make the events of the Federation present to the different offices of the Holy See, always in dialogue with the Representative of the Holy See in the Federation.

We are ready to contribute to the preparation of official documents.



## 4. Programmes

For our work we also need programmes. We have expressed quite often our appreciation for official documents such as *Dei verbum*, the document of the Biblical Commission on the interpretation of the Bible.

A short useful text is the few pages in the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the Bible and its interpretation.

I would like to add also "*Tertio adveniente millennio*" since its biblical-trinitarian approach to the Jubilee can help us in our biblical-pastoral ministry.

The Federation itself has welcomed its own Bogota Statement and now we have produced a statement on strategy approved by this Assembly.

## 5. Structures

Visions and programmes need to be implemented through appropriate structures.

The Federation has grown. Growing means also to be prepared for some changes. In the strategy paper there are some recommendations for the Executive Committee.

## 6. Thanks

Finally, I would like to express my thanks.

We have to express our thanks for the insights that the Spirit has given us during these days, insights into God's ways, into God's sharing of our life, insights too into human life and community life.

But now thanks have to be said to many people who made this meeting a success.

Thank you for your attention.

Hong Kong, 11 July 1996. ◆

## Letter from the Pope to Bishop Ablondi

*Pope John Paul II sent his message to the Federation at its fifth Plenary Assembly and to all the delegates present in Hong Kong by means of a letter to Monsignor Alberto Ablondi, the outgoing President. Referring several times to the Constitution Dei Verbum, the Pope reiterated the necessity whereby the Word of God reaches all peoples and nourishes their lives.*

### To the Most Reverend Alberto Ablondi, Bishop of Livorno, President of the Catholic Biblical Federation

On the occasion of the Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation meeting in Hong Kong on 2 - 12 July 1996 to reflect on the theme "*The Word was made flesh ... that they may have life in all its fullness*" (Jn 1:14; 10:10), I ask you to assure the Delegates and Participants of my closeness in prayer during these days of study.

I invoke upon you all an outpouring of the Holy Spirit for an ever deeper understanding of the Scriptures and a renewed commitment to the Biblical Apostolate.

You have come together from all over the world, united in your common faith in God's loving revelation of himself contained in the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 7).

You are gathered in the shared conviction that it is the Word of God himself who is the source of life: the Word of God made flesh, the Word that dwelt among us, suffered and died for us and for all, and rose again, so that all might have life, life to the full.

As you pray and study, you are deeply conscious of the quest for divine life which characterizes men and women today, the deep longing for certainty and hope which fills many human hearts.

You sense the great responsibility which is yours, and which belongs to

the whole Church, to open the treasures of the written word of God to all who will listen: "We announce to you the eternal life which was with the Father, and has appeared to us.

What we have seen and have heard we announce to you" (1 Jn 1:2-3).

Because "Scripture is subject finally to the judgement of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God" (*Dei Verbum*, 13), the efforts of the Catholic Biblical Federation will be crowned with success in the measure in which they support and sustain the work of the Pastors whom the Lord has placed to shepherd his flock in each particular Church.

The fact that you are meeting in Hong Kong, in the heart of Asia, is a reminder of how much more needs to be done in the Biblical Apostolate.

It is my earnest prayer that you who are deeply committed to making the word of God available to all peoples everywhere will continue with enthusiasm to seek ways of communicating and sharing the great gift of God: "so that by hearing the message of salvation the whole world may believe; by believing, it may hope; and by hoping, it may love" (*Dei Verbum*, 1).

With affection in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, I impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 11 June 1996

**John Paul II**



## Letter to the Pope

*Monsignor Wilhelm Egger, in his capacity as the new president of the Federation, sent a letter of gratitude to Pope John Paul II for his message of encouragement to the Plenary Assembly.*

### Most Holy Father,

it was with joy that we received through Bishop Alberto Ablondi, until this year President of the Catholic Biblical Federation, your letter on the occasion of the Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation meeting in Hong Kong, July 2-12, 1996.

We thank you for Your words of encouragement. We received with gratitude Your challenge to accept responsibility "to open the treasures of the written Word of God to all who will listen".

The 150 representatives of the Catholic Biblical Federation have spent ten days reflecting on the theme, "Word of God - Source of Life".

We studied the question of methodologies to be used in reading the Bible.

Throughout our deliberations we always kept in mind the needs of the people in the local churches from which we come, and we were guided by Your own pastorally oriented directions.

All along, our concern has been the gift of life which God continuously bestows on us and which has to be protected and nourished, as You so carefully describe in *Evangelium Vitae*.

We pledged ourselves to be involved in preparing for the Jubilee 2000, especially focusing upon the Biblical and Trinitarian themes outlined in your letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*.

We have also committed ourselves to work for the abolition of the international debt of so many developing nations so that they may have the resources to work for the upliftment of those citizens in the greatest need.

As we continue in our efforts to proclaim the fullness of the Gospel message, we humbly ask Your apostolic blessing on our endeavours.

With an assurance of prayers  
Yours sincerely

**Bishop Wilhelm Egger**  
Bishop of BOZEN-Brixen  
President, Catholic Biblical Federation

and does not go back without giving life.

This way inspired, it is easier getting into the climate of our meeting on "The Word became flesh ... that they may have life in all its fullness."

Between the coming out and the going back of the Word while being fruitful, we can rethink the different moments of our Federation, the meetings and the initiatives. At this light we can guess the work done and the work still to be done.

### Obedience to the Spirit

Let us not forget that Christ's walk into the world begins with the Spirit descending on him at Baptism.

For this reason, we insisted on the need of prayer both at the time of our meetings and as well as a component of the life of our Federation.

Preparing for this Assembly I warmly invited to prayer.

We need the Spirit's help so that when we face the Word he might teach us "all the truth" carrying us with an open mind towards mystery.

On the other hand, the Spirit makes us understand as well as assume the Word of God into our own words.

We, then, nearly become sacramental expression because the Spirit turns us into the "Word of God."

With these characteristic, our humble action is always called to have a universal dimension.

Thus, we boldly pressed on in cooperating with everybody and in every way, without fear or suspicion of being taken advantage to, to allow the Word to be truly universal in its expressions, and the Christians could appear united while the Word would not be disturbed by the noises of divisions.

## Report of the CBF President

*Monsignor Alberto Ablondi, President of the Catholic Biblical Federation for the last twelve years, invites us to reflect on obedience to the Spirit and to the human being so that the Word may say all that it should tell us. Likewise he shares with us his good experiences in leading the Federation during those years.*

As a summary of the last few years, twelve as far as I am concerned, I think I can gather the reality, the hopes, the

regrets, and the wishes in the light of God's Word using Isaiah's words in saying that the Word flows from God

## Obedience to God's Timing

It is important, I think, to have acted having regard to God's timing. Nothing is more important than timing for God's as well as for the human word.

There is need for time either to hear sounds or to read; time is needed between hearing sounds or reading and giving attention to it; this means time necessary to allow the Word in all the different forms of meditating, studying, and thinking.

Finally, we need time to move from comprehension to conversion. At his point, the Word becomes incarnate, becoming history and getting in our life with different suggestions.

Thus, the Word becomes the soul of our activity, is the interpreter of the signs of time, becomes a denunciation of the lack of human values, as well as being enriched by the variety of different personalities.

However, these characteristics concern human timing, then we need to keep in mind that God's timing is usually unpredictable, and mysterious, while being certain.

I have insisted on this, because the Word is time rather than space. It needs time to show itself in all its power.

For this reason, it has been proposed the Weeks, the Months, and the Years of the Word of God.

Besides, it has been suggested the Lectio Divina in all its different forms, so that the Word might become prayer.

Finally, I might say that this Federation made sure that the path for the Word of God were not different from the one used by Him who has been the Incarnate Word among us in our history.

Thus, we have privileged the throw of seeds, rather than harvesting, because we have been sent to sow rather than to reap.

We looked for a path inside as well as outside the Church, looking for relationships with Non-Christians and Non-Believers, following our Lord's example who had the courage to pray outside the Temple and who stated "*but I say to you...*" capable of giving new life.

## Obedient to Mankind

Of course, we did not lack of all those difficulties that the Word of God has suffered and still suffers when it is buried by the silence of Christian people, like in a new Good Friday, instead of being the sound of the Risen Lord!

I think about some nations and continents; for instance, there are some lights of resurrection for our Federation in Africa, but in North America there is still passion time.

I think there had to be a Good Friday even for those called by the Lord to responsible positions at the service of our Federation, a service at times well received, while at other times it is less well received.

But, the Word followed a path parallel to that of our Lord particularly the friendship that surely made the sowing very fruitful; I mean the friendship with General Secretary Fr. Ludger Feldkämper and with all the co-workers of every continent.

I would like to conclude with a wish: the first sign of this Assembly was to solemn enthrone the Word of God, meaning the presence of the Risen

Lord through the presence of His Word.

Why not think to make this gesture universal? In "*other places*" it has been suggested that one get the universal by singular moments and initiatives.

Therefore, I wish to the Catholic Biblical Federation a presence that much universal and a service that much active in ecclesial communities so that every communion might open up to mission.

Why not thinking of a festivity of "*Verbum Domini*" side by side to the one of "*Corpus Domini*" as a practical sign of the renewed presence of God's Word among God's people? This, so that the Body and the word of Christ more united and venerated might "*give life, and life in all its fullness*" for the world.

Of this I have reminded only a few moments, because of my personal experience of it.

Though, I could say that these last twelve years have been a gift from God for me: because of many friends I met, because of so many experiences I lived, because of so many acquaintances that enriched me.

However, for me as a Christian, as a priest and as a bishop, the life of the Federation in particular has been a ulterior motive of growth of love for the Word, a growth of the Word itself, and a growth of love through the Word.

### New:

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## Reading the Bible in an Asian Context

*Sr. Maria Ko Ha-Fong FMA, one of the principal speakers at the Plenary Assembly, introduces her listeners to an Asiatic approach to reading the Bible. The traditional way of an Asiatic reading of the sacred books emphasizes the sapiential style, that of the heart and the mystagogical.*

I would like to begin with a scene from the Bible. On a desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza, a man was sitting in his carriage, reading Sacred Scripture as he traveled along.

He was not a Hebrew, but a eunuch coming from far away Ethiopia, a region on the edge of the Roman empire. Philip came upon him. The meeting developed into a dialog, then finally led to Baptism.

We all recognize this story told so vividly by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8:26-40).

What strikes us immediately on reading it is the overpowering intervention of the Holy Spirit who guides Philip and the early Church in these first steps of evangelization.

Yet, we should not overlook as less significant the admirable action of the same Holy Spirit in the Ethiopian. He belonged to a foreign culture and tradition, but was sympathetic to the Hebrew faith.

On the return pilgrimage from Jerusalem he was completely immersed in reading the Scriptures.

His efforts were sincere, his openness of heart was admirable, his search for the truth very attentive, yet he was not successful in understanding the passage he was reading.

"How can I understand if there is no one to explain it to me?", "Tell me, of whom

is the prophet speaking, of himself or of some other?"

These questions put to Philip reveal an anxious search for the key to understanding divine revelation.

The scroll of the Scriptures lies there in his hands, open, fascinating, welcoming, stimulating and promising.

The text presents itself unconditionally to its reader, whoever he/she may be.

Here the Word of God is open in simplicity to this pagan; it doesn't oppose or impose itself.

It is mysterious, but not obscure, attractive yet not immediately gratifying.

It is precisely with the contemplation of this beautiful scene that I wish to introduce my reflections within the second part of our Plenary Assembly: **"How to Read the Bible"**.

The theme assigned to me was: **"Reading the Bible in an Asian Context"**.

I think that the Ethiopian reading the Bible is an emblematic figure. He could represent all those who, in the search for understanding the Bible, meet with the challenge of overcoming cultural barriers.

Thus, we can easily see someone from China, from India, from Japan, etc., and the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza could be any road on our vast Asian

continent where more than 60% of humanity lives.

I will concentrate my reflections on two points.

In the first point, I want to invite you to contemplate **the Bible in the hands of Asians today**.

By its nature, the Bible is open to all its readers, the Word of God is destined to be preached to all peoples of all times of all cultures.

In these past 2000 years of Christianity, the spread of God's Word — or to use a beautiful Pauline expression "the running of the word" (2 Ts 3:1) — follows the itinerary traced out by the Holy Spirit.

It begins in the East, travels the whole Western world, and from there returns to the East as it penetrates ever more the vast continent of Asia.

In the course of these travels, the Bible continuously grows and is enriched.

The Bible today, in the hands of an Asian, is full of this enormous and precious richness.

Yet, sometimes, in spite of recognizing the value of all this richness, the Asian has difficulty in accepting some elements, because they are too different, or faraway, or foreign, or simply too western.

In the second point, the focus will move from the book to the reader as we ask ourselves: **How does an Asian read the Bible?**

Does an Asian approach to Biblical interpretation exist?

How can Asia contribute to and enrich the Bible while it continues on its course?

I believe these questions are interesting and stimulating, but I would not want to arouse unfounded hopes with this presen-



tation which, as you yourselves realize, will be very modest.

Certainly, the combined reflection throughout the course of these days, particularly the contribution of the Asians present in this Assembly, will give greater depth and fullness to the development of this theme.

## 1. The Bible in the hands of the Asian Reader

### 1.1. The Bible is open to the plurality of language and culture

In which language and form did the Ethiopian in the Acts of the Apostles read the text in Isaiah? It is impossible for us to know.

Still, the fact that this text was in the hands of a stranger seems to be a significant symbol, a real prophecy.

It witnesses that the Bible is open to being understood by various cultures, that the Word of God voluntarily accepts being translated into different languages, transformed into various types of human communication.

This seems quite obvious if we consider the fact that today the Bible - at least in part - has been translated into approximately 2090 languages, is expressed in poetry, in music, in art, in dance, in movies..., and is recognized as "the Great Code" of art and literature; yet, this is, in reality, one characteristic of the Christian Scriptures that is not commonly shared by others.

A comparison with the scriptures of other religions highlights this fact.

Many religions, from those limited to a certain ethnical group, to those which are worldwide and highly diffused, rigidly regard as normative the language and culture of the beginnings.

For example, it is difficult to imagine that a follower of Shinto will use a language

other than Japanese, or that a follower of Tao a language other than Chinese to read their scriptures. An Orthodox Jew continues today to read and pray the Bible in Hebrew, a Muslim always considers as normative the Koran written in Arabic, and the Brahman Hindu priests still use the liturgical texts in Sanskrit.

The idea of putting their sacred texts to music, adapting them to theater or movies, just as the Christians do with the Bible, is unthinkable for Buddhists and Moslems alike.

The openness of the Christian Bible to this variety of languages and cultures cannot be explained simply as the result of the efforts of evangelization and the worldwide missionary expansion of Christianity; it has its profound theological motivation in the very nature of the Bible itself.

I would like to explain this briefly in the following points:

#### 1.1.1. The Bible, "Entrusted" to everyone

I use the word "entrusted" not only because it expresses the sense of humility and faith that God has in humanity by choosing human language as a means of communication, but also because of the Christological significance of the word (*παράδοσις*) itself in the Gospels.

In fact, the Christian Bible not only contains Christ's message, it reflects in its nature His mystery as well.

It is like an icon of Christ, witnessing His continual presence and prolonging his "entrustment" to the whole world and its history.

In a special way, the Bible mirrors and testifies to the mystery of the Incarnation and of Easter.

In the Incarnation God entrusts himself to the world hiding within the humility of human nature, in the Scriptures. He is hidden in the humility of the human

word, fully accommodating historical contingency, poverty and fragmentation of human language.

Infinite Wisdom makes its dwelling place in a book. The Word of God accepts to enclose itself within the limited space of a text, accepting even to die within the rigidity of the written word so as to rise again in the unlimited vital daily contexts, giving life to an infinite number of readers in every time and culture.

Besides this, one can detect a strong analogy between the Bible and the Eucharist, where Christ entrusts himself as food for eternal life, where the whole world and all of history is consecrated in the signs of bread and wine.

In the Bible, the human word is the sacramental sign through which the unity of all of humanity with God takes place in Jesus Christ.

#### 1.1.2. From One to Many

One of the characteristics of God's action among us can be seen in what is revealed at the beginnings of Israel's history when God said to Abraham: "In you all the peoples on the earth shall be blessed." (Gn 12:3).

This is the logic: from one to many in a universal openness. I think that this logic is valid for the Bible as well: from one Bible to many Bibles. Within the Bible itself we find indications of this universality of the written text and of the necessity of its multiplication in various languages and contexts. I will point out two such indications.

The first is the text of Jesus' crucifixion in the Gospel according to St. John (Jn 19:19-22).

On the sign to be hung on the cross, Pilate had the sentence "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" written in three languages: Hebrew, Latin and Greek. These three represent three worlds: the religious, cultural and social-political reality of Jesus' times.



All of his contemporaries of whatever language and daily context must have the possibility of understanding this revelation of the universal lordship of Jesus Christ.

The message of the cross must be written in many languages, proclaimed to the limits of the earth in the most universal terms possible.

All peoples, all languages, all cultures must be drawn to Jesus as he Himself said, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all men to myself" (Jn 12:32).

The second text is that of Pentecost. Upon hearing the announcement of the Apostles, their listeners, who came from various parts of the world, marveled: "Aren't these all Galileans?... yet we each hear their announcement of the great works of God in our own language." (Acts 2:7-11).

The works of God are transcultural; they find a home in all cultures. The Word of God is universal; it can be proclaimed in any language. Pentecost offers the vision of a new humanity in contrast to that seen in the story of the Tower of Babel.

There, the plurality of language created confusion, leading to separation; here instead, it becomes richness, leads to wonder and praise.

All welcome the same "Good News", each in his/her own language and with one's own cultural identity.

It is the Holy Spirit who guides and guarantees this unity in diversity throughout the whole life of the Church.

### 1.1.3. A Book that grows

Luke loves to describe the development of the mission of the Church with the simple yet meaningful expression: "The word of God grew" (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20).

Certainly, once the Word of God was fixed in writing, it did not grow in content

or amount, but grew in number of copies and translations, as well as in various and numberless editions.

Not only this, but there was also another growth, even more powerful though hidden and unmeasurable: the reality of the Bible has not ceased to grow throughout the Church's long history — growth in credibility by means of those who live and testify to it; growth in depth of meaning as exegetical and theological studies revealed its richness; growth in vitality by means of liturgical celebrations and pastoral action; growth in universality, popularity and cultural relevance as it penetrates various social-cultural contexts.

Today, we hear quite often of the "history of the effects" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), a well-known expression in hermeneutics.

Without doubt, there is no other book in the world which has had such a rich and long "history of the effects", there has not been another book which has "grown" to this extent, becoming so very fruitful.

In one of his most celebrated affirmations about the Bible, Gregory the Great stated: "*Scriptura cum legente crescit*". Scripture grows with the one who is reading it, Scripture grows by the very effort of reading it.

This is a simultaneous growth of both the reader and the Word, or, better yet, of the reader with the Word and the Word with the reader.

The capacity for growth is related to the great adaptability of the Word of God and its irresistible power for involving its readers. Commenting on Ezekiel's prophetic vision,

Gregory the Great compared Scripture to a wheel which, with its roundness and continual movement, adjusts itself to the various mentalities and ability of understanding of its readers.

The Bible, which is the final product of a long process of tradition and the arrival

point of influences coming from various cultural surroundings, including those of Mesopotamia, Semitic, Greco-Roman, opens up today to unlimited possibilities of growth. No culture is impenetrable for the Word of God.

## 1.2. The Bible in Asia

After affirming that the Christian Bible is by its very nature a book opened to all, a book that must spread, grow and enter into every culture to challenge life, I would now like to come to Asia in order to see how the Bible really has grown on this continent which is so huge and diversified, how it has succeeded in being a ferment in these complex cultures.

At first sight, this view doesn't seem optimistic. We know that the Christian presence in Asia is a minority.

Only 3% of the population is Christian, and if the Philippines were not taken into account, that percentage would drop to 1%.

Consequently, the Bible doesn't have a great deal of influence in the general culture.

It comes naturally to ask ourselves, as did the missiologist Walbert Bühlmann, "Why does this happen?"

The other continents were Christianized one after the other.

Even Africa by the year 2000 will probably be 57% Christian.

Why has Asian, the most religious of all the continents, become almost a forbidden hope for the Church? The question is provocative.

In reality, Asia is not a forbidden hope for the Church, it is rather "a great challenge for evangelization", just as the Pope states in his Apostolic Letter *Tertium Millennio Adveniente*.

There are indeed many signs of hope, one of which is precisely this growth and

spread of the Word of God during these last few decades; I would say especially during the last ten years.

It is an undeniable fact that after Vatican II, the Word of God found its central place in the life of the Church. This means a return to Scripture in the Catholic Church after centuries of exile. This is especially true for the Church in Europe.

Here in Asia, instead of a return, we must really speak of an epiphany of the Word of God, of a discovery of the Bible, not because Asia didn't know the Bible, but because Scripture never had an important place when evangelization began in Asia. Permit me to make two references to history to illustrate this point.

In the first centuries, in their efforts to spread the Bible, missionaries sometimes found themselves in the necessity of inventing the written word of the people among whom they were working, as happened in the case of Sts. Cyril and Methodius for the Slavs, or of having to build up a cultural literature where a true indigenous literature was lacking.

Things were different in eastern Asian, where the missionaries didn't encounter a cultural emptiness, but an environment full of colorful religions and ancient traditions. They met with a developed civil reality, which could boast of elevated cultures and refined philosophy.

In China, for example, when the missionaries began to translate the Bible in the 1600's, they realized it was a fascinating and difficult adventure.

For almost every word, they to choose between a totally new creation, not easily understood by the Chinese people, and an adaptation to expressions which referred to an already familiar reality, thus running the risk of ambiguity.

For example they had to ask themselves, if the term *tien-zhu*, which means "the Lord of the heavens" could be adequately used to speak about the Christian God. In fact, the translation of the Bible in Asia

requires a process of dialogue and profound inculturation.

The first Bibles translated into Asian languages, even though they were the fruit of much diligent and intelligent effort, could not take in all of this, so they remained understandable to very few.

Another factor must also be considered. The great epoch of expansion of Christianity in Asia, between the 1600 and 1800's, coincides with the rigid period after the Council of Trent.

The Missionaries shared the then common mentality that the Bible must be read with special care by only a few. The most important book of the faith was not the Bible, but the catechism.

One opened the Bible especially to justify doctrines, or for edifying material to enrich preaching.

Access to the Bible by the faithful was not direct, but mediated by the clergy in ministry and in the liturgy.

For this reason, from its very beginnings in Asia, the Catholic Church was known more for its great missionary figures, for its magnificent organizational structures and efficiency, for its works of charity, for its splendid Churches, for its European style of religious practices, and less for its spirituality and sacred books.

For the Asian people, instead, religious literature is much more important for the spread of a religion than any westerner could imagine. A witness to this is the spread of Buddhism in China.

Between 400 and 600, hundreds of Buddhist monks and pilgrims undertook dangerous journeys to reach India to find the original sacred texts.

The evangelization of Korea is another example. The foundation of Christianity in Korea was not laid by foreign missionaries entering the country, but by the study of Christian books brought into the

country from China by several Korean converts.

After Vatican II, the Bible was handed over to the Asian peoples in a new way.

The meeting with the sacred text has become more immediate and intense, more frequent and vital. Part of this may also be due to a better translation and a greater effort of inculturation.

In this new meeting, the Christians in Asia are discovering the marvels of the sacred text, they realize with surprise that it is very near to their own mentality, to their own way of thinking and expressing themselves.

They feel at home with the narrative style, with the parables and metaphors, with the concise oracles of the prophets, with the poetic prayers, and especially with the wisdom reflections.

These are the same means used in the ancient writings to communicate experiences and the wisdom of life.

The Bible opens up a great display of symbols and images before the reader, a lively intertwining of words and silence, of time and space.

One hears the voice of God, of man, of nature, of the whole cosmos; one feels drawn into the mysterious harmony while within one's self, the heart flies to the heights of the infinite, to fullness.

This is exactly what the Oriental longs for and expects from divine revelation.

We should not be surprised that in these few decades since Vatican II, all the Churches in Asia have witnessed an increase of initiatives around the Word of God.

And there, where the Bible has the central place, is a real vitality, a growth in quality in all aspects of the ecclesial community.

We can testify to this while listening during these days to the various Asian representatives of our Federation.

Not only within the Church, but even among non Christians, the Bible exercises an extraordinary fascination, and finds a wide diffusion.

In Japan, for example, 50% of the families possess a Bible.

Even in China, the so-called "Culture Christians", non Christian intellectuals who study the Bible and are interested in Christianity, are increasing in numbers.

However, the awareness of this diminishing of the distance between the Bible and its Asian readers, must not lead to a purely spontaneous, non-critical reading which ignores history, as though the text has come to them directly without any mediation.

When an Asian reads a classic of antiquity, he does so with great reverence and in an attitude of profound gratitude.

The book is weighty in his hands. It is the weight of tradition, of the accumulated wisdom of the ages.

With the Bible in hand, the Asian reader senses this weight in a particular way.

He feels like an heir not only of the history of the Old and New Testaments, but of all the generations of the faithful who have gone before, read, studied, and lived this sacred text.

He senses that he is inserted into this generational flow, welcomes and recognizes the treasure of the patristic exegesis, of the mediaeval studies, of the richness of the historical-critical methods in the modern era, and of all the various types of interpretation that have enriched the sacred text throughout history.

At the same time he must be alert to avoid letting this richness become a burden.

He has to discern, adapt and elaborate it in such a way as to render this heritage truly fruitful.

Here we can ask ourselves: Strengthened by the discovery of this nearness to the world of the Bible and aware of the richness inherited from the West, can Asia have its own special way of reading the Bible?

Does Asia have something to offer the West in exchange for what it has received in abundance?

## 2. An Asian Approach to Reading the Bible

The 1993 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, clearly recognizes that "The interpretation of a text is always dependent on the mentality and preoccupations of its readers."

Thus, efforts at inculturation must be continuous.

When speaking in a special way of countries where evangelization is only at its beginning, the Biblical Commission observes: "Missionaries inevitably bring the Word of God already inculturated in the culture of their birth country. It thus becomes necessary for the local Churches to use immense energies to move from these foreign forms of inculturation of the Bible to other forms which correspond to the culture of their own country" (IV, B).

During these past ten years there has been some action in this field in Asia, however, a broad and systematic reflection still does not yet exist.

We certainly cannot expect Asians to elaborate methods and alternative models with respect to what already exists in scientific exegesis.

Perhaps there may not even be anything that can be called absolutely new in the Asian approach to reading the Bible.

Rather, it is a specific hermeneutic sensitivity, a characteristic note that becomes

integrated into the richness and harmony of that marvelous, universal adventure of interpreting the Word of God.

In this talk I will limit myself to a few of these hermeneutic sensitivities.

### 2.1. "God has spoken once, twice I have heard" (Ps 62: 12) — Reading beyond the written word

This verse has been used in biblical hermeneutics by the rabbis to illustrate the overflowing meaning of Scripture where "more" dwells in "less".

Each word, each letter in the Bible bears a load of meaning far beyond its capacity.

Every word is a "wonderful concentration of the Infinite", as E. Lévinas points out, so the reader must go "beyond the verse".

Thus, biblical interpretation is potentially infinite.

The oriental reader is more open to intuit the infinite, due perhaps also to the eastern type of writing which predisposes to this dimension.

In antiquity, Hebrews read the written Scriptures according to an alphabetic system made up of consonants.

The vowels are unwritten, like the invisible life breath which animates and gives meaning to the string of consonants, transforming them into a word.

The vowels are flexible, variable, moveable, defined by the reader at each reading; while the consonants are fixed, ordered in a certain manner, waiting for their meaning to be revealed.

Using an image of the creation found in the Book of Genesis, they can be likened to the animals which passed in procession before Adam, waiting to receive their name.



This reading becomes a dynamic process in which the interaction between the reader and the text is indispensable.

This characteristic is common to the writings in the Far East.

For example, in the Chinese ideogram the words are not made up of a string of letters, but are an overall, symbolic representation of reality.

Writings which use the western alphabet invite the mind to follow a succession in a predetermined order, to look for a hierarchy of the single parts according to various logical models, to analyze rationally, to see possible links in the composition, to determine cause and effect.

This encourages the reader to establish methodical processes, to pass from facts to concepts, to privilege proof over mystery, experimental truth over myth, what is technical over what is artistic, spelling correctly over writing beautifully, grammar over style.

In order to grasp the meaning of what is written, one must seek to understand, that is, to "stand under", under the objective operational laws. Reading the oriental scriptures, instead, tends to lead readers to "go beyond" the letters, the signs.

The meaning of the words is not the result of the logical combination of single elements; rather it is self-evident, revealing itself not so much in a rational analysis of the parts, but in the contemplation of the whole.

In the very process of reading, the relationship between the reader and the text, between the medium and the message is dynamic and symbolic, with abundant space for creative interaction.

Consequently, in oriental languages, most of the words have multiple meanings, and the structure of these languages is flexible, without a whole lot of grammatical rules or syntax.

Although there is a long literary tradition in the East and a rich patrimony of writings, Orientals are not very preoccupied with developing hermeneutic principles or models.

The tendency to transcend the material aspect of the written word trains the vision to look for what is not written, not said, not expressed; to search out that silence which nourishes, giving depth and consistency to the word.

Let's look for a moment at an oriental painting.

The silk cloth or paper is never completely covered with colors.

There is always a lot of blank space, in fact, there is often much more blank space than color.

This blank space does not mean emptiness; it is an openness towards the infinite, a field of freedom filled with potential, an invitation to go beyond what is painted.

It is part of the picture itself and, together with the few strokes of color, it forms an harmonious unity.

The movement in the picture is from the colors to the transparency of the light itself.

It is like poetry which moves from words to the silence surrounding them, like writing and reading which moves from the visible to what is unseen.

The direction is from the limited to the infinite, in an open process.

The ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao Tse, believed to have founded Taoism, begins his reflections on the nature of Tao with these words: "The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named isn't the eternal name."

Orientals value white space and silence. They do not like making long comments

or giving long explanations for their religious writings or classical books, because the fruitfulness of the word is not found in multiplying words.

The word, according to a Zen Buddhist saying, should be like the finger that points to the moon — you look at the moon, not at the finger that points to it.

These characteristics of the oriental culture make it easier for the reader to see the reading of the Bible as something ever new.

Revelation reproduces itself without interruption.

Ephrem the Syrian, one of the Fathers of the Eastern Church, compares Scriptures to a water fountain saying, "It is the fountain that satisfies your thirst; not your thirst that exhausts the fountain."

Reading the Bible must never be reduced to a technical decodification of the text.

The reader who approaches the text without excessive pretexts and predictions on the outcome, is open, humble and grateful, quick to welcome surprises, to immerse himself in the infinite, in the silence of wonder.

He knows that God's wisdom is immense, as the wise man, Ben Sira, commented, "The first man ever created never knew Wisdom completely, and the last person on earth will be no more successful" (Sir 24:28).

True, the elements which have been highlighted so far cannot be considered exclusively oriental, nor can they be over-evaluated in a unilateral direction.

Transcending the text must be rooted in an historical consciousness of the same text; otherwise, we run the risk of being arbitrary.

On its part, the text calls for serious study just as it is, avoiding arbitrariness, re-  
(Cont. on pg. 21)



## WORD OF GOD - SOURCE OF LIFE

### Final Statement of the V Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF)

Hong Kong, 2-12 July 1996

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

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

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

*lectio* reflects the Asian setting of our meeting. It is influenced by Asian traditions which value harmonious wisdom, which find life in the "*cave of the heart*".

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**3.2** But we are easily blind to what God is doing. Our eyes need to be opened. We can easily stop short at superficial desires, desires that are still too self-centered. The Samaritan woman at first desired a world in which she would not have to come every day

to fetch water. Her desires needed, as ours need, to be deepened and purified. The Word of God can give us deeper insight into reality, can help us to see God's hand at work in the splendour of creation, in communities striving for justice and peace, in the beauty of human life. Just as the Samaritan woman's desires were deepened and purified in her encounter with Jesus, so the Word of God can deepen and purify our desires, helping us realize that God's desire for us, the desire that *"they may have life, and have it in all its fullness"* (Jn 10:10) *"can accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine"* (Eph 3:20). The Word enables us to see our reality and our hopes with new eyes. At the same time that reality can give us a new lens through which to read the Word.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**4.6** This path that Jesus points out as leading to the source of life is a difficult path, a path beset by conflict. Today our path passes through the conflict between a culture of death and communities seeking the realization of life-giving love. It is not always a clear

path, something that Jesus himself experienced in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman (vv. 4, 11-13, 15, 17, 19-20). But this is the path by which he revealed himself as Messiah, the one who would fulfill the hope of his people (v.26). And in living together with him, the Samaritans discovered who he was in fact — the *"saviour of the world"* (v.42).

#### **5. "... neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem" (Jn 4:21)**

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

**5.3.5** This attitude of dialogue, of sensitivity to and feeling for "the other", for people of different culture, different faith, different world-view, is totally incompatible with any religious arrogance and with any fundamentalist understanding of the Bible. The "spi-

ritual narrowness" of such fundamentalisms has rightly been criticized (Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*).

## **6. "These are the true worshippers, whom the Father seeks" (Jn 4:25)**

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **7. "We believe now ... because we have heard for ourselves" (Jn 4:42)**

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

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

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

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

**7.5** The implications for biblical pastoral ministry are clear  
- we, women and men both, are called to apostleship, to invite others to "*come and see*"  
- we "*preach not ourselves, but Christ*"

*Jesus*" (2 Cor 4:5)

- we engage in true dialogue when we do not just exchange words but share in solidarity in the realities of each other's lives
- in such a dialogue we are both learners and teachers
- in this dialogue, this encounter, we hope to meet the other, and together to meet Jesus and to experience the ways in which he is the life-giving saviour of the world.

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

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

**8.1** The *Catholic Biblical Federation* commits itself to

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

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

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

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

**8.1.5** seeking new possibilities for cooperation with the Pontifical Biblical Commission

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

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

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

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

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

**8.2** The individual members of the Federation commit themselves to

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

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

**8.2.3** making formation, of both lay people and clergy, for biblical pastoral

ministry a high priority. Such formation programmes will

**8.2.3.1** include a grounding in sound principles of exegesis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



(Cont. from pg. 16)

claiming its right to be respected in its historical identity.

There is one more element which must not be overlooked: cultural characteristics and hermeneutics in general cannot simply be generalized to the whole Bible without the mediation of sound theological reflection.

Biblical revelation has its own intrinsic intelligibility which cannot be lost in the act of incarnating itself in the various cultures.

While Asian readers tend to go beyond the letter and to understand what is not expressed, they must remember what Ignatius of Antioch said: "Only one who truly possesses the Word of Jesus can understand its silence as well, and can reach perfection."

## 2.2. "Ask you fathers and they will tell you" (Dt 32: 7) — Tradition enriches Reading

It is a known fact that Easterners have a strong sense of union with their traditions and ancestry.

These characteristics are also found in the fields of knowledge and hermeneutics. the experiences of one's ancestors, the wisdom of one's fathers, teachers, of the wise men, and gurus play an important role In the search for truth and in the interpretation of religious writings.

Confucius, the Chinese philosopher and great teacher, presented himself in this manner: "I was not one who was born in possession of knowledge; I am one who loves his ancestors and is earnest in seeking it in them."

We find a similar phrase in the Book of Sirach describing a wise man: "He searches the wisdom of his ancestors." (Sir 39:1).

Yet the phrase "Ask your fathers" doesn't mean only searching the past; in looking to the past and its continual changes, Easterners recognize something eternal,

and in listening to their ancestry they experience a sense of presence and mysterious communion.

This can all be applied to reading the Bible.

In fact, the Bible places the reader in the heritage of believers from the first protagonists of the Old Testament down to our own day, creating a strong solidarity among generations.

Whoever reads the Bible experiences the sentiments of one who leafs through a family album.

He comes to know his forefathers in the faith, and to contemplate the marvels of God revealed in them.

As the Letter to the Hebrews comments, he feels "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1).

In fact, the Bible brings together many faith stories into the one story of salvation, combining many single dialogs into one great dialog between God and humanity.

This intertwining of stories and faces is found not only in the Biblical text, but in its transmission as well.

We have already spoken about the growth and spread of the Bible.

A 20th century Christian reads the Bible enriched by the many various meanings which the text has taken on over the centuries.

As the well-known Biblist Alonso-Schökel wrote, "Tradition is a necessary means for being able to understand the text and its life. It lived on and continues to live in tradition; without it, it will die. Tradition enters into a dialectic process of interrelationship with the text in such a way as to be able to condition its intelligence and understanding."

While the historical-critical method examines the causes and the context that produced the text, tradition enlightens

the effects it produced as well as the activity that brought the text into our times.

The effects produced in one generation become part of the understanding handed on to the next. It is continual, dynamic, vital.

Since eastern Asia was absent at the beginning of this process, how can Asian readers, inserting themselves on at a certain point, become part of this dynamism? We cannot expect that it will be automatic and without difficulties.

On the one hand, by mentality and culture, Asian readers feel more than others the necessity to dialog with ancestors and teachers, to undertake a choral reading supported by tradition and the church community.

On the other hand, however, they feel further away than others from the Christian tradition which is largely westernized.

"What link is there between Athens and Jerusalem?" was the ironic question of Tertullian in the third century. The silent answer was "nothing", since this author did not see how it could be possible for Christianity to enter into the Greco-Roman culture.

Yet, later developments in the Church proved him wrong. Today we don't ask such question any more.

We are convinced that there is not only the possibility and need for inculturating the Word of God, but believe that even the richness produced by the Bible throughout the centuries is a patrimony for all believers, and thus is to be brought to all cultural contexts.

An Asian Christian can see in Augustine, in Thomas, in other Christian authors, his ancestors in the faith just as much as westerners do.

In order to understand Scripture, Christians of East and West turn to their common Fathers, they follow the same

tradition, not mainly because its is an authoritative norm, but because of an intrinsic need: we must be immersed in the life-giving stream of God's Word in order to understand it.

In Asia, however, in practice, there has not been enough work in this area. The distance between the tradition of the Church and that of the Asian culture is still too great.

A more profound knowledge of the history of the interpretation of the Bible and attentive reflection on the dynamic spread of the Word of God in different epochs and various contexts would greatly illuminate the inculturation of the Bible in Asia.

I would think that Asian Christians could especially benefit from the richness of the Patristic exegesis. The earliest Fathers of the Church are "privileged witnesses of tradition"

Their interpretation of Scripture, though not without its limits, is of special value since they were close to the origins; it is also because, as Pope Pius XII pointed out in the Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, their contribution came from "a type of delicate intuition about the things of heaven, an ineffable penetration of the spirit."

They began the process of inculturation and will always remain teachers and models in this commitment within the Church.

These early Fathers of the Church, especially those from the East, make wide use of symbols and images, figurative language and wisdom expression.

In this, Oriental readers can more easily be at home in their own effort in interpreting the Word of God.

It is important to remember that enriching ourselves through the exegesis done by others does not substitute for our direct reading of the text. Rather, it means reading the text together in a constructive dialog.

This is how the Hebrew theologian, F. Rosenzweig, describes it: "When a Biblical passage is of interest to me, I read everything I can find written about it in traditional commentaries, its position in our Hebrew history, as well as what it has become in the Christian tradition ... If I find unexpectedly that I myself have become one of these scriptural commentators, I realize that I have understood the passage."

Reading the Bible in this way widens understanding and almost spontaneously leads to involving the traditions, masters and wise men of one's own culture in the dialog.

For example, a Chinese can find a certain harmony between some of the teachings of Confucius or Lao Tse and the contents of the Bible, an Indian can discover signs of Christ's teachings in the profound spiritual reflections of men like Tagore or Gandhi.

And not only. This could reach out to an interreligious dialog.

Raimundo Panikkar speaks of the "Unknown Christ of Hinduism," while others compare some characteristics of Jesus to those of Buddha, or some of Christianity to those of Buddhism. The Bible thus becomes fertile ground for meeting, and the reader is like a mediator between the Word of God written in the Book and the "seeds of the Word" scattered throughout history.

On this ground of the Bible, Fathers in faith, in blood and in culture meet and dialog. This widened dialog manifests the universality of Revelation: God wants to speak with all humanity, involving all in the one dialog of salvation.

### 2.3. "Your word is a lamp for my feet" (Ps 119:105) — A Wisdom Reading

Speaking about the interpretation of Hindu sacred writings, Mahatma Gandhi states that the first rule for understanding the meaning of the text is "a practical

experience of truth." He thus points out a common eastern hermeneutic tool.

The truth sought after in the sacred books is not abstract, speculative, metaphysical; rather it is practical, vital.

It teaches how to live well; it is a light for the journey, and leads to "knowledge of the right way" (Pr 14:8). This truth loves to reveal itself not in rational knowledge, but in harmonious wisdom.

In the Bible itself, Wisdom literature includes a series of books and the category "wisdom" occupies an important place.

In the Old Testament, Wisdom is a space of confluence — like rivers flowing into the ocean — where legal, historical and prophetic traditions converged, where universal problems were reflected upon, where Hebrew thought met with the Hellenistic culture and the popular philosophies of the time.

Even the New Testament attributes to Christ and to his teachings many wisdom sayings.

He is "greater than Solomon" (Mt 12:42), but his wisdom is not that of the gifted and learned, rather it is revealed to little ones (Lk 10:21).

In Biblical texts, the wise person experiences wonder contemplating nature and the beauty of life, but also feels a sense of powerlessness when faced with contradictions and the absurdities of human existence. He doesn't try to solve the problems nor escape from reality.

Instead, entering into the depths of reality and the experience of life, he discovers the secret order that holds all things in being.

He does not try to explain the "why" of everything, but realizes with great wonder the harmonious relationship that exists between God, the world, the human person, life, death, time, space, the individual, society, etc., even if at times this relationship is hidden in conflict and disorder.

Wise people always have a contemplative attitude toward reality. Zen Buddhism speaks of a "third eye" in a wise person, an eye that sees the depths and penetrates into those regions hidden from a superficial and leveling vision.

Using this image, the Chinese theologian, Song Choan-Seng, promotes a "third-eye theology", which we could possibly apply to the reading of the Bible using the hermeneutics of the third-eye.

Basing ourselves on this primacy of the category of wisdom in the Bible, we can suppose with good reason that the access of Asian readers to the sacred texts will be facilitated, especially when reading wisdom literature.

They more easily perceive the vital harmonizing power that flows out of the text, especially in what is the usual peril while reading the Bible—the dichotomy between faith and experience, thinking and living, understanding and acting, obedience and creativity, enlightenment and conversion.

Given the fact that wisdom is practical, the wisdom literature of the Bible is not only an interpretation of the text, it is also an interpretation of life. An axiom which occurs frequently in the Hebrew exegesis can be shared with the whole Asian context: Live Scripture and you will come to understand it better!

Gregory the Great, in one of his homilies, put it very clearly: "Whoever wants to understand what he has heard, should seek to quickly put into practice whatever has been understood." Action isn't just a follow-up to understanding - it forms an integral part of it. There is a true circular movement between understanding and doing. Jesus' word illustrates this idea: "Whoever lives the truth, comes into the light" (Jn 3:21).

This wisdom approach to Scripture causes its readers to take on an attitude of grateful wonder and sincere humility. Like the wise men of the Old Testament, these readers recognize that the beginning of

wisdom is "the fear of the Lord" and not ownership of the things of God or of one's own life.

It is not the reader who analyzes, organizes and rationalizes the text, rather it is the content of the text itself that enlightens and reveals its truth.

When revelation is too high, too full of light, too far beyond one's ability to understand, the wise reader bows to the text, puts it into his memory and into his heart, hoping that what is learned by heart will slowly unfold itself and reach its fullness of meaning in life's experiences.

Oscar Wilde has a significant saying: "There are works which wait, which one does not understand for a long time; the reason is that they bring answers to questions which have not yet been raised; for the question arrives a terribly long time after the answer". The Bible could be considered the first of these works, and the Asians are the first to recognize it.

In fact, education spiritual formation in Asia still insist on memorization. The teachers of Zen love entrusting their disciples with *koan*, wisdom sayings that are apparently incomprehensible.

The disciple must learn them by heart, repeat them again and again, meditate on them for hours and days, until these very sayings reveal their meaning.

The final effect is "enlightenment" by the wisdom sayings and an "awakening" of the one who has been meditating on them.

One could criticize Asians for this type of knowledge that has little logic and little foundation in methodical reasoning, or for the memorization without thorough understanding, but this can also be seen as an expression of wisdom, a wisdom which is comparable to that of Mary who, even though she did not immediately understand everything, "held all these things in her heart, meditating on them" (Lk 2:19.51).

## 2.4. "This word is very near to you, in your heart" (Dt 30:14)—A Heart to Heart Reading

The Word of God needs to be guarded in one's heart. In Asian spirituality the heart has a very special place. Asia shares the Biblical mentality that sees the heart as the source of interior life in the human person.

The heart is the seat not only of intimate sentiments, of love, of desire, but also of intelligence, wisdom, decision and all of moral life. It is there that we celebrate the encounter with God. It is the ground where the Word grows, bears fruit and transforms life.

The various forms of meditation practiced in the East and now spread throughout the West as well, on the one hand seek to dispose the human person, both physically and spiritually, to total openness.

On the other hand, they try to widen time and space for the meditated word so that it can descend slowly into the depths of the heart and from there permeate the whole of one's being.

In the meeting between Christ and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus takes them to task at the beginning of their conversation for being "slow and hard of heart" (Lk 24: 25).

When Jesus explained the Scriptures to them, they "felt their hearts burning within them" (Lk 24:27). Welcoming the Word of God means a change of heart.

Thus, in the Bible, God speaks to and acts in the heart. There is, however, another aspect no less real or wonderful: by means of the Bible, we human beings can enter into the heart of God. The Fathers of the Church were convinced of this. St. Gregory the Great states; "Reading the Bible is learning to know the heart of God by means of His words."

Even Thomas Aquinas, comparing the reader to the privileged disciple who rested his head on Christ's heart, affirms



that reading the Bible is "to understand the Scriptures, which manifest the heart of Christ, through the very heart of Christ itself." The Bible is a bridge from heart to heart, from the heart of God to the human heart and back again.

As he/she enters into the heart of God, the reader gradually reaches what St. Paul calls "putting on the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16), "having the same sentiments that were those of Christ" (Phil 2, 5), experiencing within the heart of God that love which He has for all humanity, harmonizing ourselves with His wisdom, often far removed from human logic.

Confucius, in tracing out his own spiritual journey, describes the culminating stage with these words: "At seventy I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right". He has attained perfect harmony of heart in his relationship with God, with the world and with others.

Perhaps this power of the heart, very much highlighted in Asian spirituality, has not yet been sufficiently explored by Christian theologians. The Christian message in Asia often appeals only to the intelligence by means of doctrine, and doesn't reach this meeting of hearts. Evangelization through the heart seems to be entrusted to the testimony of life and the service of charity, considered to be a domain entirely separated from theological reflection.

A deeper study of the Bible and an evangelization of the heart centered on the Word of God could lead to the reawakening of this latent energy.

In Asian culture and religion there is much reflection on the reality of suffering, mercy and compassion, on universal love, on peace and on harmony. These are themes that present a strong link to the Biblical message, themes that must not be treated merely with an intellectual approach alone, but by way of the heart.

It would be very interesting to reflect on testimonies of Asia non-Christians in-

tellectuals revealing the impact of the Bible on them. For example, Gandhi affirmed to have received great influence from the New Testament. He believed that the teaching of Jesus was essentially an Oriental creed, which harmonized well with his own Hinduism.

On comparing the Sermon on the Mount and the Bhagavad-gita, his favorite Scripture, which he described as his "spiritual dictionary", he claimed to perceive an essential unity between them.

He remarked concerning the experience as follows: "Jesus played a great part in my life ... When I began to read the Sermon on the Mount, I felt the beauty of it. It went straight into my heart".

Asian Christians, because of their particular longing for wholeness, for fullness of life and for harmony, can have a deeper understanding and of the biblical theme of *Shalom*.

In the same way their particular sensitivity to the paradox and harmony of life and death, joy and sorrow, fullness and emptiness, *yin* and *yang*, enable them to approach to the Paschal mystery in a surprisingly profound way.

They seem to almost feel the suffering in the heart of God faced with the suffering which afflicts human hearts. They know how to draw near the cross contemplating the greatness of love and the compassion of God which redeems human suffering with His own suffering. They see into the mystery that joins joy and sorrow, just as it was expressed by Jesus with the metaphor of a woman giving birth (Jn 16: 21-23).

They understand how every person, every life, every creature is precious in the eyes of God, and that all are called to live together in harmony, without egoism and without taking advantage one of another.

It is not by chance that oriental theologians have developed in an original manner and with particular sensibility themes such as "the pain of God" (Kazo Kita-

mori), the "silence of God", the "solitude of God" (Shusaku Endo), or the compassion of God towards the *Minjung*, that is, the mass of suffering humanity who have no voice, no face, yet have the right to be recognized as subjects of history (Cyrus H. Moon).

Thus, it seems to me that a "heart to heart" reading of the Bible can contribute to the building up of an Asian Christian theology and spirituality faithful to divine revelation and to the Asian culture.

From thence there could come forth a new ecclesial and social consciousness, a new style of evangelization, pointing to a new era for the people of Asia.

## 2.5. "It is I who speak to you" (Jn 4: 26) — A Mystagogical Reading

As I draw towards the conclusion of this talk, I would like to recall a conviction which must be present in every Christian, not just Asians: every Biblical reading done in whatever cultural context, according to any method or approach, must aim at encountering Christ.

Although Christianity possesses sacred writings, like the Hebrews, Moslems, Hindus and Buddhists, "it is not the religion of the Bible: it is the religion of Christ." Thus Biblical interpretation cannot be aimed at the text or the book in itself, but must have a mystagogical function, that of leading all to the mystery of Christ.

This talk began with the passage of the Ethiopian reading the Scriptures. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the help of Philip, he reached the point of accepting Christ through the waters of Baptism.

I would now like to conclude recalling another passage, which has certain connections with the first one, the passage at the heart of our *lectio divina* during these days: Christ's meeting with the Samaritan woman.

Once again, we find ourselves in the land of Samaria, the same place where the conversion of the Ethiopian took place, a conversion that began with reading the Bible. Here too is the symbol of water as well as the original misunderstanding. In this case, the woman is not reading a text, but meets Christ in the guise of an unknown Jew.

It is not Philip or one of the missionaries, but Jesus Himself who guides the woman to Himself in a patient process. Jesus is the goal of this process and at the same time He inspires and guides it.

With the symbol of water, Jesus frees the woman from her superficial expectations and launches her beyond, into the mystery; He shows her that He is, in reality, greater than her forefathers, that His gift is greater than her traditional heritage.

He speaks to her heart, entering into the depths of her life, opening her toward the Father, introducing her to the infinite horizons of that adoration which is in spirit and truth, helping her to understand that the whole journey of humanity toward God is also the journey of God toward humanity. It is not only humanity that seeks God and speaks to Him, it is also God who continually seeks true adorers.

At the end of this process, Jesus revealed Himself and the mystery of salvation linked to Him. The woman accepted to entering into this mystery and became herself a witness to it and its missionary, since this mystery, by its very nature, is contagious and all inclusive.

I will not take up more time. I, too, wish to leave that "blank space" of which I spoke. That space will surely be more beautiful than all the words I have spoken.

Let me just repeat one more time that word which I consider to be the most important one, which is not my word, but the Word of Jesus directed to the Samaritan woman and to everyone who reads the Bible: "It is I who speak to you."

## Helps for reading

**"I came that all might have life, and life in abundance."  
(John 10,10)**

### **The dialogue of Jesus with the Samaritan woman (John 4,1-42)**

*Carlos Mesters (Brazil), well known expert on Pastoral Biblical Ministry*

#### **1. The text: John 4,1-42**

#### **2. An explanation of various approaches to the text**

#### **3. Practical suggestions for the use of the scenarios**

#### **4. The ten scenarios**

1st scenario: The disposition to dialogue which brings forth new life.

2nd scenario: A reading of reality which is born of a new experience of God and of life.

3rd scenario: Jesus' pedagogy transforms everyday life.

4th scenario: Evangelisation: the fount of life for the evangeliser and the person being evangelised.

5th scenario: Ecumenism and openness to the other: a dialogue of conversion.

6th scenario: The welcoming and pluralist community which promotes life.

7th scenario: A reading of history and the Bible: how to discover the fount of life within the past.

8th scenario: The presence and witness of women in the life of the community and in the spread of the Good News.

9th scenario: Evangelisation and culture: our "Old Testament" which leads us to Christ.

10th scenario: "I came that all might have life and life in abundance."

#### **1. The text**

**1-6: The stage where the dialogue takes place**

**7-26: The dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman**

**7- 15: on the theme of water**

**16-18: on her husband**

**19-26: on the place of worship**

**27-30: The result of the dialogue for the Samaritan woman**

**31-38: The result of the dialogue for Jesus**

**39-42: The result of Jesus' mission in Samaria**

## 2. An explanation of various approaches to the text

1. The theme of the Fifth Plenary Assembly in Hong Kong is "I came that all might have life, and life in abundance" (John 10/10).

CBF proposed that, during the Assembly, there would be a prayerful reading of the Bible every day based on the text of John's Gospel 4,1-42.

This intention is that, during these days, we not only share our experience with the Bible in various continents, but that also we may together place ourselves under the judgement of God's Word and that we may drink directly from that fount which is within us (cf. John 4/14).

2. A text is like a person. It is possible to take various "photos", various interpretations, from different angles. That is what we will do in the following ten scenarios.

Despite the inevitable repetition which this brings, such variety helps us to discover the richness of God's Word which exists not only in the text but also in our own lives. For, by means of the prayerful daily reading of the Bible, we will be invited to open ourselves to one another in order to share our faith experience and our witness to God's Word.

3. A text is born from the dialogue between an author and his readers. The choice of words depends on two factors: the subject which the author wishes to present and the person for whom he is writing. The writer of John 4,1-42 is thinking of the problems and questions of the community for whom he is writing.

The situation of the community influences the choice of words in the text. For that reason not everything in the text which speaks of Jesus derives from real historical facts.

We find in it many elements which reflect more the community's situation in the years 90 - 100 than the historical reality of the time of Jesus in the decade from the year 30. In this text we find many symbolic elements with the appearance of history.

4. In the same way the search for the meaning which the text has for us today does not depend only on the study we make of the past. It depends also on the community witness to the living Christ among us today.

It depends on the questions that our communities ask of the text. It depends on the problems which today question our faith in Jesus. Today's questions are like the wires which bring electric power and switch on the light of the text for our lives.

For this reason the replies which the text offers us - in other words, the interpretation - will be different in Latin America, Africa, Asia, Oceania and Europe because the problems are different in these various continents.

But that which unites us in the same text, the same God, the same Spirit, the same Jesus, the same life which struggles and seems to survive, the same sincerity of mutual respect and respect for the text.

5. Apparently the ten themes of John 4,1-42 which we present here take the text literally. I say "apparently"! Because, in reality, we take the text as a reflection of the faith of the community of the "Beloved Disciple" at the end of the first century.

We do not discuss whether what the text says is historical or not. We seek the meaning which the text had for the life and faith of the first Christians and which it could have for us today. In these ten scenarios we are not engaged in exegesis but rather in a prayerful reading of the text.

We do not dismiss exegesis. On the contrary! We assume it. It is at the root of the reading we do. A root is usually found below the ground. It does not appear or expose itself. That would not be good for the tree.

6. Each one of the ten themes or scenarios offers merely some suggestions for the start of conversation. They are intended to release God's Word in us. They seek to provoke our dialogue with the text and a dialogue among us based on the text.

God's Word which already exists in our lives must be allowed to blossom, to speak to us and to enrich us mutually.

Each one of the ten scenarios brings, as well as this, some background information or material to help in our reflection and sharing. They are reflections which allow us to perceive and deepen the particular emphasis of each scenario.

## 3. Practical suggestions for the use of the ten scenarios

1. We will follow the method of the prayerful reading of God's Word, also known as the "Lectio Divina". A method is more than just a mixture of didactic techniques. It is a particular attitude which is taken towards the Bible, deriving from a vision which is held of the Bible, the Church, reality and God's self-revealing action in life.

2. The "Lectio Divina" or "prayerful reading" method is concentrated on four basic attitudes which are linked: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation.

(a) **Reading** seeks to discover the meaning which the text has in itself. It respects the text's autonomy and independence.

(b) **Meditation** seeks to discover the meaning the text has for us today. Through rumination, meditation and reflection, we seek to actualise the meaning of the text and to incarnate it in our reality. Meditation is at the heart of the prayerful reading of the Bible.

(c) **Prayer** seeks to inspire in us the appropriate words which the text causes us to speak to God. Through prayer we respond to God who spoke to us in the reading and meditation. Prayer is the essence and perfume of the "Lectio Divina".

(d) **Contemplation** is the light which remains in our eyes after prayerful Bible reading. It is the new light with which we look towards God, our brothers and sisters, towards life and reality. It is the new "flavour" with which we accept life from God's hand.



3. In the suggestions which follow there is a recognition and mingling of three aspects of "Lectio Divina": reading, meditation and prayer.

### 1. Opening

The light of the Holy Spirit is invoked. There is a brief moment of silence in order to create an atmosphere of recollection.

### 2. Preparation

for the reading of God's Word. The objective of the scenario is read which furnishes thus the particular emphasis of the day. The day's special theme is read which orientates the reading of the Bible.

### 3. Reading

the Bible text. After the reading, there is a brief silence to allow for personal interiorisation. The text is lengthy. Maybe it's not necessary to read it completely every day.

### 4. Sharing the faith

is order to actualise the meaning of the text in our lives. We reply to the questions relating to the day's scenario. The questions can be modified or adapted.

### 5. Prayer

Spontaneous prayers that transform the text being meditated on into prayer. A suggestion for a final psalm.

4. Suggestions are only suggestions! They are designed to orientate the group during prayerful reading of the Bible in the course of the ten days of this Assembly.

Each group is free to find and to follow its own path.

### 1st scenario: the disposition to dialogue which brings forth new life.

1. **Opening:** Welcome those present, invoke the Holy Spirit with a prayer or a song. A moment of silence.

2. **Objective:** Seek to fathom the manner in which Jesus conducts his dialogue

with the Samaritan woman. Jesus was an "apprentice". During the dialogue, Jesus had to learn from others how to relate to them.

3. **Key:** During the reading of the text, let us pay attention to the way Jesus enters into dialogue and to what he achieved.

4. **Text:** John 4,1-42

After the reading, a moment of silence.

### 5. Questions:

1) What are the subjects of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman?

2) What characterises the attitude of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in this dialogue? What are the preconceptions both had to overcome to maintain this dialogue?

3) There are dialogues which destroy and others that bring life. What is the consequence of this dialogue for Jesus and for the Samaritan woman?

4) Let us confront our own way of dialogue with that of Jesus.

6. **Prayers.** Inspired by the text we move to spontaneous prayer.

7. **Psalm 120:** "When I speak 'Peace', they call back 'war'."

### Background

1. Jesus initiates the dialogue seeking communication through the work done by the woman: "Give me something to drink" (7).

Water, rope, bucket, well: these are facets of the woman's work. But this is not the route by which Jesus can communicate with her (7-15).

2. Then Jesus tries another route and says "Go and seek out your husband". This is the "family" route, but here again Jesus fails. The woman replies "I have no husband" (16-18).

3. Finally the Samaritan woman identifies Jesus and says "I see that you are a prophet" (19).

At that moment she finds her role in the conversation and begins to take the initiative: "Where should we adore God, here or in Jerusalem?" (20). Jesus then enters by the "door" of religion which the woman opened (19-24).

4. Next the woman again changes the subject and turns to the messianic hope of her people: "I know that the Messiah will come."

When he comes, he will teach us everything" (25). And once again Jesus enters the "door" opened by the Samaritan woman (26).

5. The result of this difficult dialogue seems to be very limited. Jesus only succeeds in provoking one question from the woman: "Is it possible that he is the Messiah?" (28).

Perhaps this is the most positive result that can be hoped for! Jesus does not give replies but instead raises questions.

6. During this dialogue, Jesus is guided by what he has learned about the woman in their talk. He doesn't impose himself or condemn her but instead respects her profoundly. He even runs the risk of achieving nothing.

7. While Jesus took the lead, the conversation made no progress. This only happened when the woman finds her role and takes the initiative.

From that moment new life is born. Do we have the courage to let the other person take the lead in dialogue?

### 2nd scenario: A reading of reality which is born of a new experience of God and of life.

1. **Opening:** Welcome those present, invoke the Holy Spirit with a prayer or a song. A moment of silence.

2. **Objective:** Seek to see life with Jesus' eyes. Jesus' response to life is different from that of the Samaritan woman and his own disciples.

Jesus perceives dimensions in life that others do not.

**3. Key:** During the reading let us observe Jesus' distinctive response to life and to what causes this difference.

**4. Text:** John 4/1-42

After the reading, a moment's silence.

### 5. Questions:

1. What is the difference between Jesus' response to life and that of the Samaritan woman and his disciples?

2. What is the cause of these differences?

3. In what way does Jesus' response cause new life to be born?

4. In what way does Jesus question our own response to life?

**6. Prayers:** Inspired by the text, we move to spontaneous prayer

**7. Psalm 120:** "God is your shadow. He is always beside you".

### Background

**1. On the meaning of water.** From the start of the conversation, Jesus speaks of water but he is thinking of the gift of life and of the Holy Spirit promised in the Old Testament (10).

The Samaritan lady from the beginning understands "water" in its material sense (11).

There is a "tension" between her and Jesus. He tries to bring her to a new level of understanding. And she tries to make Jesus understand things according to their meaning in the peoples' ordinary life.

**2. On the place of adoration.** The woman asks questions from the Samaritan perspective (20). Jesus replies from the Jewish viewpoint and states that this is the correct one (21-22).

But he goes beyond the Jewish viewpoint because he says that "from hence forward" access to God is open to all, as long as it be in spirit and truth (23-24).

### 3. The behaviour of Jesus.

1. The disciples, returning from the city, are amazed that Jesus is talking with a woman beside the well but say nothing (27).

Jesus enjoys more personal liberty than they do. The woman has helped him to overcome the taboo which prevented a man being in contact with a woman, especially a Samaritan woman.

2. The disciples go to the city to buy food and satisfy their hunger (8). But when the food arrives, Jesus does not wish to eat and says "I have another food". Once again they are puzzled by Jesus' behaviour (31-34).

**4. On the time for Harvest.** In the people's view the harvest will be ready only four months hence. But Jesus says the fields are already ready (35).

He has another way of seeing things. He can read the signs of the times and hear God's call which is within both present reality and history.

**5. What causes Jesus to have a different reading of reality** from that of the disciples, the Jews, the Samaritan woman and the people in general?

This new vision suddenly becomes manifest in the conversation with the Samaritan woman. Jesus even forgets to eat and wishes only to be attentive to what his Father is asking of him: "I have another food which you do not know" (32).

The source of this difference lies in the new experience which Jesus has of God as *Father*: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to complete his work" (34).

This new experience of God as "Father" allows Jesus to understand the Old Testament (symbolised by the word "water") in a new way; to perceive differently how access to God is earned (in spirit and in truth); to relate in a new way with people (as with the Samaritan woman); and to interpret in a new manner nature's mani-

festations (symbolised by harvest and water). The experience of God as *Father* is the source of new life.

### 3rd scenario: Jesus' pedagogy transforms everyday life.

**1. Opening:** Welcome those present, invoke the Holy Spirit with a prayer or a song. A moment of silence.

**2. Objective:** Let us learn how to make life transparent so that it reveals to us something of God.

Basing himself on what the Samaritan woman and the disciples already know or live out, Jesus seeks to help them to perceive a more profound dimension to life's reality as, for example, in water.

**3. Key:** During the reading, let us notice how Jesus helps people to move from the visible and palpable to perceiving God's invisible presence.

**4. Text:** John 4, 1-42

After the reading, a moment's silence.

### 5. Questions:

1. How does Jesus facilitate the Samaritan woman to perceive that in her exists a source of living water? In what way does Jesus move from the real and material sense of water to its symbolic meaning?

2. What strikes you most about the pedagogy of Jesus? Why?

3. Where in the Old Testament is water associated with the gift of life and the gift of the Holy Spirit?

4. In what ways does the pedagogy of Jesus question, provoke or criticise us?

**6. Prayers:** Inspired by the text, we move to spontaneous prayer

**7. Psalm 120:** "To my brothers and friends I say, 'Peace be with you'"

### Background

1. Jesus meets the Samaritan woman close to the well, the traditional place of

meetings and conversations. He makes use of his own very real thirst and allows the woman to feel necessary and useful.

Through Jesus' question she sees that he needs her to quench his thirst. He develops in her a willingness to help and serve.

2. Jesus uses the word "water" at the same time in two senses: the normal material sense as something that quenches thirst, and also in the symbolic sense as the source of life and the gift of the Spirit.

In other words, Jesus uses a language which people understand but at the same time inspires in them a wish to go deeper and to discover a more profound meaning in life.

3. The symbolic use of water was rooted in the life, history and tradition of the people. Jesus knows these traditions and makes use of them in his conversation with the Samaritan woman.

Suggesting water's symbolic meaning, he evokes the Old Testament where water's mystical quality is frequently a symbol of God's action in people. Jeremiah, for example, compares the living water of the spring to the water of the cistern (Jer. 2,13).

In the case of a cistern, the more water you take, the less there will be. With a spring, the more water you draw, the more there will be. (Other relevant Old Testament texts: Is. 12,3; 49,10; 55,1; Ez. 47,1-3 etc.).

#### 4. The dialogue has two levels

1. First of all there is the superficial level of water which quenches thirst. At this level, the conversation is tense and there is no progress. It is the Samaritan woman who has the upper hand because Jesus does not succeed in reaching out to her life by this gateway.

2. Then there is the profound, symbolic meaning of water as the image of the new life brought by Jesus. At this level, the conversation has a perfect continuity.

After revealing that he himself is the new life, Jesus is the true "husband" who

brings new life to the woman who seeks the fullness of life and until now has not found it.

As well as this, if the people accept Jesus as "bridegroom", there will be access to God everywhere, as long as he is sought in spirit and truth (23-24).

5. Jesus declares his thirst but does not drink. This is a sign that his thirst was symbolic. It related to his mission. It is a thirst that continues throughout his life until his death.

On the cross at the moment of his death, Jesus says "I am thirsty" (John 19,28). Having declared his thirst for the last time, he can say "All is consummated" (John 19,30). His mission has been fulfilled.

#### 4th scenario: Evangelisation: the fount of life for the evangeliser and for the person being evangelised.

1. **Opening:** Welcome those present, invoke the Holy Spirit with a prayer or a song. A moment of silence.

2. **Objective:** To discuss how evangelisation can be a fount of life which helps us to become aware of our mission as Christians.

In the text we can see how the first Christians understood their mission in relation to Jesus. It was by means of evangelising action that the Christian grew and discovered his mission and how to fulfil it.

3. **Key:** During the reading, let us observe how Jesus, when revealing the Good News to the Samaritan woman, discovers, lives out and deepens his own mission.

4. **Text:** John 4, 1-42

After the reading, a moment's silence.

#### 5. Questions:

1. What is the departure point for Jesus' evangelization? And the departure point for the Samaritan's evangelization?

2. What is the content of the Good News which Jesus reveals to the woman? And what is the content of the Good News which she brings to the people of Samaria?

3. What is the result of the woman's evangelisation in the lives of the Samaritan people and in Jesus?

4. In what ways does the evangelisation of Jesus and the Samaritan woman both question us and affirm us?

6. **Prayers:** Inspired by the text, we move to spontaneous prayer

7. **Psalm 120:** "To you I lift up my eyes. To you who dwell in Heaven."

#### Background

1. **Starting point.** In order to announce the Good News, Jesus makes use of the occasions which life offers him: a well, a journey, work. He uses life's material realities - thirst and tiredness. From these things he initiates a conversation with the Samaritan (5-8).

2. **Content.** Jesus makes the Samaritan woman reflect on her own life and discover therein a deeper dimension. He leads her to discover the Gospel within life itself (14).

The content of the Good News revealed by him is that he himself is the fount of life and that his fount can spring up in her. With this fount in her she can adore God in any place, as long as it is in spirit and truth (23).

3. **Process.** During the conversation - that is, during the course of evangelisation - Jesus himself goes through a change. Talking to the woman makes him forget his hunger and inspires him to fulfil the will of his Father who was revealing himself to Jesus at that moment (31-34).

4. **Conditions.** We notice Jesus' confidence in the person he is evangelising. He is not afraid to reveal to her that he is the Messiah (26). In John's Gospel, the Samaritan woman is the first person to receive this revelation.



**5. Result.** At the end of the conversation, the Samaritan woman leaves her bucket near the well and returns without water to the city because already she does not need water from Jacob's well which is of the Old Testament.

She has just drunk from the water of new life which Jesus has offered her. Now the spring is within her. She has within her the experience of pardon and no longer depends on others in order to know God (Jer. 31/34). This is the "water" she will communicate to others in the city.

**6. Follow-on.** Evangelised by Jesus, the woman evangelises her brothers and sisters. At first the Samaritans depend on the witness of the woman (39) but later believe because they themselves have seen (42).

Jesus had said to his first disciples "Come and see". There are similarities between how Jesus and this woman announce the Good News. It does not consist in declaring a doctrine but in making feel a presence: "Come and see".

**7. Model.** The disciples went to the city and converted no-one. The Samaritan woman returned to the city and converted everyone. She is the model and gives a lesson to the disciples.

### 5th scenario: Ecumenism and openness to the other, to what is different.

**1. Opening:** Welcome those present, invoke the Holy Spirit with a prayer or a song. A moment of silence.

**2. Objective:** To attain the openness of Jesus in relation to the religion of others. Jesus breaks the rules of behaviour of his time.

With great naturalness he opens himself to a forbidden person, such as the Samaritan woman, and forms a relationship with her.

**3. Key:** During the reading, let us observe Jesus' ecumenical attitude. He is not shut in by his own religion but opens himself to what is different and welcomes it.

**4. Text:** John 4, 1-42

After the reading, a moment's silence.

### 5. Questions:

1. What are the taboos and divisions of the era that appear in the text?

2. How does Jesus meet and overcome these taboos and divisions?

3. What is the result of Jesus' ecumenical attitude?

4. In what ways does the ecumenical attitude of Jesus and of the Samaritan woman question our own lack of ecumenism?

**6. Prayers:** Inspired by the text, we move to spontaneous prayer

**7. Psalm 124:** "Our help is in the name of the Lord who made Heaven and earth."

### Background

1. Jesus avoids a fight about religion. When he sees that the pharisees might become angry with him, he leaves Judea and returns to Galilee (1-3).

1. Jesus travels through Samaria which was not customary for the Jews (3).

2. Though a man, he converses normally with a woman (7).

3. Though a Jew, he speaks with a Samaritan which was forbidden for a Jew (9).

4. He asks for a drink from a marginalised person, without worrying about the severe purity standards (7).

5. Jesus spends two days with the Samaritans (40). To live, eat and drink together was a sign of great intimacy and union. Sharing the same table was only for those equal in the same religion.

2. Jesus does not close himself up within his own religion, race or geographical area. He recognises the "Gift of God" in a person who was neither Jewish nor active religiously (14). And it is to this

woman, judged to be a "heretic" by the Jews of that time, that Jesus first reveals his identity as Messiah (26).

3. The subtle manner in which the evangelist highlights the originality of Jesus - that is, in travelling through Samaria (4) and ignoring the Jewish custom of not speaking to Samaritans (9) - shows how important Jesus' ecumenical attitude was for the community of John at the end of the first century (see also in scenario number 6).

4. Despite this ecumenical opening, Jesus does not reject all Jewish laws. In the presence of the Samaritan woman, he endorses accepted norms, saying "salvation comes from the Jews" (22). But Jesus is not tied down by these norms and goes beyond the vision of the Jews (23).

5. Jesus spends two days with the people of that place and welcomes them into his company. In the end he is recognised as the saviour of "the whole world" and not only of the Jews (42).

### 6th scenario: the welcoming and pluralist community which promotes life

**1. Opening:** Welcome those present, invoke the Holy Spirit with a prayer or a song. A moment of silence.

**2. Objective:** To arrive at a new type of human relationship, capable of welcoming people and of living in harmony with those who are different.

The community which is revealed in the episode of the Samaritan woman, and in the context of John's Gospel generally, is a call to ecumenism.

**3. Key:** During the reading, let us be attentive to the evidence of the community which is revealed in this text: a community that knows how to open itself to promote life.

**4. Text:** John 4, 1-42

After the reading, a moment's silence.

**5. Questions:**

1. What are the characteristics of the Johannine community at the end of the first century which appear in this text?
2. What is the moment of most intense welcome?
3. In what ways does the ecumenical openness of Jesus and of the Samaritan woman produce new life?
4. Let us confront the Johannine community with our own community.

**6. Prayers:** Inspired by the text, we move to spontaneous prayer

**7. Psalm 125:** "The Lord protects his people now and always."

**Background**

The Gospel of John was written at the end of the first century. In its lines and between its lines we can see the traces of a Christian community that was open, welcoming and pluralist. Let us examine it.

**1.** The community that appears in the text takes it as normal that women have leadership in the community and that they preach the Good News, even with more success than men.

For example, the apostles went to the city and nothing happened (8 and 27). The woman went and many in that city were converted "because of the word of the woman who gave witness" (39).

**2.** John's Gospel accepts it as normal that Samaritans take part in the community's life and welcome Jesus as Messiah (26/29). And for these people the Messiah is not given just to the Samaritans or to the Jews, but he is rather "the saviour of the world" (42).

Other texts in John's Gospel reveal a community composed of a great variety of people, coming from various movements and organizations: disciples of John the Baptist (1,35-42), Samaritans (4,39-42), Greek Hellenists (7,35; 12,20-21), Jews expelled from the synagogue (9,22-23).

**3.** The community is not limited geographically, neither to the sacred space of Jerusalem or Mount Gerezim. It goes beyond ethnic or racial considerations whether of Jews or Samaritans. The community can exist anywhere provided it exists in spirit and in truth (21-24).

**4.** It is a community without much power where marginalised people find a place. A despised and ill-treated blind man represents the community and defends it before the Jews (9,24-34). A Samaritan woman, considered to be a heretic, becomes an evangeliser and founder of a community (4,39-42).

Both the blind man and the Samaritan woman announce Jesus to be a prophet (4,19; 9,17) but they go beyond the idea of prophet. For the woman, Jesus is the Messiah, the saviour of the world (42). For the blind man, Jesus is the "Son of Man" (9,35-38).

**5.** John's community is a minority one in a state of resistance. It experiences two crises of splitting apart: the "external" rupture of the expulsion from the synagogue (9,22) and the "internal" rupture in the face of the scandal of Jesus' incarnation (6,66).

Even so, despite its marginal and persecuted status and its weakness, the community does not close in on itself but is open and welcoming.

**7th scenario: A reading of the Bible: how to discover the fount of life within the past**

**1. Opening:** Welcome those present, invoke the Holy Spirit with a prayer or a song. A moment of silence.

**2. Objective:** To learn to discover with the help of the Bible God's living word in our life and in our past. The text offers us an insight into how the Johannine community read and re-read the Old Testament, that is, the peoples' past.

**3. Key:** During the reading, let us observe with what criteria and objections the Bible (the Old Testament) is being interpreted and availed of in this text.

**4. Text:** John 4, 1-42

After the reading, a moment's silence.

**5. Questions:**

1. Which are the passages where we can see the use of the Old Testament?
2. What characteristics mark the use of the Old Testament in this text? That is, what criteria of interpretation are followed by Jesus and by the Samaritan woman?
3. How can the Bible help us to discover within our past our own "Old Testament" which leads us to Christ?

**6. Prayers:** Inspired by the text, we move to spontaneous prayer

**7. Psalm 126:** "They will return singing and bearing their wheat."

**Background**

**1.** Aspects, sentences or facts from the Old Testament which are evoked, suggested or read again in the text:

1. Samaria, close to the region where Jacob had given away his son Joseph.

2. The well was constructed by Jacob (6,12). (cf. Jos. 24,32) Jesus is the new Patriarch, greater than Jacob.

3. Living water from the spring (10). (cf. Jer. 2,13; Is. 58,11). The water from Jacob's well is not sufficient. The living water offered by Jesus becomes necessary.

4. The re-reading of the role of the Temple (2 K 17,27-33; Dt. 12,5; Ex 20,24). Jesus is the new Temple (2,21).

5. The five husbands (18) evoke the five Samaritan peoples and their idols (2 K 17,29-30).

6. Jesus is recognised as a prophet (19). He is the promised and expected prophet (Dt. 18,15-18).

7. Jesus is recognised as "Saviour" (Gospel) of the whole world (42).

8. Salvation comes from the Jews (22). (cf. Rom. 9,4-5).

9. I know that the Messiah will come (25).

10. The statement "I am he" (26) evokes Ex 3,14-15 and Hos 1,9 (cf. John 6,10; 8,24,28,58; 13,19).

2. These references don't always quote the Old Testament in the written text. The Samaritan woman quotes the Bible according to the oral tradition of the Samaritans.

The Bible and this oral tradition have the same value for her.

3. In this way of using the Old Testament the evangelist suggests between the lines that in Jesus has come a way of judging the Bible and the peoples' history.

The Samaritan woman - that is, the Samaritan "people" - had five husbands, five idols. The sixth, "the one you have now, is not your husband" (18).

The false Yahweh of the Samaritans is not the true husband. Jesus, the seventh figure, is the true husband who comes among them.

4. This is the challenge which faces us: how do we re-read our past and our history, whether written or oral, to discover in it the action of God's Spirit who shapes our people and our culture in the direction of full life in God?

## 8th scenario: the presence and witness of women

**1. Opening:** Welcome those present, invoke the Holy Spirit with a prayer or a song. A moment of silence.

**2. Objective:** To identify the place, function and mission which women held in the Johannine communities at the end of the first century.

In John's Gospel women are highlighted at seven decisive moments for the preaching of the Good News.

To them are attributed functions and missions which in the other gospels are attributed to the apostles.

**3. Key:** During the reading, let us observe what attributions the woman receives and how she exercises them in Jesus' presence.

**4. Text:** John 4, 1-42

After the reading, a moment's silence.

## 5. Questions:

1. What most impressed you about the attitude of the Samaritan woman during her dialogue with Jesus? What is the influence she has on Jesus?

2. What is the witness of women in John's Gospel?

3. In John's Gospel what is the contribution of women so that all may have life in abundance?

4. Let us confront the Johannine reality with the role which women today exercise in the communities and churches.

**6. Prayers:** Inspired by the text, we move to spontaneous prayer

**7. Psalm 127:** "If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labour."

## Background

1. Here are the seven occasions in John's Gospel when a woman occupies a role of prominence in the community and in the preaching of the Good News.

1. Mary at the wedding in Cana (2,1-11). She points out the principal law of the Gospel: "Do everything that he asks you".

2. The Samaritan woman becomes the evangeliser of her country (4,1-42). She is the first to receive from Jesus the greatest secret: his identity as Messiah: "It is I who am speaking with you" (4,26).

3. The adulterous woman at the moment of being pardoned by Jesus becomes the judge of patriarchal society (or of masculine power) which condemned her (8,1-11).

culine power) which condemned her (8,1-11).

4. Martha professes faith in the Messiah, the son of God. In the Other Gospels the person who makes this solemn profession of faith is Peter (Mt 16,16). In the Gospel of John, the person who makes this solemn profession of faith is a woman, Martha (11,27).

5. Mary anoints the feet of Jesus for the day of his burial (12,7). She is the only person who understood and accepted Jesus as Messiah-Servant destined to die on the cross.

The person who died on a cross could not be buried or embalmed. For this reason, Mary acted in anticipation and anointed Jesus' body. She is the model for the other disciples. Peter had not accepted Jesus as the Messiah-Servant (13,8).

6. At the foot of the Cross "Women, behold your son"; "Behold your mother" (19,25-27). The Church is born at the foot of the cross. Mary is the model of the Christian community.

7. Mary Magdalen is called on to announce the Good News to her brothers (20,11-18). Magdalen receives on order - an "ordination" - without which all the other ordinations given to the apostles would have been without value.

2. On these seven occasions a woman is presented positively. She helps Jesus in the discovery and fulfilment of his mission. The pain of birth is the symbol of the suffering which brings new life (16,21).

## 9th scenario: Evangelisation and culture: our "Old Testament" which leads us to Christ.

**1. Opening:** Welcome those present, invoke the Holy Spirit with a prayer or a song. A moment of silence.

**2. Objective:** To learn how the Good News of God already existed as a "germ" in the Samaritan culture and how it was



made explicit firstly by the preaching of Jesus and later by that of the Samaritan woman.

The Samaritan woman evangelises the people of her country on the basis of their own culture and tradition, and on the basis of the experience she had with Jesus beside the well.

**3. Key:** During the reading, let us observe the way the Good News entered the life of the Samaritan woman and people.

**4. Text:** John 4, 1-42

After the reading, a moment's silence.

#### 5. Questions:

1. What led the Samaritan woman to announce Jesus to her people? What arguments did she use?

2. What were the steps in the inculturation of the Good News in the life of the Samaritan people?

3. What most impressed you about the way the Samaritan woman revealed the Good News to her people?

4. In what way does the text question or illuminate our way of inculturating the Good News among our peoples?

**6. Prayers:** Inspired by the text, we move to spontaneous prayer

**7. Psalm 128:** "Blessed are they who fear the Lord and walk in his ways."

#### Background

1. In the Acts of the Apostles (8,5) it is the deacon, Philip, who reveals the Good News. Philip was one of the seven deacons who received a mandate from the apostles for this mission.

According to the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (4,1-42), the Good News came to the Samaritans through their own people and very probable through a woman.

This lady, marginalised both as a woman and a Samaritan, becomes the evangeliser of her own people, without having re-

ceived a mandate from the apostles. She acted without intermediaries.

2. She announces Jesus on the basis of her own experience: "Come and see a man who told me everything I did" (29); and also on the basis of her tradition and culture: "Is it possible that he is the Messiah?" (29). This means that she presents the Gospel to her fellow country people as a sort of "affirmative reply" to that which they were already living.

3. Jesus affirms the intuition of the Samaritan woman because he remarks: "Do you not say that there is only four months before the harvest? I say to you then: lift up your eyes and look at the fields: they are already golden for the harvest. I have sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have worked for this harvest and you have benefitted from their work" (4,35-37).

And another text: "He who drinks from the water that I give will never experience thirst. The water that I will give will become within him a fount of water that will spring up towards eternal life" (14). With other words the seed of the Good News is already being sown in the culture of the Samaritans.

4. The preaching of the Good News is not imposed in an authoritarian way or by the threat of punishments. It is done in a way that leaves the listener with the last word as to acceptance or rejection.

The Samaritan woman merely says "Come and see" (4,29; cf. 1,39). It is the Samaritans themselves who will decide. She only offers the invitation. She does not create a dependent condition.

On the contrary! They reply: "It is not because of what you said that we believe. We ourselves have heard him and we believe that he is truly the saviour of the world" (42).

5. The consequence was not a cultural rupture but rather an affirmation. The preaching derived and was born from the peoples' own cultural values: dialogue, welcome, socialising, shared witness, an invitation to Jesus like that of the two

disciples going to Emaus: "Stay with us" (John 4,40; Luke 24,29).

#### 10th scenario: "I came that all might have life and life in abundance."

**1. Opening:** Welcome those present, invoke the Holy Spirit with a prayer or a song. A moment of silence.

**2. Objective:** Let us share with each other the good experiences of this Fifth Assembly and relate them to the talk about the Samaritan woman.

**3. Key:** During the reading, let us reflect on what most impressed us about this text in the last ten days.

**4. Text:** John 4, 1-42

After the reading, a moment's silence.

#### 5. Questions:

1. What most impressed me in this text that I had not been aware of previously?

2. How did this text from John (4,1-42) contribute to the general message of this Fifth Assembly?

3. What concretely do I bring away for my Biblical work among the people of my country?

**6. Prayers:** Inspired by the text, we move to spontaneous prayer

**7. Psalm 131:**

*"My heart is not proud, Lord.  
My eyes do not look higher than they ought.*

*I do not frequent high society.  
I do not have grandiose pretensions.*

*Inside me all has become calm.  
Peace and serenity have come to stay.*

*Like the child after feeding  
which sleep quietly in its mother's lap.*

*My friends, we pray that God will help us  
To hope in him today and always." ♦*

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#### **Biblical-Pastoral Center Dei Verbum Nemi (Rome)**

The next formation course for leaders in the biblical-pastoral ministry is scheduled to be held: 15 August to 13 December 1997

Applicants for this course should write as soon as possible to:

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The East Asian Pastoral Institute offers a four-month course (30 June - 25 October 1997) for men and women, clergy and laity, actively engaged in the biblical pastoral ministry or assigned to it in the near future.

The objectives of the program are to deepen the participants' understanding of the content and ways of interpretation of the Old and New Testament. Training in the pastoral use of the Bible:

- various methods of Bible sharing for use in basic ecclesial communities, neighbourhood gospel groups and the like;
- a systematic and disciplined method of Bible study called *Joy of Discovery in Bible Study*. Participants will be trained in teaching others this method;
- training for effective preaching of the Word;
- introduction to central themes of the Old and New Testament.

The course is developed within the context of the Catholic Church's approach to Scripture as follows:

- (a) understanding the relationship of revelation, tradition, scripture and the magisterium;
- (b) study of the 1994 Statement of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on Interpretation of the Bible;
- (c) study of the 1990 statement of the Bogota Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation on Bible and Evangelization.

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