



# Catholic Biblical Federation

## Biblical Pastoral Ministry in Latin America

### A liberating reading of the Bible in Brazil

### New Evangelization in Peru



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**Editors:**

Ludger Feldkämper, Alexander Schweitzer

**Production and Layout:**

Hildegard Rathgeb

**Editorial Collaboration:**

Christa Wehr

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**Dear Readers,**

Globalisation and regionalization, at first sight opposite tendencies, are inseparably connected with one another and today play a dominant role in all the important areas of society. The church also has been marked by this development. The relationship of the church universal and the local church, the question of unity and diversity are both old and, at the same time, current subjects. The significance of diversity is being more and more recognized and acknowledged: diversity of theologies, of religious-cultural traditions, of biblical interpretations. The president of the Catholic Biblical Federation, Bishop Wilhelm Egger, writes in his letter on the promulgation of the Constitution of the Catholic Biblical Federation: *The CBF offers us the possibility to learn from each other. The regionalization permits a greater contextualization, that is, a greater attention to the problems of the different regions, to the contribution to the various ways of reading. The dialogue within the Federation allows us to treasure this richness of the understanding of the text and helps us to overcome its limitations and the risks of one-sidedness.* As a contribution to this dialogue, the issues of the BVD for this year are concerned with biblical pastoral activity in individual regions and so make visible the various ways in which the Word of God is effective among peoples. After the issues on Africa and Europe, the present issue is devoted to Latin America.

A significant theological direction is closely connected with Latin America: liberation theology. It has its origin in the poor sectors of society and, even though it may have application elsewhere, is above all to be understood in the Latin American context. In his contribution about Bible readings in a liberation theology perspective in the base communities of Brazil, Fr. Carlos Mesters shows how much this biblical understanding derives from below, out of the concrete, often painful life experiences of the poor and what transforming power is attached to the Word of God in this context. *It is not primarily a question of the interpretation of the Bible but of the interpretation of life with the help of the Bible* (Mesters). By this are intended concrete consequences in daily life, changes in the social, economic and cultural areas. It is because of this social engagement that the Bible readings in a liberation theology perspective can become a healthy counterweight to spiritualistic and fundamentalistic tendencies in Bible interpretation. Here lies, according to Mesters, the significance of interpreting the Bible in a liberation theology perspective outside of the Latin American context.

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

**Editorial**

The other two major contributions of this issue are also dedicated to a Latin American question, which is at the same time a question for the whole church, namely, the new evangelization. According to Fr. Luis Castonguay, in his article on Peru, the first evangelization of Latin America was carried out on the basis of a small catechism. The contemporary preaching of the Word of God should be characterised above all by taking the Bible as its norm. The author paints a picture of crisis of faith and values in the Peruvian society and offers an outline for a biblically oriented new evangelization. In his pastoral letter Archbishop Norberto Rivera of Mexico also urges that Christian and church life should be penetrated by the Word of God. The Bible should be the moving force in the liturgy, in lectio divina, in private prayer and in the community.

Even though the space for reports from the Federation is somewhat limited in this issue, the testimony of the Spanish Dominican Sisters represents the experience of many who assemble around the Word of God or who discover it anew. When the Word of God becomes the center of life, it provides comfort, confidence, strength and, above all, community.

This issue of the BDV hopes to contribute a few little stones to the shimmering mosaic of the world-wide biblical pastoral ministry. From the example of liberation theology and from the efforts at new evangelization, it can be seen that the burning issues for a local church are often matters of interest to all Christians. The answers that the Christians of one region, of one country, of one social level, have found to pressing contemporary questions can inspire their sisters and brothers in other parts of the world. To continue with the image of the mosaic: just as the different colored stones contribute to the whole picture, in the same way the diversity reflected in the local churches contributes to the entire artistic effect brought about by God's activity in the world.

*Alexander M. Schweitzer*

**"Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided  
for all the Christian faithful"**

*(Dei Verbum, 22).*

**KATHOLISCHE BIBELFÖDERATION**

General Secretariat  
Postfach 10 52 22  
D-70045 Stuttgart  
Germany

Tel.: (07 11) 1 69 24-0  
Fax: (07 11) 1 69 24 24  
Email: bdv@kbf.n-e-t.de

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## A liberating reading of the Bible

*Faith has its roots in everyday life. Its transforming and freeing power unfolds, where people live it out together. In the Bible people discover themselves and their situation and from it they draw the power for the shaping of their lives. The author, Carlos Mesters O.Carm., clarifies these principal themes of his contribution with concrete examples. A book of the people, above all of the disadvantaged, from which a power to reshape goes forth: this role is attached to the Bible in the Brazilian base communities. The second part of the essay seeks to cast light on the factors that lead to these liberation-theology readings of the Bible. In the relevance of the Bible for the everyday situation, in its function of founding a community, in the social approach of the Bible readings of the base communities, and in the counterweight which these present to the spiritualistic and fundamentalist tendencies, Carlos Mesters sees the value of the liberation-theology Bible readings, also beyond the Brazilian context. The article appeared in the periodical Medellín, N. 88, Vol. XXII, Dec. 1996, pp. 123-138.*

### Introduction

I will limit myself to what is happening here in Brazil, as I do not know enough about what is happening in other Latin American countries. But a good analysis of eight gallons of river water, gives one an idea of the type of water in the whole river.

The way in which Christians live in the Base Ecclesial Communities is the source of the "liberating reading" of the Bible. This type of reading is a means of absorbing strength and light from the Bible in order to cope with the daily struggles and the paths people follow in their lives.

With the help of the Bible, the people discover a new experience of God and a new vision of the transformatory and liberating action of the Word of God in their lives.

I will begin this article by describing some significant events taken from real life and I will then attempt to explain, through observations, the importance of these facts for a popular reading of the Bible.

### Part One

#### **Three events which demonstrate the current situation**

##### **First Event: Colombia**

It happened during the first meeting of a Bible study course. There were around 25 people in the group. On the wall, the sentence *GOD IS LOVE* had been written. The priest asked, "Who wrote that?" A lady replied, "I did." The priest then asked, "Why did you write that?" "Because the wall seemed too empty", came the reply. "And why did you write that particular sentence?" the priest wanted to know. The lady replied, "I thought it was beautiful". And the priest asked her, "Where did you get it from?" The lady replied, "I made it up myself! I thought it was how we should live as Christians."

So the priest said, "We'll open the Bible at the first letter of St. John, Chapter 4, Verse 8." He waited until everyone had found the text and asked the lady to read. She read, "He who does not love, does not know God, for God is love."

It was the first time in her life that she had opened a Bible. She got a shock. She did not expect to find within it the sentence she had written on the wall. She discovered without realising it that the Word of God was already part of her life. She experienced a satisfaction and happiness so great that she hardly slept that night. Over the next few days, the Bible she had received from the priest was filled up with paper bookmarks. And in the evenings she found other sentences she recognised!

This simple story and many others like it demonstrate that the way in which the people in the Base Ecclesial Communities interpret the Bible should be respected. What follows illustrates why.

1. The Bible is accepted by the people as the Word of God. They already have faith before they reach the stage of actually opening the Bible for the first time. This faith in its entirety is reflected in the Bible. This is what characterises the way we read the Bible in Latin America. Without this faith, the whole reading process and method would be different.

2. A progressive discovery is currently underway that the Word of God is not only found in the Bible but also in everyday life and that the main aim of reading the Bible is not to interpret the book itself but rather to interpret life with the help of the Bible. We are discovering that God speaks to us today through events which occur in our lives.

3. The Bible enters into the lives of the people in a different way: not through authority but through personal and community experience. It is present not as a book which imposes a rigid doctrine but as Good News which reveals the liberating presence of God in the life and struggle of the people. The Bible confirms the path that the people are following and in this way strengthens their hope.

4. The Bible used to be distant, but now it is close! What was once mys-





terious and inaccessible began to form part of the daily life of the poor. Not only God's word, but God himself was brought closer. It is difficult for one of us to really evaluate what this change has meant for the poor.

## **Second Event: Nuevo Iguazú, Rio de Janeiro**

It was a Bible meeting for blacks only. It began with everyone listening to the personal story of two elderly blacks: a story of much suffering and discrimination. Then, together in silence, they attempted to remember the history of blacks in Brazil. The resulting overall view was a time line of long slavery and its subsequent oppression. They then asked for an account of the history of the people in the Bible. The result was a description of stories, side by side, distant from each other in time, but close in content: two stories of oppression and the struggle for liberty. That was the first part.

In the second part, they decided to reflect more deeply on the captivity of the people of the Bible. They wanted to know how to face the captivity in which they found themselves today, in the twentieth century, here in Brazil. It was a study full of many beautiful discoveries. The group strongly identified with the Servant of Yahweh of whom the prophet Isaias spoke and with his mission. They began to look at their own situation with different eyes.

### **Observations made on this event**

1. On reading the Bible, the people of the Communities involve their own history and uppermost in their minds are the problems which arise from the hard reality of their lives. The Bible is a mirror, "symbol" (cf Heb 11,19), of the way they themselves live today. A strong bond is thus established between the Bible and everyday life which, at times, seems little more than a superficial link. This is in fact a prayerful reading of faith

very similar to the reading which was performed by the Church Fathers.

2. In order to establish this strong link between the Bible and everyday life it is important: a) to bear in mind the real problems which arise from everyday life and the reality suffered today, rather than artificial problems which have nothing to do with the lives of the people; b) to understand that the ground covered today is the same as that covered in the past; c) to have a global vision of the Bible which may be related to the specific situation of the readers. Reading the Bible in this way results in a mutual understanding of the Bible and everyday life. The meaning and importance of the Bible are discovered and enriched in the light of what is lived and suffered in everyday life and vice-versa.

3. From this new-found bond between the Bible and everyday life, the poor made the biggest discovery of all: "If God was with that people in the past, then He is also with us in our own struggle for freedom today. He listens to our cries!

## **Third Event: Cabedelo, Paraíba**

This last Bible meeting began with a song. Then the story of the disciples on their way to Emmaus was read up to where it says: "We were hoping!" (Lk 24, 13-24). There was a pause in order to reply to the following question: the cross killed the hope of the disciples; what is the cross today which is killing the hope of the people?

The reading was continued and we listened to how Jesus interpreted the Scriptures for the disciples (Lk 24, 25-27). The group was then divided into groups of three. One person in each group played the role of Christ for the other two. They had to tell each other of experiences of when their brother or sister, through God's Word, became Christ for him or her and made their hearts burst with love.

After ten minutes, to the sound of a hymn, the group came together again

to listen to how the disciples arrived in Emmaus and recognised Jesus in the breaking of bread (Lk 24, 28-32). At this point the whole group went into the hall and they celebrated the Eucharist, the breaking of bread.

Finally, after Communion, they read of how the disciples returned to Jerusalem, where the forces of death from which the cross had emerged and killed Jesus still resided. But the two disciples had already gained victory over the power of death by their faith in the resurrection (Lk 24, 33-35).

### **Observations made on this event**

1. This event clearly demonstrates that in order to make a good interpretation of the Bible, it is very important to create a prayerful atmosphere of faith and fraternity through songs, prayers and worship.

In other words, unless the text is studied in the context of the Holy Spirit, the meaning it has for us today will not be revealed. Therefore, the meaning of the Bible is not only an idea or message which points out and promotes the Truth; it is also a "feeling", a consolation, a comfort which is "felt" within the heart.

2. Not long after this event, a new way of looking at and interpreting the Bible emerges. The Bible is no longer seen as a rather strange book belonging only to the clergy, but as **our** book, "written for us until the end of time" (1 Cor 10,11).

3. The interpreting of a comprehensive activity which involves not only the intellectual contribution of scripture study, should also, and most importantly, include the process of participation by the Community: group work and study, personal and community readings, acting and other dramatical activities, worship, prayer, recreation etc. Above all, interpretation is a community activity in which everyone participates, each in his own way according to his ability and exegetical capacity.

## Conclusion

There are many other stories. These three are enough to demonstrate that the winds of change are blowing and illustrate where we are at this moment in time. The current situation, demonstrated by these events, evolved over a number of years when the first seeds of change were planted in the renewal of the 1940s and 1950s.

It is important to remember that what we are talking about refers only to the Base Ecclesial Communities, which are a minority. The majority of people have a different way of looking at the Bible, less liberating and more fundamentalist.

In order to clarify the route the faith journey has followed over the last few years, it may be useful to present what has been discussed so far in a more systematic way. We will look at two aspects in particular: the internal force of the process of popular interpretation and its novelty.

## Second Part

### *The internal force of the process of interpretation*

#### 1. Three factors

Many factors contributed to this type of reading of the Bible in Brazil. We will examine three of the most important in order to gain an overall picture.

#### a) The work of YCW: a new way of looking at God's revelation

The See, Judge, Act method clearly brings with it a new way of considering and experiencing the revealing action of God in history. Before attempting to understand what God is saying, one must first look at the situation of the people and their problems. Then, with the help of biblical texts, we try to judge this situation. This means that God's voice does not come from the Bible itself, but rather from the events

illustrated in the Bible. It is these events which show us a new way to behave and worship... the see-judge-act method.

#### b) The Second Vatican Council and Dei Verbum

The Dei Verbum document confirms for the Church this new method of seeing the revealing action of God. God talks through events and people. We ourselves discover what he is saying with the help of the Bible, the written Word of God. The way of life of the people of Israel in the past is shown to us in the Bible as a standard (canon).

#### c) The military coup and the crisis of ultra-modernism

The people were in a state of abandon. In 1964 the military coup revealed that the work aimed at raising popular consciousness done up to then was far from complete. So-called "modernism" suffered a shock. The need for more thorough and patient work with the people was evident, with greater respect being paid to their culture and customs.

The Church was the only place where they could still work freely, where they were not victims of political repression. Therefore, from the 1960s, work began at the ground level and Base Ecclesial Communities grew up all over the place. The people began to read the Bible.

However, the most important element of all, which has never been considered as a factor on its own, in spite of playing a part in all the other factors, is the action of the Holy Spirit. He sets this truth in motion and guides it. Let us listen what the Spirit says to the Churches!

#### 2. Three stages

Over the years, three viewpoints came to prominence, one after the other.

They could be considered as three different aims, present in the way people use the Bible:

#### a) Knowing the Bible: instruction

The renewal of exegesis, the three encyclicals written by Leo XIII, Benedict XV and Pious XII on the interpretation of the Bible, the work of explaining the scriptures, and liturgical renewal all brought the Bible closer to the people. Here in Brazil, somebody claimed that what helped to encourage a greater interest by Catholics in the Bible was the missionary vigour of the Pentecostal churches. The desire to get to know the Bible therefore inspired many people to read it more frequently.

#### b) Creating community: worship

As people began to read or listen to the Word, it bore fruit. The first fruit was that of bringing people together and creating communities. Popular Bible study weeks, the distribution of the Bible in the vernacular, celebrations of the Word, scarcity of the clergy, courses, meetings, training, numerous Bible groups and circles, and "Bible month" all produced a great passion for community based on the Word of God.

#### c) Serving the people: transformation

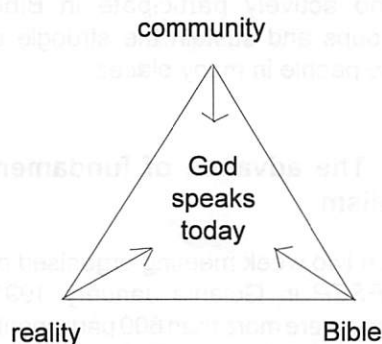
A further step was taken, most notably after 1968. The knowledge gained from the Bible and the main concerns of the community, provided the basis for a common goal: service to the people and the defence of life. As the poor had neither the money nor the time to read books on the Bible, they began to read the Bible from the only resource they had: their lives of faith, lived in community, their lives of suffering as oppressed people. Reading the Bible in this way they came upon the obvious: a history of oppression which mirrored what they themselves



are suffering now; a story of people fighting for the same things for which they struggle today: land, justice, sharing, fraternity, life.

### 3. The internal force

These three stages are like three aspects or aims of a particular type of interpretation of the Bible. Between them there is an internal force which marks the process of popular interpretation: knowing the Bible leads to living together in community; living together in community leads to serving the people which, in turn, leads to the desire for a deeper knowledge of the original context of the Bible, and so on. It is a never ending circle. Each of these three aspects spring from the other, involve the other and lead to the other.



It is not so important to establish from which of the three stages the process of interpretation begins. This depends on the situation, history, culture and interests of the community or group. What is important is the understanding that one stage will always remain incomplete with the other two.

Generally, in all communities there are people who identify themselves with one of the three stages:

- 1) people who want to know the Bible and who are more interested in study;
- 2) people who place more emphasis on community and its internal functions;
- 3) people whose main concern is serving others and making their con-

tribution in political and popular movements.

All this produces tensions between the different groups and interests. These tensions are healthy and productive. For example, in some places, the more intense political practices of recent years now demand a deeper knowledge of biblical text and a more intense living of the spirit of liberation in community.

In other places communal life has reached its peak and demands action more closely linked with the popular movements. In other words, the tensions help to create an equilibrium which favours the interpretation of the Bible and prevents it from becoming unilateral.

Sometimes, however, these tensions are negative and lead to one of the three aspects becoming isolated or excluding the other two. The road to popular interpretation is often tense and full of conflict with the risk of becoming blinkered or retreating.

### 4. Dangers of isolation

When a community achieves the aim of one of these aspects (knowing, living together or serving), some of its members, out of loyalty to the Word, wish to advance and move forward, whilst others, in the name of the same loyalty, reject the new "openness". It is a moment of crisis and also of grace. The group in favour of moving forward does not always win.

1. All pastoral movements are based on and use the Bible. In the name of the Bible the fundamentalists reject interpretation and refuse to open up to reality. In some places the Bible groups which shut themselves off or adhere to the literal meaning of the Bible become the most conservative groups in the parish. Even an exegete run the risk of being isolated in the study of biblical text, however progressive he or she may be.

2. Many movements shut themselves away in community, mysticism, cha-

ismatic ideas and reject any political "opening up". They persist in serving the (many) poor, although not in the spirit of transformation or freedom.

3. Although less frequent, isolation in a different sense may also occur. The community reaches a more committed level of service and a clearer political consciousness; one can see how the communal, personal or devotional activities may be manipulated with relative ease by the dominant ideology and it may be concluded that these things do not contribute so much to the transformation.

For this reason the risk of isolation still exists in social and political matters, in serving the people.

Although understandable, cases of isolation like these are tragic, as none of the three aspects can really be achieved. In order to avoid this danger it is important to maintain an atmosphere of dialogue, since wherever the human word is circulated with freedom and without censure, the Word of God will generate freedom.

## Third Part

### *Change and the importance of popular interpretation*

Within the interpretation made by the poor of the Bible there is a very important change in the life of the churches. Classic change which brings back some of the basic values of the common Tradition. Below are seven points which, in one way or another, signpost this route.

1. The aim of interpretation is no longer the search for information on the past, but is rather the clarification of the present in the light of the presence of God-with us, God the Liberator.

In other words, interpreting everyday life with the help of the Bible. A new vision of the revelation, described



and defined by *Dei Verbum* is rediscovered by reading the Bible.

2. The subject of interpretation is no longer the study of scripture itself. Interpreting is a community activity in which everyone participates, and includes scripture study which plays a special role in the overall interpretation.

For this reason, it is important to bear in mind not only the faith of the community, but that it also forms an effective part of a living community and searches for the meaning recognised by this community.

This effective belonging to a living community is critical for the functioning of scientific scripture study which, is then of greater service to the people.

3. The social strata from where the interpretation originates is among the poor, outcast and marginalised. This therefore changes the viewpoint. Often, because an interpreter lacks a more critical social conscience, he falls victim to ideological preconceptions and without even realising it, uses the Bible to legitimise the dehumanising system of oppression.

4. The type of reading which links the Bible to everyday life is ecumenical and liberating. It is important to understand that ecumenical reading does not mean that Catholics and Protestants discuss their differences in order to arrive at a common conclusion, although this may be a consequence.

The most ecumenical thing we possess is the life that God gave us. Here in Latin America, the lives of many of the population are in danger, and their lives are therefore not longer free.

Ecumenical reading is the interpretation of the Bible in defence of life. People of different Christian denominations unite not in the defence of

their institutions and confessions, but rather in the defence and service of the life of the people.

Nowadays, because of the current situation in which the Latin Americans live, a reading in defence of life must, of necessity, be liberating. For this very reason it is conflictive and has become a sign of contradiction.

5. Here we see the difference in European exegesis. The biggest problem here is that faith is at risk because of secularisation. It is, however, life itself which is in serious danger of being eliminated and dehumanised.

And what is worse, the Bible itself is at risk of being used to legitimate this situation in the name of God.

As in the times of the kings of Judah and Israel, Tradition is being used to legitimise idols. Popular interpretation discovers, reveals and denounces such manipulation.

6. The method and dynamic used by the poor in their meetings are very simple. They are not used to employing discursive language, consisting of arguments and reasoning.

They prefer to recount events and use comparisons... a type of language which functions by associating ideas and whose main concern is not making things known, but discovering.

7. The function and limits of the Bible now appear more clearly. The limits are these: the Bible is not an end in itself, but should be used in the interpretation of life; it does not function on its own and does not open our eyes for us, since what opens the eyes is the sharing of bread, the gesture of community.

The Bible is like the heart: if it remains outside the body of the community and the life of the people *it* dies and *people* die!

## Part Four

### ***Challenges which show that change has arrived***

#### **1. Feminist reading**

Feminist reading questions and makes readings which have been "masculine" for centuries relevant to women. It cannot be rejected as a passing phenomenon nor as one of the many largely inconsequential curiosities of scripture study.

It is one of the most important characteristics which are emerging from popular Bible reading, and is more widely reaching than it may seem at first glance.

In Brazil it is even more important to the overwhelming majority of women who actively participate in Bible groups and sustain the struggle of the people in many places

#### **2. The advance of fundamentalism**

In a two week meeting organised by CESEP in Goiania January 1991, there were more than 600 participants who came from the ECBs of almost all the states of Brazil: a lot of young people! In the three days dedicated to Bible study, the line of interpretation was obviously liberating.

In the conversations with the participants, however, a different interpretative attitude appeared several times, in which fundamentalism was mixed in with liberation theology: especially among the young!

How can this phenomenon be explained? Where does it come from? Is it from contact with the conservative wing, with the charismatics, the believers? Is it also possible that it comes from the deficiencies of the liberating attitude to the Bible? Could it be that it comes from something even deeper that is changing the human subconscious?



The danger of fundamentalism exists not only in the Christian churches but also in other religions: Jewish, Moslem, Buddhist ... even secularised forms of fundamentalism exist.

### 3. The search for Spirituality and our method of interpretation

In every nook and cranny we hear or feel the desire for greater deepening, for feeling, for spirituality. The Bible, in fact, may be an answer to this desire, since the Word of God has two fundamental dimensions. On the one hand, it brings light. In this sense it may contribute to the clarification of ideas, unmasking false ideologies and communicating a more critical conscience.

On the other hand, it brings strength. In this sense it can encourage people, communicate courage, bring happiness, as creating strength produces new things, stimulates the people and makes this happen, makes people love each other.

Unfortunately, in the practice of pastoral care, these two aspects of the Word are separate. On the one hand we have the charismatic movements; on the other, the liberation movements. The charismatics spend much time in prayer, but often lack critical vision and tend towards a fundamentalist, moralising, spiritualist and individualist interpretation of the Bible. For this reason, their prayer often lacks a real basis in biblical text and reality.

The liberation movements, in their turn, possess a great critical conscience, but at times lack perseverance and faith when facing human situations which, in a scientific analysis of reality, do not contribute anything to the transformation of society. Sometimes they have a certain difficulty in comprehending the value of long hours spent in prayer with no immediate result.

### 4. The culture of Latin American peoples and the Old Testament

According to the myth of Tucumán explained by the amazonian Indians, of the origin of evil in the word, the guilty party is not woman, but man.

Someone asked, "Why don't we use our own myths instead of the Hebrew's myths?" there was no answer. The same question was asked in a Bible study course in Bolivia in May 1991. The participants, all Aymaras, asked, "Why use only the Bible? Our stories are much more interesting, less sexist and we know them better!"

The Asian religions, which are older than our own, have been asking the same questions for several years. What is the value of our history and our culture? Can they not be of as much value as our Old Testament, where the promises God made to our ancestors are hidden and where our law exists as "our teacher to bring us closer to Jesus Christ? (Gal 3,24).

The Gospel was not written in order to condemn the Old Testament but to complete it and explain all its meaning (Mt 5,17).

The Old Testament of the people of Israel is the inspired canon or standard which helps us to see and reveal this deeper dimension of our culture and history, of our Old Testament.

### 5. The need to create Bible study centres in Latin America

The progress of the Communities is increasing and deepening. Bit by bit, from the heart of this popular practice, a "new" attitude of interpretation, which is in fact not so much new, but ancient, is emerging.

There is a need for this to be legitimised as much from the Tradition of the Churches as from exegetic investigation. The reading originated by

the poor and because of the situation of the poor makes its own demands. As it moves forward, the desire for greater scientific explanation increases.

There are many Bible facilitators who like to have some knowledge of the biblical languages; they like to have a better knowledge of the economic, political, social and ideological context in which the Bible was written; they would like to bring to the Bible the questions which today cause anxiety among the people in living their faith.

In addition to this, the number of clergy is very small. The greatest and most urgent scarcity is that of biblical facilitators who can answer the increasing demand for Bible study training and face the new problem which is being created because of the immense growth of fundamentalism (the most dangerous "ism" in existence).

Furthermore, the practice of Bible reading of the type performed in the Base Ecclesial Communities in Latin America has already had certain repercussions in the Universal Church, as it is promoting discussion, reactions and support in many places.

This was clearly seen at the Catholic Biblical Federation's World Meeting held in Bogotá in July 1990 and in the world meeting of the Lutheran Church, which took place in Curitiba in January 1990.

Much interest has been shown on other continents in the Bible reading which is being carried out here in Latin America.

For all these reasons it is important to begin thinking seriously about the creation of a centre of investigation and biblical training which springs from the real problems we have here in our communities.

(Translated by Ceri Bacon)

## Pastoral Letter on Sacred Scripture in the New Evangelization

*In his pastoral letter of September 1996, the primate of Mexico, Archbishop Norberto Rivera, calls for new evangelisation, in the center of which must stand the Bible. In various ways it takes its place again into the center of life: in the celebration of the liturgy, in the liturgy of the hours, in lectio divina, in personal prayer. From this central point the preaching of the Word of God is nourished; it is not always easy but all the more necessary.*

To priests, brothers and sisters in Consecrated Life, Lay Faithful Pastoral Agents and all the members of the Archdiocese of Mexico: *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly"* (Col. 3:16).

### 1. Introduction

Our whole faith is born from a fundamental fact, the event of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, who, by his death and resurrection has manifested to us the love of God and his plan of salvation.

Jesus Christ is the centre and totality of this event set in the fullness of time (cf Gal. 4:4), whence there flows like an inexhaustible fountain the salvific action of God towards the past, in the present and for the future of the whole of humanity.

Thus, all that is of real value for humankind is found in Christ and outside of him there is nothing. That is why St Paul exclaims: *"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things ... by making peace through the blood of his cross"* (Col. 1:19-20).

Sacred Scripture, inspired by God himself, and preserved with fidelity and veneration by the Church, con-

tains all the elements of this history of our salvation.

Thus, as Christ, *the Word of God made flesh* (Jn 1:14), manifests to us the face of God (cf Jn 14:9), so also Sacred Scripture shows us Christ and in some way communicates to us his action.

That is why Scripture is said to be the living Word of God: *"Indeed the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit ... it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart"* (Heb. 4:12).

All those who make up the Church, but especially priests, deacons and laity who are at the head of Christian communities, must read and study Scripture assiduously, so that they do not become *"empty preachers of the word, because we do not listen to it within ourselves"* (Augustin, Sermon 179, 1: PL 38,966).

But still more, brothers and sisters, the object of this pastoral exhortation is rooted in the pre-occupation I have that this word of salvation reaches all the faithful of our beloved Archdiocese, especially at this time when there is a growing interest for it in all parts, so much so that we cannot fail to call to mind the words of the prophet: *"The time is surely coming, says the*

*Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord."* (Am. 8:11).

### 2. The Word of God, Spirit of the Church

If the world is hungry for this Word then the Church has a grave responsibility to proclaim it and to explain it. It is a fundamental command which it has received from Christ: *"Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation"* (Mk 16:15).

That was the same fundamental task of the apostles, who sought always to devote themselves completely *"to prayer and to serving the Word"* (cf Acts 6:1-4), whereby the Church itself is born, grows and is nourished (cf Acts 2:42).

There is no obstacle that can hold up this announcement nor human command that can oppose it, since *"we must obey God rather than any human authority"* (Acts 5:29).

Perhaps the only thing that could hold up this proclamation of the Word of God would be our own resistance or negligence towards it.

Hence our responsibility is all the greater: *"Woe is me if I do not proclaim the gospel"*, St Paul tells us. Woe to us if we do not proclaim the gospel, the synodal proclamation reminds us (ECUCIM, 2908).

Not only is the beginning of the Church enlightened by this proclamation, but the whole of its history.

It is enough to remember the immense work of the Fathers during the first eight centuries, devoted almost totally to the contemplation and explication of Scripture; or again, the middle ages transcribed and pondered the Word of God carefully, and made it the soul of their culture; the renaissance made it the first printed word, and multiplied Latin versions and translations into the new European languages.





It was only through the abuse that led to the Protestant Reform that the Church demanded decisive care, so as not to make the Word the pretext for justifying human opinions.

By a strange reaction the Word became very distant from the faithful people, but not from the faith it nourished, nor from the Christian life it guided, which is why the second Vatican Council wanted to record that *"the Church has always venerated the divine scriptures as it has venerated the Body of the Lord, in that it never ceases, above all in the sacred liturgy, to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the word of God and the Body of Christ"* (Dei Verbum 21).

So it is that we should *"make known the Word of God contained in the Sacred Scriptures, as a fundamental instrument for the understanding, deepening and meditation of our faith, so that they (all the faithful) in their turn, may spread it among their fellow men and women"* (DV 25).

It falls to me, bishop of this Archdiocese, as the Council exhorts, to form appropriately the faithful who, through the Lord's goodness have been entrusted to me, in an appreciation and knowledge of the sacred books, especially of the gospels.

Therefore, after taking some significant steps in the direction that the second Synod has indicated to us, and complementing the *Pastoral Orientation concerning the formation of lay agents for specific actions*, which I recently addressed to the community of the Archdiocese (25.05.96), I consider that it is necessary that we take cognisance of the place to which the Word corresponds in what the Church has to do and each one of us in turn, so that it may become better known and, above all, alive.

In effect, if the Church exists and is constituted by the Word as the people of God and in an evangelized and evangelizing community (cf SD 33, Christif. 36), it means that it *"is the*

*Church's support and strength, imparting robustness of faith to its daughters and sons, and providing food for their souls. It is a pure and unfailing fount of spiritual life"* (DV 21).

### 3. Facts and Challenges

The reality in which we find ourselves has already been analysed by the second archdiocesan Synod, where, together with concrete facts, we have been presented with challenges that become more urgent each day:

In the face of an indifferent and dehumanised society, of the large number of baptised who live on the margins of Christian life, of a community with Christian roots, but, in large part of a dead and inactive faith, and of ineffective ecclesial activity, what is pressing is:

- to implement an evangelizing process which gives priority to *"kerygmatic"* proclamation for the purpose of conversion;
- to renew profoundly experience of the Lord, so that Agents at all times, and not only in liturgical celebrations, proclaim in a complete, creative and testifying way, a Christ who is alive and capable of transforming human-kind and its historical reality;

- to become aware of the necessity of moving from a pastoral ministry centred on cult and administration to one in which everything is directed to the proclamation of the mystery of Jesus Christ.

Woe to us if we do not preach the gospel!

### 4. Contemplation of the Word

The first and indispensable step for everyone is to go to Scripture in order to contemplate the Word of God.

It should be our daily nourishment from where we consider all other reality. Pastors of communities, religious, together with lay agents who serve in different areas, and all the faithful

who make up groups and ecclesial movements, should maintain a real and personal closeness with the Word of God.

The Council reminds us that the privileged time in which the Church listens to the Word is the *liturgical assembly* seeing that in it Christ *"is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church"* (SC 7).

Within the whole liturgical life the Eucharist occupies the central place in the meeting with God the Father through his Christ, since *"just as he did in another time for the disciples at Emmaus, he explains the scriptures to us and breaks bread for us"* (Euch. Prayer V).

The Sunday celebration should be prepared carefully so that the whole Church might receive, assimilate and live out with love and gratitude the gift of the Word.

Outside the liturgy, the Word of God should dominate every moment of personal and community faith, the significant moments of our life, but especially our prayer, indeed, even more, Scripture itself is our prayer.

One is referring here to what the Church calls *lectio divina*, that is, that constant endeavour to listen methodically to the Word of God.

This closeness to Scripture leads us to contemplate in faith the realities that God himself has revealed: beyond the words, the signs or the narrated facts, we come to understand that the Kingdom of God is present among us, that God himself is both infinitely transcendent and extraordinarily close.

This contemplation is a gift to us from God; it is up to us to seek it, to want it, to be prepared to receive it. Let us not be afraid nor try to resist and the Holy Spirit who guides the plans of God will do the rest.

One of the moments of greater sensitivity in listening to the Word is *pra-*

yer. The official prayer of the Church is not exclusive to priests and religious, it is for all the people of God: it is encouraging that each day there exist in number and in depth more and more groups of lay people who gather together in their parishes to pray the *liturgy of the hours*, one of the best instruments we have for praying with Sacred Scripture.

We should see to it that all groups of community prayer, where music and song are great supports, may be inspired by the Gospel since "they should be drawn chiefly from the sacred scripture and from liturgical sources" (SC 121).

In a time in which our city has sunk in a sea of fleeting and empty images, in the midst of the deafening noise of modern civilisation, with thousands of proposals, but with a great absence of God, men and women are experiencing a dissatisfaction and loneliness which can easily lead them in different ways to those of the Church and to an authentic faith.

Therefore, the increase of the cult of the esoteric and new religious movements does not surprise us. The salutary remedy lies in recapturing the capacity for contemplation starting from the sacred Scriptures, a capacity that fills the heart and allows it to pass from the labyrinth of incredulity to the testimony of the risen one (cf John 20:25) and the hope of our fullness and salvation in Christ.

It is well to remember, at this stage, the exhortation of Saint Paul: "*Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully*" (2 Tim. 4:2-5).

## 5. Proclamation of the Gospel

The people of God, also frequently called the people of the Word, maintain their identity in so far as they announce the *kerygma*, proclaim the *preaching* or expound the *catechesis*.

Evangelization begins with the *kerygma*, which is the first explicit proclamation about Christ. "*To know Christ is everything; the rest is nothing; hence the importance of proclaiming this*" (ECUCIM 2904), is what the Synod tells us.

This pastoral imperative is especially important given the situation in our archdiocese, where ignorance and religious indifference is prevalent, so that pastoral agents should effect a clear, vigorous and testifying proclamation about Jesus Christ, overcoming fear and pretext.

The proclamation should be directed especially at those who are remote from ecclesial life, who are also the majority of the baptised.

There is no cause to doubt in proposing, from the beginning, a direct encounter with the Word through the written text (see Acts 8:4-5), since the Word of God is always alive and effective.

Therefore, all ecclesial groups and movements should place special insistence on this, so that whoever joins them encounters Sacred Scripture straight away.

One of the most important forms of evangelising is *preaching*. It is the fundamental task of priests and deacons, since, as Saint Paul says, faith comes through preaching (Rom. 10:17). It is the most effective means of cultivating the Christian life of the community.

All preaching should begin from Scripture and should become more profound through reflection. In this sense I exhort my brother priests and deacons to place greater emphasis on

constant and personal study, and by all possible means, to create in an atmosphere of fraternity and prayer with other priests, the preparation of the Sunday homily, which is a privileged moment for proclaiming the Word and nourishing the community with it.

We know that we can approach the Bible from different angles: literary, historical, scientific, sociological, but that the one important way is to discover in it the source of salvation for all: because "*all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

On the other hand, today, more than ever, *catechesis* is imperative in all its forms and stages: infant, pre-sacramental, juvenile, adult, family; it is sustained "*in the living fountain of the Word of God, transmitted through Tradition and Scripture ...*" so "*it will be all the more effective and rich the more the texts are read with the intelligence and heart of the Church, and in so far as it is inspired through the reflection of and in the life of the two thousand years of the Church*" (Cat Trad 27; cf SD 33).

Yes, *catechesis* is one of the permanent ministries of the Word. One would say that it sinks its roots more deeply in Scripture, since it is sustained in it in a firm and tangible way.

Therefore, it is very necessary, in the face of the attacks and disorientation that non catholic groups and falsely Christian sects launch, that our faithful discover that their spiritual growth depends on direct contact with the Bible in the heart of the Church (cf SD 294); in other words, that they see it, together with the Eucharist, devotion to Mary and communion with the bishop and the Pope, as a sign of their catholic identity (SD 143).

Scripture is born in the Church and is for the Church and the world. "*The Bible is ours*", said the Fathers of the



Church, in the face of sectarian attacks (cf Tert. De Praes 20-26). Let us not forget for one moment in our catechetical work that Scripture is a fundamental part of the great treasure of the faith which the Church has conserved with great fidelity (cf 1 Tim 6:20).

Within the plans of catechesis in all its levels, it should be strengthened by a true biblical education which leads us to reaffirm our faith, our love of Christ and the Church, and be the major reference point for all ecumenical endeavour and for all support in the face of sectarian disorientation.

We should begin with a better *biblical formation* for all agents of evangelization, so that supported by a solid and profound line of exegesis that is able to actualise the Word (cf DV 12) and take steps with regard to an authentic *inculturation of the Gospel* (Cat Trad 53; RM 52-53).

We should spare neither economic resources nor personal effort in seeing that the Word of God gets to all the faithful (ECUCIM 3090; 3871).

## 6. Witness to our Faith

The first means that the Synod proposed for the New Evangelization of our Archdiocese was *witness*.

Paul VI had already said that: "*Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.*" (EN 41); therefore, the Pope continues, "*for the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one's neighbour with limitless zeal ... It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus - the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in*

*short, the witness of sanctity.*" (EN 41).

The Word of God enlightens everything, judges everything and gives it sense, its true sense.

And so it is of pressing importance that all the activities of the Church rest upon it in order to put forward Gospel values: fraternal solidarity, human advancement, defence of human rights, defence of life in all its stages, specific actions towards the young, families, workers, education, social welfare, and many more things.

The attitudes we should adopt as pastors and as committed Christians, together with those which we should arouse through fidelity to the gospel and to our brethren, cannot be other than the humble and generous response which Jesus asks of his disciples: "*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven*" (Mt 5:16).

It is not difficult to describe the relation that exists between contemplation, proclamation and witness of the Word.

I would emphasise, dear brothers and sisters, that it is at this ultimate stage where the fruits of all the former ones are, in such wise that all the evangelizing action should come to conclusion in a social pastoral ministry, with specific action by pastors and lay people in favour of the family, of human welfare, of work, and with the dignifying of culture as a goal.

It is already part of the common language of biblical theology to speak of God's revelation through deeds and words, and so Vatican II tells us that "*the pattern of revelation unfolds through deeds and words which are intrinsically connected: the works performed by God in the history of salvation show forth and confirm the doctrine and realities signified by the words; the words, for their part, proclaim the works, and bring to light the mystery they contain*" (DV 2).

This word-event has its fullness in Christ: it brings about what is proclaimed in such way that He Himself is the word and its event.

The Church, for its part, should express in its action what its faith signifies so that concern for alleviating human suffering, its option for the poor, for education for life, for justice and truth, and its commitment to authentic peace, are nothing but signs of the correspondence between faith and life, between words and deeds.

It will serve for nothing for us to be doctors of the Word of God, like new scribes and Pharisees if we do not put it into practice. Passing time in groups and communities, studying the Bible, means nothing if we do not arrive at a concrete commitment: "*faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead*" (James 2:17). So says the apostle James.

## 7. Attitudes for Reading Sacred Scripture

In a cultural ambience where everything loses its value and significance, we should take care not to make any mistakes in our reflections on the sacred texts which demand concrete attitudes and profound veneration.

*A Spirit of Faith.* We should be fully convinced that we are in the presence of the Word of God, which speaks to us and questions us. It is not a question of any kind of further reading, but of the expression whereby God has wished to manifest Himself.

That is what the Church continually wants to indicate when it asks that at the end of the reading in a liturgical context the reader proclaim: "*This is the Word of the Lord*".

*An Attitude of Listening.* If Scripture is the Word of God and we are convinced of this we should place ourselves in a spirit of openness, with great sensibility, divesting ourselves of indifference and routine, so as to discover the will of God, as the young Samuel expres-



ses it: *"Speak Lord, for your servant is listening"* (1 Sam. 3:10). This implies having interior humility, because the Word of God does not enter where human pride wishes to set itself up as the supreme truth.

*An Attitude of Discernment.* When God reveals himself man should endeavour to understand what the Lord requires of him or her.

We should scrutinise the texts, seeking to understand them from a position of faith, since the Word of God does not always propose new things. The Grace of God is necessary *"and so that revelation may be more deeply understood, the same Holy Spirit constantly perfects faith by his gifts"* (DV 5).

*An Attitude of Surrender.* This is equivalent to promptness in accepting and fulfilling the word that has been listened to.

One who reads the Bible always has an attitude of surrender: one accepts the Father who speaks, Christ by whom he speaks and the Holy Spirit who enlightens us before whom he speaks and the Church where this Word resounds.

We encounter the best model of surrender and self-giving in Mary, Virgin and Mother: *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"* (Lk 1:38).

*An Attitude of Commitment.* This Word is God Himself who goes forth to encounter humankind and asks for a response. Our commitment is personal and communal, it is from each one and as the Church.

Would that all our activities, social, political and cultural, whether in the area of the family or the workplace, be enlightened by the Word of God and according to the directions of the Magisterium of the Church, so that we do not end up in mere philanthropy or sociological activity.

Finally, it is well to remember what we should adhere to for a profitable reading:

The reading of Scripture should be done from faith and in the context of Catholic Tradition, that is, under the guidance of the authentic Magisterium of the Church.

One must avoid reactionary or private readings, disembodied from historical reality, as if the Word of God were for other times and not our own and alien to the social dimension of the faith.

Also one must take care not to make ideological readings or re-readings, as if the Bible were merely the place where pre-established ideas, theories or hypotheses were confirmed.

Equally, one will have to avoid readings that are biased and out of step with the total biblical context as if the Bible merely speaks to us of isolated acts or only provides us with sociological, cultural, archaeological or folkloristic data.

Finally, it is very important not to fall into a fundamentalist reading, that is, to take the text materially and mechanically, without a healthy interpretation that produces meaning and application in a Catholic context.

## 8. Conclusion

Pope John Paul II has called upon the Church and all people of good will to celebrate the Great Jubilee of two thousand years of Christian life, and has set out for us a three-year preparation.

The first year, that is, 1997, is dedicated to deep reflection on Christ, and to *"recognise who Christ truly is. Christians, especially in the course of this year, should turn with renewed interest to the Bible, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose and other aids"* (TMA 40).

I make my own this wish of the holy Father and I invite all the faithful of the

archdiocesan community of Mexico to support this pontifical initiative, thus adding to the missionary impulse which the second Synod asked of us, and which cannot have any more valid sustenance than the same Sacred Scripture.

So then, I exhort all those responsible for pastoral ministry so that Sacred Scripture may be more dynamically integrated in all processes of evangelization so that it may be like its soul, sustained with vigour (Puebla 372; DV 21).

It is important for this to develop biblical pastoral ministry more, with a view to being able to offer a service to all agents of particular pastoral ministries, providing elements for study and prayer from the Word of God.

There will be no true evangelization if Christ is not proclaimed openly everywhere whether the time is favourable or unfavourable (2 Tim 4:2).

It is imperative that approach families, the poor, the marginalised and youth be approached so as to lead them happily and with decision to conversion and faith.

This was what Jesus did (MK 1:15) and it is his command that we continue to do it today (cf Mt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8).

May Our Lady of Guadeloupe, bearer of the Word made flesh (cf Jn 1:14), and to whose care the Father, in his infinite mercy, entrusted this Archdiocese of Mexico City, continue to inspire and encourage this responsibility which I share with you.

Your brother and servant blesses you.

+ Norberto Rivera C  
Archbishop Primate of Mexico

Mexico, D. F., 30 September 1996  
Memoria of St Jerome, Priest and Doctor of the Church. ◆

(Transl.: Robin Duckworth)



## For Reflection

### A New Evangelization in Peru: How?

*With a view of the Peruvian situation, this contribution takes up a subject that is of great relevance and urgency in many countries and regions: new evangelisation. After an analysis of the situation, there follow concrete proposals for enhancing the role of the Bible in the different areas of church life. The chief concern of the author is to give the Bible a central place in new evangelisation.*

#### Introduction

The question I asked myself, in the Peruvian context at the end of this century, is this: *What can the Peruvian Catholic Church do to facilitate access for the faithful to the riches of the Word of God?* I am referring here to three types of access:

a) material access to the Bible (obtaining bibles at lower prices is always a first step towards biblical pastoral ministry);

b) access to the sense of the text in its context (or it may be, a biblical pastoral ministry that allows one to learn to read the Bible in the Church);

c) access to the message of the text for and by Christian communities of today.

This conquest will open doors to the plenitude of the means of salvation that the Church possesses, and will permit the commitment of life of all the particular Christian communities.

This will give rise to all the celebrations and jubilees possible between earth

and heaven ... the rejoicing of the new evangelization.

I asked myself a further question: What are the initiatives that must be taken for the Bible to become really the foundation of the life of the Church, of each local church and of all the faithful?

When I think that in Brazil, where biblical pastoral ministry has been organized at national level for more than thirty years, I ask myself how we can put in place in Peru a pastoral plan at the end of a century in which there are hardly any explicit references to the Bible. This grieves me. Is it a case of lack of enthusiasm?

Does the Word of God have no appeal? Maybe putting *the Word of God* at the centre of the whole pastoral ministry seems to be very Protestant?

Or is it simply a question of theological formation? (Let us remember that before the Second Vatican Council, in Catholic seminaries in general, the Bible was not the prime material of courses, nor even much less than that ...).

Is it possible that still today we do not let ourselves be captivated, like Jeremiah, or Mary and all the other believers who appear in the Bible ... so as to become pregnant with the Word? Perhaps the new evangelization has no future?

The time of conversion has already arrived ... so that, in Peru, all agents of pastoral ministry might give more attention to and reliance on the Word of God in an active biblical pastoral ministry; it promises transformation and a new breeze for a people who are suffocating.

Peru, on its way to the year 2000, feels a great hunger for the Word of God which it is discovering as its own and without which it will never have a "new evangelization".

#### The Face of a Reality Analysed

At the beginning of 1995 there appeared a national Pastoral Plan 1995-2000 in which the Bishops of Peru manifested their will to promote a renewed new evangelization to celebrate 2000 years of Christianity. One speaks of a new evangelization because there was a first evangelization which had begun already, more than 500 years ago ...

It is noted that 85% of the population of Peru declares itself to be catholic (1993). But, says the document, there are fewer and fewer references to Christian values in the everyday life of these persons.

Many Catholics pose themselves few questions about God (there is an indifference on this point that is increasingly marked), and, in practice, he is often denied.

Frequently one discovers that the popular concept about the Church, the sacraments, prayer and, in general, Christianity, is found to be distorted, if not simply rejected. Often the Church is seen as a charity asso-

ciation or a non-governmental organization which looks after the needy ...

There certainly exists a separation between faith and life among many of the baptized who do not accept or pay little attention to the fundamental doctrines of the faith, and, above all, to catholic morality. One speaks now of "remote and estranged baptized". The mentality of "à la carte religion" is often the fashion. This tendency facilitates the numerical growth of sects of varying tendencies.

If it is true that too many Catholics ignore what is essentially the Church, it now remains excluded from many public places, according to the document already cited. The majority of people are catholic, but this is not taken into account at the level of governmental programmes, institutions and official legislation.

The actual tendency, in effect, is to consider the Church as a personal matter. And, as the two great idols at the end of this century, in Peru, are the State and the liberal economic system that, practically speaking, abandons around 12 million Peruvians (what revenge of the gods!), it is easy to understand that we find ourselves in a stricken, not a promised, land ... It is clear, too, that Christ and his Gospel find themselves badly treated, as well as the cultural identity of the people in general.

Living the community dimension of the faith, in the actual context, is not a common reality. But perhaps one might wish first of all, for more communion within the Church itself at all levels.

I think, above all, in certain apostolic and other movements, that sometimes they give the impression of being "catholic sects", if not simply demonstrating an elitism rather full of complexes. If, however, the Bishops see the growth of these movements as positive, they will, with reason hasten to demand a better spirit of communion within the whole Church.

What is there to say now about the lack of pastoral agents (ordained and non-ordained), the deficiencies in their preparation and their commitment? In an undeveloped country like Peru, it is often necessary to undertake activities or works that are proper to technicians, engineers and other professionals. In this way, they cannot work fully in the pastoral ministry properly so-called.

But not everything is negative. In effect, a good number of laypeople manifest the willingness to play an active role in the life and mission of the Church. The Episcopal document points out also, although timidly, that in Peru there is a growth with respect to a meditative reading of the Bible and biblical prayer, both personal and in groups. Hunger for God leads to a search for the means and occasions of prayer and contemplation.

Unfortunately, this *important statement does not refer to the context of the rest of the document*. It is as if there were no awareness of the need for a national and diocesan biblical pastoral ministry: something articulated and vigorous, and which might be supported by all means possible ...

When it deals with consecrated life, the Pastoral Plan 1995-2000 mentions that religious are still suffering from the impact of a profound crisis which affected many communities in Peru. The Prelates can thank them for their contribution to the life and mission of the Church in Peru. They recognise the great effort made in the promotion of vocations, in the question of discernment, formation and accompaniment.

However, there exists a great problem that the text does not indicate, that of the model of "religious life" towards which the young postulants of religious communities are directed.

What is it that attracts attention? What goal is being sought? Is it a question of a specific vocation or of "religious life" in general? In Peru, is it not true

that many young people enter religious life after having adopted, without taking much account of it, a certain bourgeoisie? How, then, does one prepare to respond to God and serve a greatly impoverished people?

The mass of Peruvian people does not expect religious to produce documents, which, in any case, they could neither read nor understand; rather, do they wish, without expressing it, that religious, in their way of life, might be signs of an other society, whose life might be a call and an announcement of a new world, more just and mutually binding ...

What is expected of religious in Peru, is not that they are symbolic gestures but, rather, a new life, a different way of living. Are young religious prepared for this challenge? Religious should be credible witnesses of God who is Love, of God who accompanies in silence the long-suffering journey of the people. He wishes to be close to the simple, the poor, companions on the way. What else is there at the heart of the concerns of Jesus?

As was said above, Peru is passing through a great crisis: economic and political, but, above all, ethical. The clearest indication at present (1996) is that of judicial power at the national level.

In fact, the whole of Latin America is experiencing this ... What counts now is to possess things, "to have" at whatever cost, to climb socially.

If in the last Peruvian elections, there were more than two dozen candidates vying for the presidency of the country, it is because many people in Peru felt attracted by power. Once elected they could "enjoy" this level of success.

This national ambience aggravates the delicate situation of misery and marginalisation already noted ... Too many people are losing work and/or are finding themselves without it; there is much underemployment, and no speaking about the deterioration of





working conditions. Misinformation is the order of the day ...

With regard to the social means of communication in relation to the life of Peruvian families, its impact is worrying, especially for young people. On this point, the Episcopal document is far-sighted.

Often violence and licentiousness are presented as something normal, and then imitable. On the other hand, information is frequently manipulated with lamentable results ... On the cultural level, Peru sees itself as obliged to fight for its very identity, which is by no means easy in a world where crushing globalisation imposes itself.

The bishops sum up their thinking by affirming that up to now, Peru still has not arrived at constructing a social order that allows everybody a proper life nor has it managed to build a democracy which really guarantees fundamental rights to every person. They consider it important that the state of constitutional right and democratic life be strengthened.

### **There will be no Evangelization without Biblical Pastoral Ministry**

In the face of so many challenges, the Peruvian Church has set itself a general objective which it sets out in the following manner (Pastoral Plan 1995-2000): to promote a new evangelization in the Peruvian Church, starting from a lively community of faith; to evangelize and be constantly evangelized itself; to be a sign of reconciliation between human beings; to seek for the integral development of the human being and to build a culture according to the Gospel.

The text of the Episcopal Conference indicates the conditions pervious to the new evangelization in Peru, but curiously, it makes no mention of the Word of God, as a basis for all its activity. Will it be implicit in the text referred to? It mentions various ele-

ments, such as: a serious effort at conversion, sanctification, theological reflection and discernment ...; it seeks better communication and co-ordination between all pastoral agents and the people of God so as to obtain a greater communion among all ... But still, it seems to me, that what is essential has not been stated. (What a difference from the Document of the Peruvian Bishops on Evangelization in 1973!)

The Peruvian Church has the will to do something new in the field of evangelization; it desires that Jesus Christ be better proclaimed in every human culture and to the roots of each one of these; it desires that nothing of the Gospel is unknown on the part of these persons, taking into account their own ways of thinking and feeling.

Like nothing else, the Church desires peace, reconciliation, solidarity, justice, right up to ... the universal jubilee! ... This is great. But, what means, what instrument will it provide to achieve all this?

What a disappointment! It is only in no. 77 of the Pastoral Plan (the booklet contains 93 numbered paragraphs in total) that we can read the short following phrase: "elaboration of the plans of formation, specially biblical and catechetical, taking into account the New Catechism of the Church ..."

The Catechism merits an explicit mention; the Word of God is merely suggested ... a diluted indication and somewhat lost in the joint reflection ... too modest to be significant and so short that no one can remember it.

I do not feel happy, as a Christian, to read this text anew, because the theologians and other specialists who elaborated it in the name of the Peruvian Bishops, have not helped them in the end on the essential matter.

The strength of the text lies in the description of the actual reality of the country and the challenges that this situation poses for the church. But on

the essential, the present document is in line with its predecessor (Pastoral Plan 1990-1995) which left no trace, and which few read ... In actual fact it will suffer the same fate. In effect, any reader will lose himself or herself in the repetition of expressions such as: inculturation of the Gospel and evangelization of culture, but it will not say anything about *how this will be done and upon what basis it should be done*.

When one speaks of *New Evangelization* in Peru, it is important to remember how the first evangelization was carried out, 500 years ago. Peruvian Christianity, strongly underlined, was born on the basis of a small catechism, and not from the starting point of Sacred Scripture.

Here, the Church was not constructed upon the unconditional listening to the Word but rather upon the basis of doctrinal formulas of faith. Certainly this is no bad thing, since that small catechism had the Bible and the living Tradition of the Church as a background.

But, at any rate, the result is not the same. A little catechism has nothing of the *Pedagogy* of God the Father who reveals his love for men and women in this world. The first book published in Latin America, in Lima, was a trilingual catechism (Quechua, Aymará and Spanish), in the time of the holy bishop Toribio de Mogrovejo, towards the end of the 16th century.

It deals with doctrine, the explanation of the Creed in theological formulas that are present as simply as possible. That is to say: 20 years after the close of the Council of Trent, and in the spirit of the Counter-Reformation, the new Christians of Peru could have access to the official Catholic faith ...

In the Catholic Church, it was only the Second Vatican Council to postulate an "easy access" to the Word of God (the Bible) for the Catholics of the whole (DV 26). Thanks to the Document on Divine Revelation (Dei Ver-

bum), Catholics can, once again, have in their hands the sacred text. In effect, if the first testament arose from the believing Hebrew people, so too, the books of the New Testament, in some way, were due to the communities of the primitive Christian Church ...

*What Peru needs today* is the proclamation of the *Word of God* as the source of life.

*What Peru needs today* is a reading of the Bible, as the written Word of God, that helps to unite faith with life, since the divorce of both is the great drama of our time.

*What Peru needs today* is a religious life that is nourished on the prayerful reading of the Bible, in community and with the people, so as to animate the faith and hope of the people and its own, and to lead to the transformation of this society which, in its present shape, does not correspond to God's will ...

*What Peru needs today* is a new evangelization which must be new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression, *so it needs the Word of God*.

All this is impossible without a biblical pastoral ministry that is well articulated and structured, a biblical pastoral ministry appropriate as a basis for all and every kind of pastoral ministry.

The Catechism will come afterwards. Let us not squander the stages. First of all, the gospels ... the Kerygma ... the Catechism is important in its due time ... since it is the baggage of the faith of 2000 years of Christian life reflected precisely in the listening to and discovering of the Word which desires to be dialogue and life for every believer, and which allows the goodness of God revealed to be savoured in its turn.

However, the sacred book will always be the first book of the Christian and of the whole Church.

In Latin America, the people are hungry for the Bible (the written Word of God). In Brazil and other countries, the Bible is the soul of so many small (lay) ecclesial communities ... In Peru the people already know that the Bible is important, because it is the Word of God. Various parishes, especially those on the periphery of our great cities, live this situation in a substantial way.

Bible circles are becoming ever more popular. Well prepared Bible Days and Bible Weeks occur in various places in the country even in rural vicariates and the prelatures of the Andes. Biblical courses are becoming ever more popular. Christians encounter in the sacred book a nourishment that helps them to progress, to act and to find meaning in their life.

Many persons discover themselves and discover their own history in those ancient texts which are full of life and wisdom, where God continues to speak, "deeply involved as God is in all the spices of our lives" (definition given by a peasant, who is a catechetical animator).

### **The Role of Biblical Pastoral Ministry in Pastoral Ministry as a Whole**

Biblical Pastoral Ministry is simply *the biblical animation* (that is, it begins from the Bible) of all Pastoral Ministry. Biblical pastoral ministry animates, inspires, illuminates, sustains and strengthens the rest of pastoral ministry, since the Word of God is the basis of all the activity of the Church. This should be said clearly in whatever pastoral plan, be it general or particular.

In effect, biblical pastoral ministry simply fulfils the affirmation of the Second Vatican Council: "All the preaching of the Church, as indeed the entire Christian religion, should be nourished and ruled by sacred scripture" (DV 21). Well now, if the

Bible should nourish and guide all the preaching and life of the Church, it is evident then that biblical pastoral ministry can no longer be optional: it must be present in all forms of pastoral ministry.

Biblical pastoral ministry should help men and women of today to discover God's way of acting, his divine pedagogy (cf DV 16), his message, his Covenant in Jesus, so much so that they can understand the actions of God and so become capable of reading their own lives and human history starting from the history of salvation.

That is why an adequate biblical pastoral ministry should take into account life lived today, especially when it discovers and interprets the signs of the times according to the same divine pedagogy.

Since Sacred Scripture contains the personal revelation of God in history which culminates in the person of Jesus, the Christ, Word of God Incarnate, biblical pastoral ministry should make a disciple of the believer, and the disciple a witness to Jesus in the world.

And so, it is supremely important, thanks to biblical pastoral ministry, that all pastoral agents (bishops, priests, deacons, religious and lay-people) acquire, with the help of Sacred Scripture read and prayed, the capacity of judging charisms, illuminating the multiple pastoral challenges that present themselves and bring into unity the variety of situations which are those of Christians and their communities.

In effect, the specific areas of biblical animation are manifold. here are some of them:

#### **1) The Bible and Catechesis**

a) A major challenge for the Peruvian Church is the biblical formation of catechists. Despite the efforts carried out, there has still not been achieved



a trainee period of reading the Bible as the Word of God for those of today.

**b)** It is equally important to present in catechesis a global vision of the history of salvation, in order to be able to discover that our own history is part of this salvation process.

**c)** Another evident challenge is the promotion of catechesis for adults. Access to the Bible that catechesis should offer is much more beneficial at an adult age, because adults already possess a great fundamental experience of life and so can judge the contrasts and similarities of their own experience of God with the people of the Bible.

## 2) The Bible and Liturgy

The Bible has always been present in the liturgy of the Church. In Latin America, the great dream is to improve liturgical celebrations. One will have to begin with the formation of readers; later, the homily (often so badly produced), which should be a good biblical catechesis. How to bring together the profound liturgical sense of the people of the Bible with the religious temperament of our people and their joy to celebrate?

## 3) The Bible and the Sacraments

In the pastoral ministry of the sacraments in general the Word does not always have the full position which corresponds to it. This situation impoverishes the sacrament itself, since it thus loses its essential characteristics and runs the risk of being reduced to a practice of almost magical gestures. Is this not common in Peru?

And so, we find ourselves in the following situation: the Word is situated only as a preparation for the sacraments ... However, on the contrary, Word and Sacrament have to be put on the same level, on the same basis, as two necessary and complimentary aspects of the "means of grace", that is, as two manifestations of the grace of God. The Word is efficacious, itself,

especially when it is a question of the Word making the sacrament. There is no sacrament without the Word of God and the Word of God believed, or, in other words, the faith.

## 4) The Bible and Sacerdotal Formation

**a)** The formation of theologians and future priests, in my opinion, needs much more biblical orientation, in the pastoral sense of the word. Without doubt, the exegetical dimension is still exaggerated (what does the text say in itself?), leaving little room for hermeneutics (what does the Word say today?). Both are essential. How happy we are by the decision of the Episcopal Conference of Peru to organize in the last two years (and it will continue) courses of sacerdotal formation of a month's duration on the gospel of the year.

The Document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, "*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*", was published in 1993, and its assessment was, in general, positive. If only it may allow for an opening up (that is to say, a great awakening in the seminaries, and at other levels) of the immense panorama of methods and approaches to the Word officially recognised by the Church!

**b)** Numerous reviews edited by biblical associations or groups offer an effective help for biblical pastoral work. Unfortunately, they are little known. And, certainly, Latin America is a great champion in this field.

## 5) The Bible and Sects

Certain sects make abuse of the Bible by an exclusively literal, fundamentalist interpretation. They pretend that beyond this kind of interpretation there is no other valid way of reading the Bible. Therefore it is of vital importance that people maintain a sound and objective contact to the book of books, participating in the latest results of biblical science and striving for a global view and ecumenical openness.

If the Christian denominations in the past were divided by the Bible (or rather by our dealing with the Bible), today it should be the Bible to reunite the Christians. Let us not forget, though, that the Word of God is greater than the Bible; God cannot restrict himself to one book, even if it is Sacred Scripture. Catholic faith teaches that the Holy Spirit is present and expresses itself in the entire tradition of the Church. Living Tradition and Sacred Scripture are the source from which the Christian community is nourished.

## 6) The Bible and Society

The great challenges today in all areas of human life should not distance us from this incomparable source which is the Bible. On the contrary, the God of the Word is a God of life, who is interested by everything that is alive and gives it a true and precise sense in Jesus.

The light that comes from the sacred text read in the church and with necessary regard to the divine pedagogy so rich in humanity, helps human beings encounter stability in their life's journey and allows them to discern the idolatries of the systems of domination in every class. "By virtue of actualization (the application of the biblical message to today's reality), the Bible can shed light upon many current issues ... Actualisation can also attend to values of which the modern world is more and more conscious, such as the rights of the human person, the protection of human life, the preservation of nature, the longing for world peace" (Interpretation. of the Bible in the Church, IV, A.2).

On the other hand, the Bible cannot be reserved solely for certain social classes; it should be more accessible to all, in all areas of action (cf DV.6), above all to those who live forgotten. In effect, so says the same document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, "the entire biblical tradition and, in a particular way, the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels indicates as privileged



hearers of the Word of God those whom the world considers people of lowly status ...”(III, B.3).

## 7) The Bible and Human Liberty

In the entire world, normally more and more generalised, day by day, decisions are taken without reference to God. Now, as before, there exists the danger that humanity will be changed into a creature of systems which will lead to servitude. The Gospel, the Word of God is the only way to liberty, to a future in which human liberty will not be threatened.

## 8) The Bible and the Mass Media

Great means for little effect ... The influence of biblical representations by means of films or TV, is very great among the people, since it is a primary source of biblical recollection for all. Given the vast weary public, a specific preparation, is necessary, both biblical-pastoral and technical, for the utilization of the mass media, that allows for the avoidance of painful improvisations, like the spectacular efforts in bad taste after the style of the tele-evangelism of the United States.

## 9) The Bible and Individual Reading

Although aware that the community dimension is very important for the access to Sacred Scripture for believers, the Church does not fail to recognise the careful reading of the Word of God for all the faithful (DV 25). This individual reading produces much fruit not only in those who practise it, but also in the community to which such persons belong. In order that this individual reading be beneficial, it should be preceded by a basic biblical formation, which should be done in the process of Christian initiation, or even, subsequently, through groups of initiation into reading the Bible.

Likewise it is important that the faithful have available good instruments for guiding this reading, thus avoiding too subjective reading. Finally, it is

suitable to offer a programme of faith-based reading (interpretation) which facilitates dialogue between the experience of the faith reflected in the text and that of the reader, in a way that the reading opens up to the faithful the actuality (the message for today) of the Word of God for each person in different times.

## 10) The Bible and “Lectio Divina”

Often human beings live overwhelmed by the difficulties of life. They spend much energy in every sort of activity. How does one find interior personal unity? How does one discover the profound conviction that one is not alone in the long journey through life? Is it possible to arrive at a certain harmony between faith and life? Regular and continuous reading of the Bible that gathers together in a prayerful attitude one’s own personal existence and the world in which one lives, seems to be the shortest and most appropriate way.

“Lectio Divina” (a prayed reading of the Bible) is defined as an individual or community exercise; it concerns listening to the Word through the

following sequences: reading, meditation, and contemplation. Evidently there are different sorts of “lectio divina” and different ways of practising it. This is something wholesome. What remains clear is that it concerns a contact with the biblical text in an attitude of faith without ever forgetting the reality in which one lives (one never approaches the Bible alone) ...

These are some of the specific areas of life which the Bible, as the Word of God, should *enliven profoundly*. The Word of God is alive and active, sharper than any two-edged sword ... everything remains clear before it ... it divides soul from spirit ... before him no creature is hidden ... (cf Heb. 4:12ff). “For as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth, it shall not return to me empty but shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Is. 55:10-11). ♦

(Transl.: Robin Duckworth)

# Life of the Federation

## Promulgation of the Constitution of the Catholic Biblical Federation

On May 21, 1997, through a letter from the *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*, Prot. N. 2222/97/a, the Holy See approved the amended Constitution of the Catholic Biblical Federation.

As provided for in Art. XII, 3 of the Constitution of the Catholic Biblical Federation, I herewith promulgate the Constitution of the Catholic Biblical Federation as approved by the Holy See.

This approval is not only required, it is also important for the CBF, inasmuch as it is an expression of confidence in the work accomplished by the Federation and in its pastoral potential.

The approval, at the same time, invites the CBF to continue its task of promoting the biblical apostolate in fidelity to the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* of the Second Vatican Council and in the context of the Pontifical Biblical Commis-



sion's *Document on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.

## The Exchange of Experiences and the Challenges of Regionalization

The CBF offers us the possibility to learn from each other. Each one of us, conditioned by our own culture, succeeds in understanding a text, but there are also limits to understanding that are imposed by our respective cultures (or at least by certain "dominant cultures").

In this regard the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission underlines the value of the various methods and approaches of reading Scripture, but notes their limitations as well.

The regionalization of the CBF expresses the will to take into account the differences of reading and permits a greater contextualization, that is, a greater attention to the problems of the different regions, to the contributions of the various ways of reading.

In this sharing of reading we can arrive at benefiting ever more from the richness of the meaning of the Word of God.

The dialogue within the Federation which I would like to call "intercontinental," allows us to treasure this richness of the understanding of the text and helps us to overcome its limitations and the risks of one-sidedness.

The usefulness of the Catholic Biblical Federation lies precisely in the fact that through the sharing of experiences and information, and through collaboration, we arrive at a deeper insight into the Scriptures.

## The Church United around the Word for a Better Understanding of the Word

Regionalization makes it more urgent to underline the basic unity of the CBF in order to make an exchange of the experiences of reading the Scrip-

tures possible and in order to encourage an exchange of the experiences of reading the Scriptures.

In this way we will come closer to the meaning of the text and to a shared hermeneutics of faith. Through our efforts the various types of reading will not remain isolated.

On the contrary, links will be created between the various experiences of reading the Bible and of the biblical apostolate. The common efforts of interpretation contribute towards practicing a Catholic reading of the Bible.

If we pay attention to the manifold ways of reading the Bible, we will deepen our understanding of the Word of God and at the same time promote the participation of all in the understanding of the Word.

This will happen with the help of the various ministers of the Word, starting with lectors and catechists, up to the ordained ministers and the episcopate. A great school for deepening an understanding of the Word of God is the liturgy.

Reflecting on the Word of God today, many voices are to be heard.

The Church, in the course of history, has accumulated an immense treasury of experiences of reading the Bible: in the commentaries of the Fathers of the Church; in the explanations of the biblical texts according to the four senses of Scripture (literal, allegorical-typological, moral, anagogical); in the commentaries lived by the Saints; and in the painful testimony of the martyrs.

We have to listen also to the crying voices of mankind and we have to understand the signs of the times.

According to *Dei Verbum* n. 12, this is the way we should read the Bible: "Since holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the same spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole Scripture if the

meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists among the elements of faith."

## Itineraries of Work

As CBF we are invited to address through seminars and workshops some basic challenges that exist in all the regions.

For example, we can stress the importance of the historical-critical method and its relationship to a spiritual reading of the Bible (cf. DV 12).

We can also address the criteria for judging the usefulness and effectiveness of the various methods of the biblical apostolate, keeping in mind, especially in the field of practical methods, the reflections of the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

We can also contribute to a better acquaintance with the method of the four senses of Scripture, as a great experience of reading within the Church, a method that is proposed anew in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n. 115ff).

Then, too, we can contribute to the ecumenical and interconfessional dialogue, both at the level of collaboration and at the level of reflection on the specific ways the Churches are involved in the biblical apostolate.

These are all ways in which the Spirit of truth guides us to the full truth (cf. John 16,13) and makes the Church an ever more attentive reader of the Word of God, capable of bearing witness to it in the world.

+ Wilhelm Egger  
Bishop of Bozen-Brixen/Bolzano-Bressanone

Bozen/Bolzano, Feast of the Sacred Heart, June 06, 1997

## Evaluation of the Plenary Assembly in Hong Kong

The author is the head of the Biblical Pastoral Office of the Swiss Catholic Biblical Association in Zurich and, since the fifth plenary assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation in Hongkong, moderator of the executive committee.

The Executive Committee (EC) during its first meeting in June 1997 dealt at length with the Plenary Assembly of July 1996 in Hong Kong and its results. It is in keeping with the purpose of the EC to direct the Federation between the Plenary Assemblies.

However, it was also a first step in implementing the official resolution of the Plenary Assembly which indicates that *"the Plenary Assembly commissions the Executive Committee to facilitate a process of study of the purpose and working of the Plenary Assembly itself."*

The basis for this assessment of the Hong Kong meeting was the evaluation of the detailed questionnaires which the participants completed, the numerous reports and feedback - for example of the delegate of the funding agencies, of the subregion of Latin Europe, the President and the EC Moderator - and obviously also the personal impressions of the EC members.

On the whole it is clear that praise of and agreement with the method of working and its results were predominant. The excellent organization and dedication of the local team is very much emphasized.

The co-workers of the General Secretariat and the many lay helpers have

done an excellent job - especially, considering the vast and unfamiliar environment of the university campus.

It was felt as very enriching that the Plenary Assembly offered a chance to meet people from beyond many boundaries and frontiers.

Moreover, looking back it became evident how strongly the Asian context marked the meeting and imprinted its spirit on the Final Statement, just as the Latin American context did in Bogotá.

Considering the character and scope of such a meeting some criticism is almost unavoidable: the program was too crammed; many points came under discussion but were not pursued sufficiently; and due to the tight schedule there was not always enough time for extensive participation.

Other objections show that it is always possible to handle matters in more than one way and that sometimes things are interpreted differently. A report, for one participant, was not systematic enough, while for another it was well structured.

Such an Assembly is at the same time an opportunity, but also a difficult challenge if one considers the widely differing expectations aroused in so many different people with the most diverse backgrounds and interests.

Still, the Assembly should give many a new impetus for the work of the Federation, as regards both administration and organization as well as spirituality and subject matter.

The Assembly is an opportunity because *"unity in diversity"* and the combination of *"prayer and work"* and *"form and content"* belong to the Federation.

On the other hand, various expectations can create a problem when they lead to different reactions.

For some, too much time was given to *"business,"* for others not enough. Some questioned the amount of time given to prayer, Bible sharing and liturgy; others found that this aspect was especially enriching.

These observations, however, are not intended to sidestep critical observations. Their main purpose, after all, is to broaden the point of view.

In this sense, I would like to emphasize the following facts of the evaluation in view of the next Plenary Assembly:

1. Already during the preparation of a Plenary Assembly - and planning for the next one is already underway - it is of great importance to draw attention clearly and openly to its nature, its task, as well as its prospective theme and contents.

1.1 In planning, it is of importance, on the one hand, to heed the prescriptions of the Constitution of the CBF and, on the other, to listen to the opinions of the members.

1.2 In announcing the Plenary Assembly, it is important to get its profile across as soon and as clearly as possible.

This permits the members to send the most suitable delegates to the Plenary Assembly.

At the same time the delegates can then prepare themselves better for what is expected of them.





**2.** Certain suggestions for change concern the composition and the task of the meeting.

For example, separating the Assembly into a “*business meeting*” and a “*biblical-pastoral congress*.”

By doing so, the participants could then be distinct as well. One suggestion was that perhaps only full member delegates discuss business matters.

**2.1** These suggestions, however, affect the Constitution and the structure of the Federation. To implement them would require changes to the Constitution which only a Plenary Assembly can decide.

**2.2** The EC will examine these proposals more closely and will, in any event, submit proposed motions to the next Plenary Assembly.

It should be noted that if the Constitution is altered at a PA, changes would take effect only at the next PA.

**2.3** Members or other bodies of the Federation who desire such changes in the Constitution and structure of the Plenary Assembly are invited to submit concrete proposals for change to the EC.

**2.4** The distinction between “*full members*” and “*associate members*” is primarily a formal one and implies no distinction in commitment to the biblical-pastoral ministry and to the Federation.

On the contrary, associate members are in reality often more important and active than full members. A reduction in participation or voice of the associate members would, in fact, mean a diminution of the decision-making body and, at the same time, would result in a lowering of quality.

**3.** Many points of criticism refer to technical, practical, organizational, or procedural questions relating to the Assembly.

**3.1** The elaboration of the Final Statement during the Assembly leads to time problems.

If the final draft is discussed only on the last working day and if changes can be introduced up to the last minute, this could easily lead to decisions being made on the spur of the moment without sufficient time for reflection and discussion.

**3.2** In order to avoid either changing the procedure entirely or bringing to the Assembly a final draft already formulated in advance, the EC could invite members to submit important topics and concerns they would like included in a final document before the Assembly begins. In addition, the preparation of the document should be started earlier during the Assembly and given more time.

**3.3** Knowledge of the languages being used, the quality of translations, and submission in advance of important texts in the official languages of the Assembly are all crucial for participation.

Since a professional solution to these concerns is not possible for financial and other reasons, other ways to seek improvements in this area should be sought.

**3.4** Because of the Federation's regionalization as well as its growing experience, technical advances in communication media and data exchange, must be used for the preparation and implementation of the Plenary Assembly.

The rapid and inexpensive advance exchange of documents and ideas should help to a large extent conserve the limited time of the Assembly. The better the preparation and advance information, the more time will be left for what can be done only in the actual meeting of the world's delegates.

**4.** Based on the experience of Hong Kong and in line with the Administrative Board, we would like to state the

following concerning the financing of the Plenary Assembly:

**4.1** Thanks to the unexpected generosity of our host, to donations, and to the thrifty use of resources by the General Secretariat, the expenses were lower than anticipated.

We are very grateful and very pleased that a small amount could already be laid aside for the next Plenary Assembly.

**4.2** According to the principle of subsidiarity the members should, whenever possible, pay their own expenses (travel, board and lodging, etc.) for the next meeting.

Therefore, it is necessary to begin raising funds early and setting them aside. If the members begin now to set aside in their annual budget an amount for participation at the next Plenary Assembly, then financing will be easier than if they were to become concerned about costs only just prior to the event.

**4.3** The fact, however, that a member is materially poor should by no means be a reason for not sending a delegate to the Plenary Assembly.

In order to prevent such a situation which is contrary to the spirit of the Federation (and the Gospel), the Federation must find new methods of funding.

Appeals to funding agencies must be supplemented by building up reserves in the various regions and possibly via a solidarity fund.

**5.** Already during its first meeting, the EC decided to take meaningful steps to implement the practical resolutions of the Hong Kong Final Statement (paragraph 8).

The EC limited itself to paragraphs concerning the Federation as a whole.

**5.1** Encouragement is given to networking and regionalization through

stronger contacts between the General Secretariat and the Coordinators as well as between the *EC* Members and the Coordinators.

**5.2** Concerning the suggestion of a Synod of Bishops, it is planned that at the next Synod on the office of the bishop, his responsibility for the Word of God and its proclamation should hold center stage.

Consequently, his role in the biblical-pastoral ministry should have equal importance.

**5.3** Concerning the questions of methods and criteria for Scripture reading in the Church as well as of further developing the respective chapter of the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, seminars are suggested.

The President of the Federation will occupy himself in particular with arranging and bringing about such seminars.

In accord with the Hong Kong Meeting, the work of the *EC* for the next

Plenary Assembly in the year 2002 has just begun.

A down-to-earth and carefully thought out plan for the Plenary Assembly and its accomplishments at the grass-root level of each member's range of action is just as important as dealing with its critical evaluation.

The *EC* notes with pleasure that the Final Statement of Hong Kong is already available in many languages and how inspiring many a contribution turns out to be.

As moderator of the *EC* I hope that we have accepted and rightly understood both the positive feedback as well as the critical observations, and that the creative impetus from the Plenary Assembly continues.

Both will be of great importance for the preparation and the success of the next Plenary Assembly.

Daniel Kosch, Zurich

(Transl.: Bernard Eckhardt) ◆

we also verify that simple folk have a thirst for God.

At the end of the week, 1-2 March, we had an assembly of the province. The objectives were very modest: making ourselves sensitive to sharing the Word of God in our communities and helping one another in formation for biblical pastoral ministry.

We began the meeting with an exposition on *Lectio Divina*.

Throughout the day we proposed techniques for biblical activities with young people; we analysed different bibles and biblical materials; we shared experiences in this field in groups and we set aside time for bringing about a dynamic which we call "biblical sighs": fears, plans, discoveries, difficulties, desires, appraisals ...

It was a first meeting that we wanted to continue ... at any rate we arrived at some commitments:

to introduce more of the Bible in our community meetings (*Lectio Divina*);

to modify our pastoral materials to give more space to activities around the Word of God;

to undertake a Bible Week in our parishes so as to bring together groups that would gather to reflect on and share the Scriptures;

to have biblical formation days for young people with whom we work;

to propose to the Provincial administration that they set up an assembly around the Word of God in which all the sisters of the province could participate;

We feel happy at having touched something of the word of life which moves us on and fills us with hope, which is why we are passing this on to anyone who may be interested.

Irene Vega  
España ◆

(Transl.: Robin Duckworth)

## Experiences

### A Group of Dominican Religious Sisters unite around the Bible

**F**or some years many sisters from the Province have wanted to have a pastoral ministry more centred on the Bible.

The sisters in Chile and Brazil have passed on to us their enthusiasm: reading the Word of God in groups is a great force for conversion in these contexts.

In several of our communities we began by reading the Gospel among ourselves: the material we chose was

the itinerary for sharing the Gospel of Mark which the Casa de la Biblia proposed to us.

Some communities share this *Lectio Divina* with people from the district who want to join with them; others, for the catechising of young people, have exchanged catechetical material for the reading of the Bible.

In all cases the experience is precious, and we feel that the Word of God is beginning to return to the people, and