



Catholic Biblical Federation

“He explained the Scripture to us” (Luke 24,32)

A plea for the ministry of the open Bible

Life of the Federation

Books and Materials



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Dear Readers,

You have all been there. The Liturgy of the Word is in progress. The lector is proclaiming a passage from the Old or New Testament that gives divine sanction to human slaughter, that justifies an act of national revenge, or that graphically depicts an apocalyptic catastrophe. And then comes the concluding formula: The Word of God - Thanks be to God. We have our explanations: the text reflects a stage along the way of the people of Israel, journeying toward its God; these passages must be understood in the overall context of the Old and New Testaments, in the sense of a "revelatio continua"; read in the light of Christian faith-experience, according to an allegorical-christological interpretation, even "un-christian" passages have their place in the canon of Holy Scripture. But an uneasy feeling remains, as does the fundamental question of how an entrance can be made into the heart of Sacred Scripture, in spite of its many difficult, inaccessible texts.

In his address to the 43rd plenary assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference entitled "He opened to us the meaning of the scriptures", Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini pursues this question of how the meaning of Sacred Scripture is unlocked in a personal way, of how an inner access to the Bible might be possible. He does this by way of fundamental reflections of a highly personal character, and he draws conclusions for the various realms of Bible ministry. At the center of his reflections stands that personal familiarity, or contact with the text, which "confronts the meaning of the biblical text with one's own horizons of meaning".

Like Martini, Rainer Dillmann also emphasizes the importance of a personal, existential approach to the Bible, in his article "Plea for a Ministry of the Open Bible". The Bible does not reveal itself to a superficial reading; the Bible is open only to people who are willing to acquire some depth, to expose themselves to the Word of God and to bring this Word to bear on the reality that surrounds them. A *lectio divina* of this kind, notes Dillmann, implies an "integration of prayer and life". Herein lies a great challenge to those involved in Bible ministry, to those engaged in spiritual direction, and indeed to all Christians. An individual's own personal approach to the Bible can open the Holy Scriptures for others as well. In their own lives, Christians can make the power of God's Word shine for others as well.

The second part of this Bulletin is devoted this time entirely to news from the Federation. In addition to giving information on the activities of all the regional members, we will introduce new publications and materials for the biblical ministry. For future issues of the Bulletin Dei Verbum we plan a section entitled "members introduced". Members of the CBF can take advantage of this section to share insights into their work, thereby contributing to greater mutuality and cohesion within the Federation. I cordially invite all to send any article they would like to see published to the General Secretariat.

May God's Word become reality for all of us, may our lives be transformed into prayer.

Alexander M. Schweitzer

Feature Articles

"HE EXPLAINED THE SCRIPTURE TO US" (Luke 24.32)

Address by Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini
at the 43rd General Assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference 1997

In his address to the 43rd plenary assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference in May 1997 Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini raises the question of how the reader can access the Holy Scriptures in a personal way. He does not ignore the difficulties of a close contact with the Bible in its entirety and he even speaks of the latter's "ugly" features. For pastoral praxis this means that one should apply one's efforts, with some discrimination, to those texts of the Bible that are best suited to transmit God's word in its "clarity". The text first appeared in Parola di Vita, Anno XLII, 4/1997, pp. 53-62.

Preface

As the starting point of my reflections I should like to take an image: Jesus explaining the Scripture to the disciples on the Road to Emmaus. I should like to interpret the passage from the viewpoint of the listeners, 'sad...as if blind, so that they did not recognise him'. It is the position of someone who hears the exegesis of Scripture with a burning heart (though without immediately realising it) but nevertheless finds it hard to believe. It cannot have been easy for Jesus to convince his two companions, if the whole long journey, the shared evening meal and the breaking of bread were needed before their eyes were opened. The unfolding of the meaning of Scripture requires a slow, continuous process which lasts as long as a walk from afternoon to evening, an image of our pilgrimage through life. It is a long road which we all follow, until the moment when our eyes are opened to the vision of the Lamb who breaks the bread at the table of the Kingdom.

I. PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

The Bible, ever more beautiful, ever more difficult

The more I get to know the Bible, the more beautiful it seems, but also the uglier. I apologise for using the word 'ugly' of something where I have the role of a loving son. But even a mother can, over the years, acquire features which are less attractive, though she still earns our love. The more I perceive over the years those aspects of the Bible which bring the light of Jesus to shine in our midst, the more I am pained by the difficulty of Scripture, pages which one does not read or accept readily, and which fit badly into the image of a humble and merciful Christ. What do I actually mean by this? There are many passages in the Bible (and I penetrate deeper into them each day) which radiate great riches, where Jesus' voice can be heard leading us to him. These are especially the Gospels, and particularly the Beatitudes, the whole Sermon on the Mount, the Parables, mainly those

passages in which charity is central, the signs of love and forgiveness, the majestic, more than human greatness which speaks from the Passion Narrative. Moreover I remember many Pauline passages where Paul emphasises the primacy of the Gospel over the Law, a primacy of grace over sin. There are also many passages which are not only difficult to explain, but hardly possible to read, difficult to accept and to digest.

***Many passages
of the Bible
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These passages speak a language of force, describe massacres and murders as willed by God, and relate, unmoved, capital punishment and divine vengeance. Such passages are not confined to the Old Testament, but continue right through to the Book of Revelation. I mean the many passages (in Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Chronicles) which, on the whole, no longer have a place in the liturgy but are accessible to anyone who happens to open the book. If these passages already cause difficulty to me, and trigger off an instinctive resistance in me, then I ask myself how they affect someone who does not know Scripture very well, and knows nothing about hermeneutics.

With quite a few readings, particularly the extended second readings on feast days, I long to look into people's faces and to ask myself how much they will understand of those few lines which are already difficult to read in the original context. Do people really listen? How can I manage, in my all too short homily, to avoid even the worst misunderstandings? Exegesis struggled for centuries - like Jacob with the angel - with these texts, found answers and explanations by different methods, from the allegorical through the literary perspective to *relatio continua*, etc. In the first part of the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, the various methods and viewpoints are listed. But it cannot be denied that despite the great modernity, even 'postmodernity', appropriate to many symbols and themes of the Bible, numerous passages in Holy Scripture remain strange to us. Neither our mentality, culture nor language can come to terms with many aspects of our religious sensibility. But disregard of these difficulties or neglect of them as banal does not contribute to treating the Bible in such a way that it becomes the place of a blessed encounter with Christ.

Several Roads to Emmaus

My second personal observation is that growing familiarity with Holy Scripture occasions the need to distinguish the different levels of the biblical text. In the approach to the sacred text, and with it to Our Lord Jesus Christ, we inevitably take different routes at different levels, without the later ones ever replacing the earlier ones. It is as if there were not one road to Emmaus but a whole network of roads. I should like to distinguish schematically three phases or moments of approach to the Bible:

Firstly the philological-exegetical way which is today easily accessible to all, thanks to multiple aids (commentaries, introductions, dictionaries, atlases, encyclopaedias, CDs, etc). At this stage one becomes aware of the enormous riches contained in the texts, the vigour, even human and literary, which will never be researched in its entirety.

Parallel to growing familiarity with the linguistic-literary aspect of the Bible arises the need ever more forcefully to comprehend the meaning of the message and to compare it to one's own frame of reference. The text remains a necessary point of departure and reference, but from it arises a whole stream of reflections, questions, analyses, replies which nourish the mind and warm the heart. This is the moment when Jesus, on the road to Emmaus, not only quotes passages from Scripture but reveals to the disciples the connections and direction of its all-embracing meaning.

Eventually comes the moment when the text in its precisely and objectively drawn contours tends to become blurred, when it abandons, as it were, its material consistency. It is then that the person of the Lord, the mystery of the Kingdom, shines through ever more clearly in

anticipation of the heavenly vision and as a stimulus to prayer and contemplation.

I have here described the three classic steps of *lectio divina*, that is, *lectio, meditatio, contemplatio*. I do not want to say that there are no other methods of *lectio divina*. For this a comprehensive literature exists. I only wanted to establish that the different steps of *lectio*, however they are named, gradually alter their significance, their importance on the spiritual road, until they make possible an encounter with Jesus. Then the text somewhat pales before the spiritual presence. Every pastoral approach to Scripture must keep this way in mind and encourage it, without insisting too much on a definite scheme. We must allow for the dynamic of prayer which arises from the Bible, including all its detours and setbacks. Therefore the encounter with Jesus through the Bible is, in the end, always a very personal adventure, a lonely struggle with an angel, a journey with the Holy Spirit, where pastoral guidance could only indicate the general direction, disposition and model. This is what happens in a School of the Word.

The Book and the Chalice

A third observation: with the growing familiarity with Holy Scripture comes the consciousness of how much the Bible is interwoven with the whole action of the Church, always present, beyond all differences and oppositions (Scripture, tradition, writing, sacraments), behind all fear of fundamentalism and extreme movements (biblicism, gnosticism, etc.). Perhaps it can be represented by an image used by a former Patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Roncalli. It is the image of Alpha and Omega, or of Book and Chalice. 'In the work of a bishop and his priests the Holy Book, is like the Alpha. The Omega, on the other

hand, if I may employ this apocalyptic expression, is the consecrated chalice on our daily altar. In the book the voice of Jesus is heard in our hearts, in the chalice Christ's blood, always a source of grace, reconciliation, salvation of the Church and of the whole world. Between these two poles all other letters of the alphabet can be found. But these are nothing unless they are supported and upheld by both extremes - the word of Jesus, which comes from Holy Scripture and re-echoes in all statements of holy Church, and the blood of Christ in the final sacrifice, as eternal source of grace and blessing' (ANGELO RONCALLI, *La Sacra Scrittura e S. Lorenzo Guitiniani*, Pastoral Letter, 1956).

Taking up this image proposed by the late Pope, I should like to say that the connection Bible-Tradition and Bible-Sacraments, and most of all Bible-Liturgy, is more than a merely theological position. It is more a practical knowledge which grows with time and experience and the grace of the Holy Spirit. But it does not grow merely by controversy, nor by warnings of very real dangers such as biblicism, a certain intellectualism, or even gnosticism, for these cannot be overcome merely by a hostile presentation. I refer particularly to a danger which was rightly pointed out by one of the Regional Conferences, namely that the Bible, 'especially in some groups, is considered more as an edifying exercise than an authentic search for an opening onto the person of Jesus Christ'. Such snares exist. They are best overcome by a constant pastoral approach to the Bible, together with the local and universal Church, with the help of the biblical Pastoral Letter. Not less Holy Scripture, but more and better - such an approach to the Bible will save us from deviations which occasionally are to be feared and deplored.

II. SOME CONSEQUENCES FOR PASTORAL PRACTICE

From the foregoing personal observations which I have presented in schematic and allusive form, so as to invite my listeners to find some echo in their own experience and memory, I should like to deduce some pastoral consequences about the way in which the Bible can lead to a personal encounter with Jesus. In so doing I shall refer to the three personal observations I have just formulated,

1. The Bible constantly becomes more beautiful and more difficult.
2. There are several roads to Emmaus, or many varied attitudes to the text.
3. The Book and the Chalice, or the natural place of the Bible as a means to salvation.

1. Three practical consequences of the first observation.

Unity and awareness of limitation

We must not deny the fact that the approach to the Bible as a whole is difficult and in some ways must always be attempted anew, as much for new generations as in the course of our own life. Difficulties, resistance and rejection must be taken into account, but should not surprise us too much. To overcome these requires from every new generation a renewal of patience and love. In particular it seems that today we do not dispose of a rigorous theory of inspiration which could answer exhaustively all questions asked by modern people with regard to Holy Scripture. The theories established by the so-called biblical question (see *Providentissimus Deus*, 1893) remain on the whole valid. On the other hand, new attempts are welcome to find a modern, or rather a postmodern, language for the complex notion of a divinely inspired text, a text we call

the Word of God. This text must be accepted as the Bible presents it, not as something abstract. It must be accepted with all its passages, the easy and the difficult ones, with the pages where God appears as speaker and those where human beings speak to God, answer him or simply talk to him, desperate or angry, just as anyone talks to other members of the family, recounts sayings through which basic understanding becomes clear, or everyday observations of the most varied kinds.

Exegesis over the last fifty years has made great strides, but much remains to be done concerning literary theories and theological perspectives before we get to the root of subjects like oral tradition, significance of writing, various forms and aspects of communication, narrative perception, etc. It follows that we must be patient and accept that not every question has a satisfactory answer. We must also help all seekers to distinguish what is clear from what is not, in humility and awareness of our own limitations.

Clarity first

In pastoral practice we must do as Jesus must certainly have done at Emmaus: he helped the disciples first of all to see clarity and light, before drawing attention to darkness and shadows. The Church has always preferred certain passages or books in the Bible from which light was gathered to others. Although I am much in favour of a *lectio continua* of the Bible as it oc-

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curs in the liturgy (and as it was defended by that great lover of Scripture, Giuseppe Dossetti), I should like to say that getting to know the Bible is most of all getting to know the Gospels and Acts, familiarity with many Psalms, and with selected passages from the Pauline Epistles, from Exodus, Isaiah and Genesis, always viewed against the background of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Any systematic guidance to Bible reading must consider these main points and this Christological key to understanding which make it possible to bring together this rich and manifold world. On the other hand, we must accept that we come near to Christ through different historical and existential approaches in which the Bible is so rich. These must not be arbitrarily skipped. It is as if the unique word that God has spoken in history, in a thousand different places and contexts, in a thousand different tone-colours, must be grasped in the individual tones and their precise significance. Otherwise the harmony which repeats the basic theme in an overwhelming modal multiplicity cannot be achieved.

The School of the Word

The particular effectiveness of a School of the Word must be noted. A few central passages are chosen and set into a wider context, as an initiation and stimulus for a direct, personal contact with the biblical text. The School of the Word which already exists in many dioceses - often as a bishop's direct initiative to youth - must not be confused with exegetical reading, sermon or catechesis. All these forms retain their full validity and significance. It should rather be an incentive for those concerned. How do I find a text which speaks to me personally, by which I reach an encounter with the Lord who speaks to me in and through the text?

So it becomes obvious how important it is to show our faithful, with the help of Bible Weeks and Bible Courses, that the Bible is a structured reality, at different levels. It requires a well-considered organic approach, rather than something uniform and monolithic, as certain charismatic groups sometimes suppose.

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2. Three consequences of the second observation about the changing relation to the text.

Avoid schematic repetitions

In all activities of the biblical apostolate we must above all avoid getting stuck in a certain pattern. Changing moods, different levels of understanding and capacity to assimilate must determine the approach. A successful initiative (e.g. a School of the Word) is not valid always and everywhere, so that it can be adopted in every situation. I have considerable hesitations about supposed recipes for success. We must pay great attention to the constant changes in our target-group, be it negatively (habit or surfeit) or positively (the emergence of new existential questions). We must rethink our formulae and activities regularly and question them again and again.

This applies also to the liturgy of the Word outside the Eucharist. At the moment these seem to me too stereotyped. They have lost the capacity to lead people really to the text, as was the case when they

were introduced at the time of the Second Vatican Council. At services of the Word I often have the impression that texts have been chosen hastily from a superficial preference. They are often too long or too dense, and they are normally for some reason hastily read out-only once, without regard for the needs or the explicit or unspoken questions of the faithful. The choice of texts for the liturgy of the Word is a delicate decision and cannot be left to chance. The basis for this choice, as for the manner of presentation and explanation, must be geared to the situation of the listeners. Their understanding of the Scriptures and their most urgent problems in life must be taken into account.

Promote an encounter with the Lord

We must make the biblical text a companion for people in a truly spiritual way, a way which most of all promotes the knowledge of the Lord, rather than simply knowledge of the Bible. The purpose of the biblical apostolate in all its forms is not to create biblical experts, but men and women of prayer who let the Bible lead them to knowledge of the Lord who calls them in the real situation of their lives, here and now. Naturally we must avoid shortcuts and must not give in to the illusion that from every page of the Bible some spiritual fruit will grow. We must bravely walk through the labyrinth of history and biblical language, keeping the aim always before our eyes and trusting the power of that Spirit through which Scripture needs to be read and understood. The old wisdom of the Imitation of Christ remains still today the golden rule for every approach to the Word of God, 'All holy books are to be read in the Spirit in which they were written'.

Formation of leaders

A third consequence concerns the formation of animators. Here too it is chiefly a question of the spirituality of these people in whom the wish to study the Bible, the desire to share their knowledge with others, arises from their longing for an intimate knowledge of Jesus Christ. Future leaders should acquire all requisite specialist knowledge, including the study of biblical languages, even Hebrew, a tendency I observe more and more among the laity. With such a formation they are sure not to pick up incoherent, confusing elements, but acquire an authentic motivation, so as to get to know Jesus in Holy Scripture and to bring him to others. Places of training for leaders do not therefore have the task of forming biblical scholars. We do need experts, but special institutions are available for them, and catechetical schools can make their own valuable contribution. I am rather thinking of simple lay functions: leaders of Bible groups, those responsible for the neighbourhood apostolate, or 'visiting helpers' in the forefront of the popular mission. In the last few years I have had the chance to get to know many of these, and they are all people hungry and thirsty for Scripture. It is now for us, by prayer and a lived spirituality, to make this good will blossom.

3. Notes on the third observation, Book and Chalice.

For an integrated way

The different methods of using the Bible in pastoral care should complement each other so as to create a common way which alone leads to a full familiarity with the holy book of the Church. The pastoral writings of the Italian Episcopal Conference mention four forms of encounter with the Bible in the pastoral work of the Church:

liturgical celebration, with a special emphasis on the homily, the way of introducing catechesis, and generally the service of the Word, religious teaching in schools. To these I should like to add *lectio divina* in common.

For these and similar forms is relevant: 'Every one of these ways makes its own demands, but requires also close connection with other forms of expressing the faith with which the Church accompanies an encounter with the Bible'. A further contribution from the bishops fits in here: in the biblical apostolate the starting-point must be already existing and uncontested premises, that is, premises which have their roots in *Dei Verbum* iste. I and which are there set out in more detail. It is a matter of achieving a revaluation of the Bible in two forms: in one, in the different moments of the Church's life (liturgy, catechesis), in the other, in a direct approach to the biblical text. I should like to take up point 22 which neatly summarises what I have tried to say, 'the approach to the Bible in faith is itself precious, even if it is not closed in itself. It must remain independent in its methods, but also closely related to other forms of mediating the faith which are part of the Church's tradition (liturgy, catechesis). Two different complementary ways to the reappraisal of the Bible are relevant: the direct approach to the text and the promotion of biblical components in other channels mediating the faith, such as catechesis and celebration.'

Then comes the problem of a practical balance between these two ways. Is it better to bring the so-called estranged immediately into contact with the basic kerygmatic Bible texts or to lead them along the systematic way of catechesis? It seems to me that the different solutions are not opposed but complementary, and that the decision will always depend on practical

considerations. In my experience with the 'chair for non-believers', of which I shall say more shortly, it is beneficial to harmonize both ways intelligently, with regard to the people concerned, their condition and the available time, even if the direct approach to the Bible has a strength and fascination which is perhaps absent from the slow systematic approach.

The direct approach to the Bible has a strength and fascination which is perhaps absent from the slow systematic approach

Practical examples for a diversified approach

To end these considerations of the synthesis of the different ways I should like to add a few practical examples of my experience of the different forms of approach. I want to sketch out six situations:

Holy Scripture and the search for the meaning

Holy Scripture and catechesis for adults

Holy Scripture and the family

Holy Scripture and the ways of vocation

Holy Scripture and youth

Holy Scripture and the search for meaning

In our big cities there are today many people who are seeking. I mean mainly those who have had a Christian education, but who have then, sometimes quite early in life, turned



away from the faith. The Italian Episcopal Conference has asked itself very seriously how they can help such people. I should like to put forward an initiative which I called somewhat provocatively the 'chair for non-believers', and where it is not primarily a matter of approach to the Bible. It starts from another point, namely from the reasons for loss of faith. People describe with great sincerity their way of life, seeking a meaning, their problems and doubts. We cannot confront these people straightaway with a page from Holy Scripture (in the sadness of the two Emmaus disciples there was little explicitly biblical) - in fact this consequence will show itself relatively quickly. For even on those encounters the Bible proves itself quickly as a source for the great archetypes of humanity, with expressive symbols for all forms of human search for meaning. The starting-point will not necessarily be a passage from the Bible, as is the case with *lectio divina*, but rather doubts, problems and questions which very soon find their reflection in a page or an image in the Bible, and will lead some to thinking about themselves, others on the way to faith.

Holy Scripture and catechesis for adults

I am impressed by the practice of the so-called 'house Bible meetings' which present a new form of adult catechesis. They arise generally from the preparation of popular missions, or as a result of them, sometimes spontaneously. In these groups, led by animators with their own formation, there is at the beginning a passage from the Bible, after which the participants can turn to structured catechesis. In this connection I was surprised by the remark of a Regional Episcopal Conference which regretted the 'atomisation of the biblical apostolate, mostly restricted to a few

groups, which does not show the relevant continuity, and is not integrated into the religious structure of the Church.' To me these house Bible groups seem a very good opportunity for our parishes as well as for the whole diocese, as an opportunity for a wider public. I have been doing this for some years in Lent through my radio catechesis which is followed by hundreds of groups in numerous parishes. This achieves a formation in faith for adults which is not elitist, offers a certain continuity, and fits into the structure of Church life.

Holy Scripture and the family

This is one of the most difficult areas. Some traditions - I am thinking of the reading in common of the history of saints - have completely disappeared, as also grace at meals. It is not easy to introduce new habits. The diocese of Bozen-Brixen has committed itself most energetically, where basic aids are handed out on a large scale, to enable families to read the Sunday readings on the previous evening. We must probably consider again the practice of the rosary; this practice of family prayer is still alive in some places and could be valuable as an introduction to praying with the Bible.

Holy Scripture and ways of vocation

Very useful was the following attempt: a group of young people aged 17-25 (about 150-200 each year) carry on for a year a living reflection on spiritual vocation. These are young people who want to fulfil the will of God without compromise and who do not exclude any call coming from God, but who are as yet unclear about the future. They submit themselves for a year to a rule of life and prayer, and receive spiritual guidance. I try, with the help of Scripture, to bring some cla-

rity, for example, they should reflect for a year (one Sunday afternoon each month) on the Call of the prophet Samuel and his life (1 Sam 1-15). The contact with the Bible sharpens the consciousness of the self, of one's own resistance and anxieties, and puts the question: what does God want from me, in such a way that the personal decision becomes easier. The method used is that of a long and often repeated *lectio divina*, practised first in common, then in form of a personal prayer and finally in small groups with exchanges. Thanks to personal accounts which I have received in all these years I have been able to follow up the spiritual way of more than a thousand young people, and reconstruct the enormous difficulties which prevent in our times clear and brave decisions of this kind. At the same time I have been able to witness changes of position in the direction of the imitation of Christ, at the beginning of which stood the encounter with the Bible.

Holy Scripture and youth

I have already mentioned the Schools of the Word which are held in many dioceses and often by the bishop himself. In this 'school' are experienced the power of the biblical word and the longing of young people for authenticity and prayer. The same applies to quiet retreats with meditation on a biblical passage. It is important in all these approaches to the text that they create a climate of reflection and enable young people to let themselves be addressed personally by the word of the Bible. They discover, as I have often been told, that God really speaks about me and to me in this text. We must certainly trust again the ability of the young to develop honest interests from apparent alienation and apathy, if they have the feeling that there is a text where I can find myself, a text which carries the fasci-

nation of a story and the progress to a predestined conclusion, which requires, here and now, honest answers.

III. CONCLUSIONS

May I be allowed two concluding points? The first I take from a contribution to regional conferences which, I think, resumes the meaning of my talk. It is said that this gathering should emphasize that in the belief of the Church and in the reading of the Bible in the context of prayer and conversion the answer lies to the urgent needs of the new evangelisation. This is particularly relevant for the request to form a laity mature in the faith, able to translate the Bible into today's world, as well as the request, against all modern tendencies to relativistic and syncretist religiosity, to strengthen the faith in Jesus as the One Saviour of the world.

The second conclusion is based on a letter which I received recently during Lent. It concerns my dioc-

san radio broadcasts on the Christology of John's Gospel. The letter came from a man of 50 in a Bible group, whom I do not know personally. To the question what a shepherd of souls expects when he wants to bring the Bible to people he writes:

"In these weeks of encounter, reading, listening and discussions, I have rediscovered a great truth, understood and completed with new knowledge - I need Jesus. He is the way for me, truth, life, bread and light. Without him I would be lost, in him and through him my life gains infinite worth, my daily actions become jewels of mysterious eternal beauty. What is so beautiful about it is that it comes to me spontaneously from the heart, thanks to your thoughts, Eminence, as if this truth had been slumbering, only waiting

to be awoken. Now I know that the truths of my religion are not speculations of my intellect, but realities which are closely linked to my heart, my human nature. Now I no longer feel alone, I know that Jesus is with me, I know that I can find in Holy Scripture, in the magisterium of the Church, answers to my deepest needs."

I wish that our words and attempts towards a biblical apostolate may always find hearts so ready to receive the seeds of the Word.

(Transl.: Henry Wansbrough)





A PLEA FOR THE MINISTRY OF THE OPEN BIBLE

by Rainer Dillmann¹

Using Mk 2:1-12 the author outlines a method of lectio divina. This particular method enables a sustained contact with the passage, an almost interpersonal relationship with the Gospel text that leads in the end to concrete decision. The personal access to the biblical text is however ultimately not a question of method; the personality of the person involved in the Bible ministry plays a central roll. Dillmann thus calls for a thorough rethinking of the text in terms of pastoral application, and - as a presupposition for an effective Bible ministry - the spiritual director's own reading of scripture as lectio divina.

Every Christian needs a pastorate of the open Bible. This can be developed in two directions, firstly so that in pastoral practice people are offered the open Bible so that they may find in it strength and courage, consolation and hope for their faith. Secondly, so that those responsible for pastoral practice, men and women, themselves open the Bible and receive from it impetus and stimulus for pastoral work in our time. Both components will here be developed and their pastoral implications shown. It seems apposite to start with a brief look at the theological basis for such a pastoral practice.

***From the Bible
we receive
an impetus
and stimulus
for the
pastoral work***

1. Vatican II on the Word of God

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council discussed fully the value of Holy Scripture in the life of the Church, as well as the necessity and principles of its interpretation. The results were formulated in the

dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*. This states, among other things, 'The Church has always revered Holy Scripture, since it unceasingly receives from the Table of the Word the Bread of Life and presents it to the faithful. In this, together with sacred tradition, the Church has always seen and still sees the highest guiding principle of its faith, for it allows the Word of God to be conveyed directly and the voice of the Holy Spirit to be heard. Thus all Church proclamation must be nourished by Holy Scripture and guided by it². Holy Scripture offers the Church 'support and life'. For Christians it is 'strength of faith' and an 'inexhaustible source of life'³.

Taking its cue from Leo XIII, the Council then describes the study of Holy Scripture as the 'soul of sacred theology' and goes on to say that 'the service of the Word also, that is pastoral proclamation, catechesis and Christian instruction, gathers from the Word of Scripture healthy nourishment and holy strength'⁴. According to the will of the Council 'all clerics, especially priests and others who as deacons or catechists, according to their commission dedicate themselves to the service of the Word, should apply themselves to Holy Scripture by constant sacred reading and thorough study'⁵.

But not only those engaged in proclaiming Holy Scripture should read it. The Council further admonishes that 'all Christian believers should,

by frequent reading of Holy Scripture, acquire the supreme advantage of knowing Christ (Phil 3.8). Ignorance of Scripture means ignorance of Christ'⁶. Therefore 'access to Holy Scripture must remain wide open for all the faithful'⁷. In this way the Second Vatican Council stresses the significance of the Bible for the Church. The Church is the community of those who together hear the Word of God and act upon it. Not only should the contents of the Scripture be accessible through the proclamation, but such proclamation 'through Scripture is built into the Church as an institution itself'. Lastly, the Council defines the Church from the hearing of the Word of God. What is relevant for the Church as a whole applies also to the individual Christian community.

In this way *Dei Verbum* laid the theological foundation by formulating the principles which characterize a pastorate of the open Bible and which are indispensable for this, namely the personal efforts of pastoral workers, men and women, through intensive reading and study of Scripture as the community of the faithful.

2. Consequences for a Ministry of the Open Bible

The high position and value attached to Scripture by *Dei Verbum*, and the accompanying hope of a revitalization of Christian life, stand in stark contrast to the facts. The

majority of Catholics, now as formerly, have achieved no more than limited access to the Bible. If Scripture, as the Council asserts, is 'the highest guiding principle of the faith', it demands an intensive reading of the Bible not only by those who by their position are committed to proclamation, but also by all Christians. But this presumes also 'the trust of their hierarchical Church in the believers' sense of faith, since they are not only allowed, but explicitly recommended to read Scripture'.

Consequences ensue for pastoral practice. Therefore I would like to formulate the following thesis: Every pastoral practice must be biblically oriented. Pastoral practice must both follow the model of Jesus and also work with the Bible. In this way it will direct and accompany the faithful in reading the Bible. *Dei Verbum* is itself an invitation to the constant reading and meditation on Scripture as a means to a renewal of Christian parishes. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* completes and deepens this teaching. The encyclical describes Jesus himself as 'the very first and greatest proclaimer of the Gospel'⁸. Emphasis on these ideas is an important element of the new evangelisation undertaken by the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation in its biblical pastorate. The Church Fathers of course pursued this method in their exegesis and interpretation of Scripture. The Church of the twentieth century must, similarly, follow the model of Jesus if it is to accompany men and women of the twenty-first century and show them meaning and purpose. This must now be further developed.

2.1 Concentration on the Model of Jesus

Without the person of Jesus of Nazareth and the confession of the Risen Christ Christian faith, hope and love are unthinkable. In Jesus' life

and ministry God has manifested himself to us human beings in an incomparable way. Christian life consists in following Jesus. Imitation and discipleship are, according to the Gospels, an expression of a life of faith. From the beginning the Christian community has also seen Jesus as the pastor who took to himself human nature, and particularly the abandoned, the lonely and the weak. We who are accustomed to formulate everything in abstract notions and concepts may regret this, but in fact it is an advantage. Stories are the medium through which culture passes on its conceptions of values. In the same way the presentations of the Gospels offer the same concrete expressions of aims and values which are to be addressed and realized in pastoral action. From the model of Jesus pastors of past ages have learnt. On this model of Jesus pastoral performance must today also be oriented.

For the practical realisation of this model of Jesus I should like to return to the familiar Church tradition of *lectio divina*. This implies a definite methodical procedure and helps to pray 'according to a method within the rhythm of life'. *Lectio divina* keeps close to the biblical text, penetrates ever more deeply into it, and links it to personal experience of life.

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Lectio divina comprehends three or perhaps four steps, *lectio, meditatio, contemplatio* (reading, meditating, praying) or *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*. The document of the Latin American Association of Religious Orders (CLAR) puts these four steps into concrete terms:

reading: to familiarise oneself with the Word, to ponder on it and to know the context

reflection: to enter into dialogue with the text, to make it real

prayer: to implore, to praise, to repeat it to oneself

contemplation: to discern, to turn the text over, to savour it⁹.

Not every reading of Scripture is *lectio divina*, not even every kind of spiritual Scripture reading or prayerful Bible reading. Cardinal Martini warns explicitly against this danger. Nor must it be confused with Scripture reading or study. *Lectio divina* is 'the knowledge of the Bible needed for daily living in order to find the right way'. The text must be read over and over again, always spelt out anew. Only in this way can the momentum, the outlines and the symbolism of the text be discovered. Carlo Martini compares this procedure to viewing a picture. First one sees superficially, one distinguishes shapes, symbols, colours and light effects. Only slowly does one begin to grasp, penetrate ever more deeply into the picture so that full understanding becomes possible. I should like to demonstrate this manner of reading from Mark 2:1-12, the Healing of the Lame Man.

Mark's story is composite. Verses 2-5a and 11-12 can be considered as a healing story, verses 5b-10 as a controversy. Yet the two genres make up a whole, for the probative force of the arguments in the controversy is based on the healing of the lame man.

The story takes its origin from the conflict which arises between Jesus



and the scribes. The decisive factor which brings the conflict to a head is Jesus' word to the lame man, 'Your sins are forgiven' (v. 5). What is strange for the modern reader is understandable from the perspective of the Jewish doctrine of retribution. Illness points to a disturbed relationship with God. When Jesus tells the lame man that his sins are forgiven, he does not look at the illness in isolation, but considers the man in his totality, in his physical, emotional and religious feelings. What Jesus really grants this man is not only a new relationship with God and the healing of his physical infirmity, but the experience of emotional security and a new community.

This evokes a reaction from the scribes of the Pharisees. In their protest they refer to religious traditions and convictions, 'Who but God can forgive sins?' (v. 7). In this way they deny Jesus the competence to approach the lame man in this way, or rather are convinced that in his behaviour Jesus sets himself against God himself. 'He is blaspheming' (v. 6). But they do not formulate their protest openly; they show an inner resistance, they ponder silently in their hearts (v. 6). Jesus brings the conflict into the open, 'Why do you have these thoughts in your hearts?' (v. 8). Now the conflict can begin and be worked out.

In his argument Jesus adopts the position of the scribes in concluding from the lower to the higher. He puts himself on the same level of ideas and arguments as his opponents. His position becomes intelligible to them and his arguments clear. Jesus' arguments contain the invitation to the scribes to give up their role as opponents. He shows them that by their refusal to accept the lame man as a full member of their religious and social community they are in danger of tying their hands in dealing with sick people. They lose their freedom to act, be-

come isolated and themselves in the end become lame.

The text offers readers, men and women of very different characters, a rich repertoire of roles. In this way the conflict can once more be played out and lived through by the reader. Since Jesus is clearly the main actor, the text contains the challenge to remember in similar encounters to orient oneself on Jesus' role, to be close to the other, to offer the other forgiveness and healing. Every of us can make room in our own lives for the effects of God's forgiving and healing word.

In a similar encounter the reader can hardly avoid taking up a position. The reader's own personal attitude constitutes the adoption of a position. Anyone who withdraws from fellow human beings is placed in the role of the scribes; anyone who turns to people in the spirit of the Gospel takes on Jesus' role, and so allows people to have some part in God's kingship. In solving the conflict the scribes pursue a strategy which can be called demarcation and exclusion. Its effects are social and emotional destabilisation. Jesus sets against it a strategy of integration. The conflict is not denied nor swept under the carpet, but a different solution is offered. By the forgiveness of sin communion with God is re-established. The sinner now obtains a new place in the community of God's children, experiencing in the end a social and emotional stability in a chronic marginal situation.

Reading is followed by meditation. This is a phase of reflection and appropriation of the values presented in the text. In Mark 2:1-12 this is the experience of being emotionally secure in a new community which Jesus grants the lame man, and which helps him to overcome his lameness. Then also there is the uncovering of a hidden conflict and with it Jesus' argumentation through which the scribes are invited to abandon their role as oppo-

nents. Finally it is the strategy of integration which gives people, in view of a chronic marginal situation, a social and emotional stability. Everyone must achieve this reflection personally. Only then can an exchange with others occur.

A frequently heard objection to this kind of consideration of the biblical text is that the vertical plane, relationship to God, is not accounted for. Was not the first move Jesus' pronouncement of forgiveness to the lame man? Such a line of argument misunderstands two things: firstly, the text takes for granted the idea of the Jewish teaching on retribution, that illness is a punishment for sins committed. With this presupposition the forgiveness of sins is the condition for healing. Secondly, biblical tradition distinguishes the vertical from the horizontal plane, but does not separate one from the other. Indeed, the authenticity of a claimed relationship with God is proved by the living out of relationships with other people. Faith must be concretely expressed by personal relationships. Every love of God must prove itself here and now. This is the decisive impetus of the biblical message.

To this is added prayer. Through it I can give thanks for the understanding and experience gained. But prayer can also be complaint and earnest intercession in a totally hopeless situation.

Last of all follows contemplation. This consists in movement beyond the text into one's personal experience. In connection with Mark 2:1-12 the conflicts within one's own community come to the fore - particularly those which are still topical. The following questions can be put:

1. *is this an open or hidden conflict?*
2. *how was this conflict triggered off?*

3. *what are the arguments on one side and the other?*
4. *what is my role in this conflict?*
5. *am I free or have I already forfeited my freedom?*
6. *what solution is offered in the spirit of the biblical story?*

Lectio divina leads into a concrete decision. It proves itself to be a tool for planning and reflection in one's own pastoral action. This can take place together with other pastoral co-workers, men and women of the parish or the deanery, as much as alone. In this way Jesus' example becomes reality in concrete pastoral practice.

Cardinal Martini has formulated, with reference to his practice in Milan Cathedral, the real relevance of *lectio divina*, and, in my view, the decisive element of Jesus' example. The success of his achievement lies in the fact that we do not present to the young a catechetical teaching or preach to them. We show them a way to assimilate the text personally. With regard to pastoral practice this means that Jesus' model does not offer a universally obligatory pastoral concept nor a methodological tool. Through the text it provokes our creativity and imagination, and thus contributes considerably to rejection of ossified forms and to liberation from empty notions. It involves but does not enslave.

2.2 Working with the Bible

This orientation to personal pastoral action through the example of Jesus seems to me the indispensable condition for a concrete use of the Bible in the community. Jesus himself acted according to the will of God and only in this way could he proclaim the will of God to people in word and deed. This is why the Gospels record that Jesus went into the desert before his public ministry and was tempted there by

Satan. In the strength of his spirit he went, according to Luke's Gospel, into the synagogue on the sabbath to read the Scripture to them, to proclaim the Word of God and to show the reality of the message contained therein (Luke 4:16-30). We are still a long way from such intimate knowledge of the biblical texts as Luke represents for Jesus. Otto Knoch reported as late as 1992 an unfamiliarity on the part of many Catholics, particularly with the Old Testament, the Epistles of the New Testament and the Book of Revelation. He saw this principally as a failure on the part of those pastorally responsible for liturgy and preaching. Even if here the blame is attributed to pastors somewhat hastily, and the accused understandably protest, Knoch has, in my opinion, drawn attention to a weakness. Despite the new order of readings which opens up the Old Testament directly, there are few parishes where all three readings are used on Sundays and Feastdays. The Old Testament mostly falls by the wayside. This shortcoming must be withstood in order to familiarise the faithful with Scripture. The possibilities offered by the Sunday and weekday readings should be used more intensively than hitherto.

The Second Vatican Council insisted on the Sunday homily¹⁰. It should not be renounced without very serious reasons. However, homily must be distinguished from exegesis. The latter is an important aid for proclamation and catechesis. John Paul II rightly reminds biblical scholars to contribute to preaching the Word of God by either giving part of their time to this service or by having good links with those who fulfill this office¹¹. The Pope is thinking of appropriate outlines of sermons and other aids. The personal practice of *lectio divina* is an important school for the proper proclamation of the Word of God, and cannot be replaced by any aid, however useful. The work of very

different groups and special ministers in the parish, such as Caritas groups, visiting groups and others, should also be accompanied by common *lectio divina*. Such a pastoral guidance of groups must start from their concrete questions and problems. The analysis of the actual situation must take precedence over the reading. Elements of *lectio divina* can also be fitted into meetings of parish committees such as pastoral councils and others, by opening them with a brief scriptural stimulus. I want to mention only incidentally the existence of Bible groups and courses; they have their own justification. They are now fairly widespread and have found a place in many parishes. A wealth of different materials and aids exists. Unfortunately Bible study in the parish is often identified with such groups, so that Bible study is considered as one task among others. The model sketched out and favoured here, a biblically oriented pastoral practice based on *lectio divina*, sees Scripture as the foundation and source of all pastoral activity and as an integral element of all pastoral practice.

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Conclusion

The question of the pastoral practice of the open Bible is not a merely confessional matter nor a matter of a method. It is a question of the inner attitude of the responsible priest. His readiness to ex-



pose himself to reality wherever he may find himself, and to allow the Word of God to throw light on depressing and joyful realities, is decisive. From his example people will learn also to put their own concrete experience under the Word of God and to reflect on it.

Our pastoral practice must be so organised that women and men of our times can enter into a relationship with the Word of God in the biblical tradition with all their joy or sadness, their hopes and anxieties. This requires a re-thinking of our pastoral concepts. Global pastoral strategies are not required, but the priest's personal reading of Scripture in the form of *lectio divina*. This

is the only means to keep in mind the one really necessary thing, and among the many tasks which fall to a priest not to miss out on the most decisive. This is how Cardinal Martini sees his own practice of *lectio divina* as a bishop.

This is the way to learn how the Church is to be understood as listening to the Word of God. Only in the interplay between the biblical Word and real life can the Word of God shine into our world. The inculturation of the Gospel into the modern world can become reality.

(Transl.: Henry Wansbrough)

¹The following reflections were first given as a talk and were re-worked for publication on the basis of the ensuing discussion.

²Dei Verbum No. 21

³Dei Verbum No. 21

⁴Dei Verbum No. 24

⁵Dei Verbum No. 25

⁶Dei Verbum No. 25

⁷Dei Verbum No. 22

⁸Dei Verbum No. 7

⁹Bulletin Dei Verbum 22,8-15 and 23, 4-8.

¹⁰Sacrosanctum Concilium, nos 51 and 52

¹¹Address to the Biblical Commission on 23.4.1993, printed in Dei Verbum 28, 9-12. ♦

Life of the Federation

Asia

The People's Republic of China

A large part of the twelve million who belong to ethnic minorities in the province of Yunnan in south-west China live widely dispersed in a mountainous area. Although the official language of the country, Mandarin, is taught in the schools, in every day life, because of weak or non-existent school instruction, the local languages alone are used. Therefore the translations of the Bible in the diverse minority languages are of great importance. The Bible in the local language gives the people access to the Word of God without regular care from priests and catechists.

A Franciscan priest, who has worked for many years in the border region between China and North Vietnam with the Miao tribe, has translated the Bible into their language. Many thousand volumes are currently in circulation among the Miao. A priest who is a member

of the Afxii tribe has dedicated himself for more than twenty years to the phonetic transcription of the tribal language. A few years ago he completed a translation of the Psalms in Afxii. Religious literature, catechetical materials and above all the Bible in the local language are basic conditions for the mission and the life of Christian communities.

India

For 16 years St. Paul's Bible Institute in Madras has organized a yearly Bible course in the Tamil language for lay people and members of religious orders. In addition to central biblical themes this year, the 25 guest teachers are offering the following courses: sociology of the Bible, the Bible and Spirituality, the Bible and renewal movements, the Bible and Church history, etc. In addition there is an introduction to Bible instruction for children and youth. The participants in the course have the opportunity to gather practical experience during a one week session in villages working with the different groups, in the multireligious and multilingual context of the Indian population. Also in

1998 a one year Bible course will be given that is explicitly addressed to women. Many have already enrolled. 25 places are reserved for Tamil speaking participants.

In addition to this course there have also been the following biblical pastoral activities in Tamilnadu, which includes 15 Catholic dioceses:

- A two year correspondence Bible course, which began at the beginning of 1997 and has arrived at 13 of 21 teaching units and at the New Testament. About 4300 persons of all levels are taking part in this course.
- In addition to diverse publications such as introductions and commentaries on the Gospels and the Psalms, St. Paul's Bible Institute has started a biblical pastoral periodical "Vivlia Virunthu". It is addressed to the people in the local Tamil language.
- The ecumenical Bible translation in Tamil has sold very well in the last two years. This is a further sign of the great need for religious literature and of the strong interest in questions of the faith.

Further information:

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Poonamallee, Madras – 600 056
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Pakistan

The Catechetical Center of Karachi celebrates its silver jubilee in 1998. It was founded at a time when almost all of the country's private schools were transformed, by government order, into state schools, and the Catholic Church thus lost its ability to pass on the Faith through religious instruction in the Catholic schools.

The national Bible Year 1997 with

the theme "The Word was made flesh, that we might have life to the full" spawned many activities. A Bible workshop dealt with the theme of the seven-step method of Bible sharing, house evangelization, and methods of Bible sharing for children. A national bible seminar trained people for bible work in the parishes. Besides this, the Catechetical Center organized programs for families, e.g., courses for marriage preparation, seminars for couples on the theme "Bible and family",

and also published a number of useful materials, among others, a guide for a self-study of the Gospel of Mark in Urdu, designed specifically for Bible-study groups in parishes.

For further information:

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Africa

The Ivory Coast

Last year, twenty-five parishes from five West-African countries established what are called Bible camps. More than 300 ministry leaders were able in this way to reach 2000 children and young people. In the city quarters of Abijan, these children and youths will bring God's Word into their families. The "small Christian Communities" too are taking part, in a variety of ways, in the preparation and implementation of the Bible camps. The engagement of the young group-leaders

who have undertaken the organization of the Bible camps is especially worthy of note. They have established a coordination committee and have set for themselves the following objectives: they are responsible for their own instruction in the Bible, they set a schedule for brief meetings in the course of the year, undertake searches for reliable speakers from outside, provide for informational exchange and organization, and look into the possibilities of financial assistance. They help parishes that are conducting Bible camps for the first time; the older group-leaders help the new ones learn techniques like pantomime, drawing, small group direction, and the running of the Bible camps.

Further information:

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Swaziland

In their plenary assembly in Manzini, Swaziland, which took place on 7-12 June 1998, the bishops of southern Africa, of the so-called IMBI-SA region, worked on the theme "The Power of God's Word". The result was an increased awareness of how central a role Scripture plays in all pastoral undertakings, responding as it does to the hunger and thirst for God's Word that is in the world. The bishops made the following recommendations:

- Once a year the Sunday liturgy should be celebrated as a feast of God's Word.
- The Bishops' Conference should encourage Bible conferences on the Word of God at the diocesan or national levels in connection with this feast.
- The bishops promise to send priests, religious or lay people for Bible training, such as the courses provided by IMBISA DEI VERBUM. This will insure that the entire Bible ministry of the Church will be imbued with the Word of God.
- The preachers of the Word should receive a solid education, and the message they proclaim should be highly esteemed.
- The Bible should be made available to all believers at an affordable price.
- The bishops recommend that materials be made available that will give believers a better knowledge

- and understanding of the Bible. This will prevent believers from joining sects that interpret the Bible in a fundamentalistic sense.
- The bishops recommend that candidates for the priesthood be nourished by an ongoing and careful study of the Scriptures through *lectio divina* and other Bible-reading methods, and that they apply the fruits of this study to their lives.
- Each Bishops' Conference is summoned to reflect on how the biblical apostolate in each diocese can be made more effective, especially by nominating contact-agents for the leaders of the Bible ministry at the level of IMBISA - or the Bishops' Conference.
- The bishops recommend to the Secretariat of the Bishops' Synod that a future Synod be devoted to the themes "the Roll of God's Word

in Evangelization" and "Passing on God's Word to the People".

Further information:

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Latin America

Bolivia

We have received material worked out by the Comisión Episcopal de Catequesis y Biblia of the Bolivian Bishops' Conference for the Bible Month, September 1998. The Bible Month is in preparation for the year 2000, under the motto: "Where the Holy Spirit is, there is the People of God", and is taking its inspiration from the Scriptural saying: "I will pour out my spirit upon your sons and daughters" (Acts 2:17). The material consists of two parts: Part I contains instructions for five sessions with various scriptural texts on the theme "the Holy Spirit", al-

ways for a group of eight persons. Each Bible meeting will have its theme highlighted by a colored poster. Part II is a director's manual for the leader of the Bible groups.

A follow-up course, designed specifically for people who have already participated in an intensive Bible course, will take place from 17-18 August in Cochabamba, on the theme: "The Holy Spirit in the work of St. Luke." The goal of this course is to provide a deeper knowledge of the Bible, with special focus on the work of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of

the Apostles and the Gospel of Luke.

The Comisión Episcopal de Catequesis y Biblia of the Bolivian Bishops' Conference has come out with the first issue of a Bulletin which will serve as a forum for those active in Bible ministry. The Bulletin is called Palabra (=Word) and invites reader contributions from the areas of catechesis and pastoral work with the Bible. It is a platform for reflection, education, and information, and should provide a stimulus for catechesis.

**Further information:**

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Nicaragua

40 Bible Courses were given in 6 of the 8 dioceses of the country last year; also in 1998 courses are being given in many parishes. The members of the Bible center in Managua hope, with the help of interested laity, to stimulate a real Bible movement. 51 people from all the countries of Central America took part in the first intensive Bible course in September 1997.

An SVD missionary reports that there is "hunger" for the Bible in the Nica tribe. Bible courses arouse

great interest and try to help to make the Bible accessible as a basis for and concrete help for everyday life.

"In these courses group discussion plays an important role. We seek to move from the life-experience of the people to the biblical themes. That is not easy because the majority of the people can read and write only with difficulty. So it is essential to listen well and from the experiences and questions of the people to find an entry into the biblical text."

Chile

In Chile an awaking can be sensed in the political and in the ecclesiastical areas; above all, the laity are asking for an increased participation. People want to become involved, to take over responsibility. The demand for Bible courses as basic education and further education is enormous. People are seeking direct access to the Bible. Not a few are taking up the offer of different sects in which Bible work is emphasized.

Throughout the country the Catholic Church makes use of the Bible week; for the first time in 1997 extensive materials were made available for this occasion, which are addressed to all groups of people: children, youth, theological students, and priests. The reactions were overwhelming: enthusiasm and gratitude from every corner of the country. It is a question of introductory material that can be used by interested persons and groups as reading and study helps and as a basis for Bible discussions. The communities of SVD missionaries and of the Holy Spirit Sisters organized in addition the sixth Bible month on the theme: "Do you really know me?" The basis of the course was the Gospel of Mark. Corresponding to the goal of the evangelist to make Jesus of Nazareth known to his contemporaries, the Bible month seeks to provide access to Jesus as a person in his mission, his message, and his divine nature. The need for religious nourishment, the hunger for the Word of God is great. Bible work and Bible materials already help to alleviate it. But much more religious nourishment will be needed.

Europe**The Czech Republic**

In June 1997 appeared the first "Biblical Pastoral News", a periodical of the Czech Biblical Association in Budweis. The periodical will appear twice a year. The first issue is devoted primarily to the 5th plenary assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation of Hong Kong (1996). From the second issue (December 1997) come the following

headings: Practical guides for Work with the Bible, News from the country and from the whole World, helpful bibliographical references.

The book on method, "Zugang zur Bibel" (=Access to the Bible), by Anneliese Hecht (Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart), has appeared in the Czech language. The book des-

cribes and analyzes the various methods of biblical-pastoral work and contains many practical examples.

Thanks to the assistance of the publishing house of the Carmelites, a Czech translation of the series "Stuttgarter Kleiner Kommentar zum Neuen Testament" is under

way. The commentaries on Matthew and Mark are already available; Luke and John are at the printer's, and the commentaries on other New Testament writings will follow.

The director of the Czech Biblical Association emphasizes that international contacts, especially those within the Central European sub-region, are a great help for the work of the Czech Biblical Association. For example, the appearance of the Indian theologian and dancer, Fr. Francis Barboza, SVD, who interprets biblical passages in classical Indian dance, was a highpoint, in terms of effective publicity, in the program of the Czech Biblical Association.

Further information:

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Middle East

Lebanon

When the Bulletin of the Middle-East subregion was launched in 1991, it consisted of but a few photocopied pages. Since then it has become a full-blown magazine, which, in the Arabic edition, contains more than 40 pages. An abbreviated edition appears in French, which expresses and fosters the connection of the Middle-

Slovenia

Bozja Beseda Danes is the name of the 16-page quarterly of the Slovenian Biblical Association in Ljubljana. This issue of January, 1998, provides information, among other things, about the long-distance Catholic Bible course which, with its 450 participants, is finding a good reception. The quarterly also contains an on-going series on the theme "Bible and Youth", and in general it focuses on themes of Bible ministry.

Further information:

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France

Fr. Michel Du Buit, OP, one of the founders of the French biblical-pastoral service "Service Biblique

Évangile et Vie" passed away on 19 November 1997. When, in 1968, the then Secretariat for Christian Unity under the direction of Cardinal Bea suggested a meeting of all those involved in biblical apostolate — a meeting which led to the founding of the World Catholic Federation for the Biblical Apostolate (WCFBA) — Fr. Du Buit was there, and he can thus be described as a founding father of the Federation. Fr. Du Buit deserves all our gratitude for his effective engagement.

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East sub-region with the other sub-regions of the Federation.

The Assembly of the Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of Lebanon dealt in their 1997 meeting with the question of how God's Word can be made more accessible to the People of God. The decision was made to organize Bible days ("journées

bibliques"), which were held for the first time during the Christmas holidays of 1997 on the theme "Miracles and Signs of Scripture".

The number of biblical specialists among priests, religious and the laity has doubled since the beginning of the biblical-pastoral in Lebanon. This period has also seen the rise of numerous new centers of re-



ligious education. At present, Lebanon has 25 such centers. The broadcasts of a religious radio station are heard throughout Lebanon and a good part of Syria, and a television station, Télé-Lumière, broadcasts a variety of biblical programs. The 6th Biblical Congress of the Middle-East will be held in Lebanon from 24-30 January 1999; the theme will be the Gospel of John.

Syria

In Syria, yearly Bible retreats are held in a number of cities. This year the focus will be on the Acts of the Apostles and the effect of the Spirit in the Church, in line with the Year of the Holy Spirit in preparation for the year 2000.

Further information on the Middle East:

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Fax: +961-9-90 38 18

(Transl.: L. Maluf / M. Sheridan)

Books and Materials

Fritzleo Lentzen-Deis: S. J., Comentario al Evangelio de Marcos, Modelo de nueva evangelización. Editorial Verbo Divino, Estella, 1998, (480 pages). This commentary on Mark's Gospel, which appears here in a new edition, was written as a "commentary for praxis" and was worked out in Latin America as a model for group Bible reading. In addition to analysis at the syntactical and semantic levels, each periscope is supplied with observations on the intended pragmatic effect of the passage as well. In a novel way, the commentary thus holds together the strictly historical-critical work on the Bible with an emphasis on the way the text engages each Bible reader. The work has also now appeared in German: **Fritzleo Lentzen-Deis: Das Markusevangelium, Ein Kommentar für die Praxis. Published by Eleonore Beck and Gabriele Miller, Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart, 1998** (360 pages).

The Spanish publication of the Casa de la Biblia: **El Evangelio del Espíritu, Cuatro Sesiones de Formación sobre los Hechos de los Apostoles, Editorial Verbo Divino, Estella, 1998** (140 pages), (Gospel of the Spirit, Four Lessons on the Acts of the Apostles) is conceived as a work-notebook. In the four addressed themes — the Holy Spirit, the Christian community, Christian mission, and Christian preaching — texts taken from the Acts of the Apostles are carefully worked out. Each of the four lessons contains material for group-work, commentary on the text in question, and suggestions for further reflection. The entire material is praxis-oriented and is eminently suitable for group-work, for ongoing educational week-ends, etc. The

work-book also contains suggestions for the use of the material.

For information and ordering:

La Casa de la Biblia, Mayor, 81
E-28013 Madrid, Spain
Tel: 34-(9)1-542 24 58
Fax: 34-(9)1-559 17 71

The Comisión Episcopal de Pastoral Bíblica has published the material of the third National Congress for Bible Ministry, which took place from 4-7 August, 1997, in Guadalajara, Mexico, under the title: **Jesuchristo, Plenitud de la Revelación y Clave de Interpretación de la Sagrada Escritura, Mexico 1997** (Jesus Christ: Fullness of Revelation and Interpretative Key of Holy Scripture). Following an introduction to the theme, the 120-page Spanish language monograph contains the three major papers of the congress: *Jesuchristo, Plenitud de la Revelación y Clave de Interpretación de la Sagrada Escritura, Jesuchristo, La Biblia-Palabra de Dios y Palabra humana* (The Bible - Word of God, and human word), *La Biblia en la Vida de la Iglesia* (The Bible in the life of the Church).

Likewise published by the Comisión Episcopal de Pastoral Bíblica was the Spanish language booklet *Los Jóvenes leen la Biblia, Dinámicas de trabajo para la Biblia del Joven*, Comisión Episcopal de Pastoral Bíblica, Mexico 1998 (Young People Read the Bible, Work-Instructions for Young People's Bible). With questions, cross-word puzzles, a song collection, texts and prayers that provoke further thought and reflection, this booklet inspires and encourages the reader of the Bible for young people to playful and at the same time more profound con-

tact with God's Word. With its varied format, the book is directly related to the Young People's Bible: *La Biblia del Joven, Selección de Textos Bíblicos*. Editorial Verbo Divino, Estella, Spain 1985, and is a valuable didactic help for the young people who read and pray this Bible.

For information and ordering:

Comisión Episcopal de Pastoral Bíblica
Avenida Lindavista 109,
Col. Tepeyac Insurgentes
07020 México, D. F.
Tel: 52-5-781 40 24
Fax: 52-5-781 40 52

Instrumentos para Leer-Interpretar la Biblia (Instruments for Reading and Interpreting the Bible) is the name of a booklet (11 pages) that has been published by the Centro Bíblico Verbo Divino in Ecuador. Various methods of reading the Bible — the historical critical method, the sociological, symbolic, contextual, psychological, feminist and fundamentalist interpretations, and also the *lectio divina* method — all are compared to the various instruments of an orchestra. The booklet explains the structure and aims of each method and invites the reader to employ the various methods with reference to a single biblical text (Mk 1:16-45). Biblical interpretation is compared to an orchestra with many instruments that puts to music songs of life and of hope. Normally we play only one or two instruments. This booklet will foster acquaintance with as many instruments of Bible reading as possible.

Another publication of the Equipo Bíblico Verbo Divino in Ecuador,



consisting of thirteen individual booklets, subdivided into five chapters, serves as a guide through the entire Bible.

Chapter 1 is devoted to background knowledge: the origin of the Bible, its authors, places of the Bible, literary genres, inspiration and revelation, Canon, etc. Chapter 2 deals with the various ways in which the biblical text can be used in a group setting (Bible sharing, drama based on the Bible, treatment of the biblical symbols of a scriptural text, exposition of the social, ideological, political and economic dimensions of the text).

Chapter 3 consists of five booklets and deals with the Old Testament divided as follows:

- History and personalities of the Old Testament
- Exodus, a mountain in the middle of a plain: It is about our experiences with freedom
- In search for the meaning of life (Gen 1-11) and the various possibilities of interpretation
- The Prophets, men of God and men for the people
- The Book of Wisdom

Chapter 4 includes two booklets, with the titles "Jesus: his land, his

people and his plan" and "the Gospels".

Chapter 5 consists of four booklets and treats the following themes:

- History and personalities of the New Testament;
- The way of the first communities (Acts of the Apostles)
- Paul and his communities
- Revelation

Ordering and further information:

Centro Bíblico Verbo Divino
Apdo. 17-03-252, Quito, Ecuador
Tel: +593-2-569 318;
Fax: +593-2-566 150

Translations

For further information and ordering:

Verbum Bible, B. P. 7463 Kinshasa,
République Démocratique de Congo

In the Dutch Antilles, the first complete edition of the Bible in Papiamentum, a Creole language spoken by about 260,000 people, has also appeared.

In Surinam, the New Testament has been published in Sarnami. Sarnami is the language of the country's population that are of Indian origin and is spoken by about 150, 000 people.

The deuterocanonical part of the Bible is currently being translated by an inter-confessional team into Asante Twi, a language spoken in Ghana. The books of Tobit, Daniel and Wisdom have already ap-

peared.

For further information, contact:

Catholic Media Network (CaMeN)
Box 607
Kumasi, Ghana

(Transl.: L. Maluf/ M. Sheridan)

The Catholic Biblical Federation (*CBF*) is a world-wide association of Catholic organizations committed to ministry to the Word of God. At the present time, the *CBF* membership includes 89 full members and 216 associate members coming from a total of 123 countries.

The activities of these organizations include the preparation of Catholic and interconfessional Bible translations, the propagation of Bibles and in general the promotion of a deeper understanding of the Holy Scripture.

The *CBF* promotes the biblical pastoral activities of these organizations, provides a forum for the world-wide sharing of experiences in the field, searches for new ways of bringing the joy of God's Word to the faithful throughout the world. The Federation seeks collaboration with the representatives of biblical scholarship as well as with Bible Societies of various confessions.

In particular, the *CBF* works toward the promotion of the reading of the Bible within the context of concrete life situations and the training of ministers of the Word in this direction.

The ministry to the Word of God is ministry to the unity of and communication between human beings. A world which grows together with the help of modern communications and yet continues to show signs of hate and destruction needs more than ever words of peace and fellowship with God and with each other.

Wilhelm Egger, Bishop of Bozen/Brixen, President of the CBF