

# **Catholic Biblical Federation**

**"The Whole Bible is a Parable"**

**Spiritual Interpretation in Early Christianity**

**Biblical Interpretation and Interreligious Dialogue**

**The Bible as Word of God**



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Dear Readers,

This double issue- of the BDV is characterized by two main focal points: the spiritual-symbolic dimension of Holy Scripture and the role of the Bible in interreligious dialogue.

From an Asiatic perspective, Maria Ko interprets the bible as symbol in her contribution entitled "The Whole Bible a Parable" (Clement of Alexandria). This is not a walk through the bible as a "garden of symbols" (G. Ravisi); nor does it claim to offer a hermeneutic of symbol. The intention of the author is rather to grasp the way in which the Bible functions as symbol, in its surplus of meaning. This is no new, no specifically Asian invention. Indeed, the spiritual-symbolic dimension of the Bible has played a central role since the time of the earliest exegetical and hermeneutical efforts to interpret Holy Scripture. This point will be brought out in the article by Mark Sheridan "Spiritual Interpretation of Scripture in Early Christianity — From Paul to Origen".

An intolerant attitude of Christians with respect to other religions, which frequently appears in the history of Christianity, is not least a consequence of a "too literal, uncritical and unscientific reading of Holy Scripture" - so Joseph Pathrapankal in his contribution "Biblical Interpretation and Interreligious Dialogue". An overly literal interpretation of a biblical text can not only miss the spirit of Holy Scripture, but it can also entail serious negative consequences. The Bible itself can here serve as a textbook for openness with respect to other religions and for friendly dialogue with them.

Dialogue is a presupposition for an understanding of different faith traditions. It often happens, however, that one's own religious conceptions are simply transferred to other religions; one's own convictions serve as a key for interpreting unfamiliar religious traditions. This furthers misunderstanding and prevents dialogue. In the article "The Bible as the Word of God — Questions from an Islamic Perspective", a group of Tunisian Christians discusses difficulties in understanding the Bible as the Word of God, such as inevitably arise out of the Islamic understanding of the Word of God in the verbally inspired Koran. The authors offer no definitive answers, but rather lay the groundwork for an understanding of the inquiries that come from an Islamic perspective and for appropriate responses. This article can have a very practical, as well as an exemplary value for our many readers who live in Islamic surroundings.

Besides these major themes, this issue also once again contains a number of news items as well as impressions from the life of the Catholic Bible Federation. As many and varied as are the society members themselves so also are the occasions that require comment: jubilees, conventions, courses and ongoing-education programs, publications, translations, among many other things. This is the last edition of the Bulletin that will look like this. The next issue will have a new, revised format. Suspense, suspense!

My best wishes to you all, and the blessing of God for the New Year!

*Alexander Schweitzer*

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## Feature Articles

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### "The Whole Bible is a Parable"

MARIA KO HA-FONG, FMA

*At the basis of great literary cultures stand classical texts: for the ancient Greeks they were the epics of Homer, for the Jews it was the Old Testament, for Christians, the Old and New Testaments, for Moslems, the Koran. To the extent that these foundation texts are to retain their significance as "canonical" texts within cultures that have undergone changes for over a thousand years, they must be interpreted. They must transcend their literal and their original historical meaning and become the symbol of the corresponding cultures.*

*The Bible as symbol, not as a collection of individual symbols, but as a foundation text of Christian culture which, over and above its literal meaning, inspires many levels of human and societal existence, that has existential significance and effective power for us today over and above its original scope and its original audience — such is the thesis of this essay. The author highlights this symbolic dimension of the Bible with examples from the exegesis of the Fathers of the Church.*

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In this contribution I would like to present symbolism as a dimension that is inherent in the entire Bible. In other words, I shall not attempt to carry out a reflection on the numerous symbols in the Bible, but on the Bible as symbol. I shall not reflect on the possibility of a symbolic reading of the Bible but on the Bible in its function as symbol.

To view the biblical text as symbol is not new. Already Clement of Alexandria asserted, "The whole Bible is a parable."<sup>1</sup> And indeed a certain symbolic value in the sense of a surplus of meaning has been attributed to the Bible in all phases of the history of exegesis.

We must ask: what are we to understand by the word "symbol."

The etymology of the word "symbol" leads us to the concept of "join together". The preposition "syn" followed by the verb "ballo" suggests the idea of two things that are placed in relationship to each other.

Thus the symbolic is in no way placed in opposition to "real" or to "historic"; on the contrary, it is nothing other than a reality that bears in itself potentially a superabundance of significance. "The symbol makes one reflect," says Ricoeur; it opens up a surplus of intelligibility, which indeed does not appear on the surface, but is also not externally or artificially thought up. In this regard X. Léon-Dufour writes: "A symbol joins together two realities, one that is immediately perceptible and one that re-

mains invisible, to which it draws us; the latter shines immediately through the former. From this it follows that the former does not point to the second as something distant and heterogeneous. Although it is indeed not the meaning, it enables the meaning to manifest itself and communicate itself to consciousness."<sup>2</sup>

To consider the Bible as symbol means therefore to underline its peculiar character, namely, to be a manifestation (Epiphany) for a reality that is hidden within it, but which is greater than it and transcends it. The symbol "joins together," the symbol points beyond itself, the symbol "masks and reveals." How is all this realized in the Bible? What does it join together? To what does it point? In





what way does it both mask and uncover the mystery of salvation? To these and similar questions we want to direct our attention now.

It may be permitted to me, as a Chinese, to reason as a Chinese. I proceed in a form that is more circular than linear, more through *parataxis* than through *syntaxis*. The language that I use is more symbolic and evocative than argumentative and speculative. My reflection is structured in three parts. It is not a question of three points so much as it of three circles or rounds, three revolutions, around one and the same reality.

### 1. Theological principles that form the basis for the symbolic character of the Bible

The first step as its goal to search out the basic theological principles on which the symbolic character of the Bible is based. Using as a point of departure above all the declarations of the Second Vatican Council, it seems to me that one can establish the following three principles.

#### 1.1 The Incarnation

The Bible is the incarnation of the Word of God in human words. "The eternal Word of the Father became the human word, so that humans might understand the Word of God. The Word changed himself into words. The Truth accepted that it should be reflected - and fragmented - in many truths."<sup>3</sup>

This "condescension" (*synkatábasis*) of the divine Wisdom, hiding itself in a book, belongs to the same logic as the *kénosis* of the Incarnation. The Church Fathers, above all Origen, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, and Gre-

gory the Great, who reflected very deeply indeed on the nature of the Bible, point out insistently this way of God's acting in the economy of salvation,<sup>4</sup> echoing the astonishment and the moving gratitude of Jesus: "I thank you, Father, for you have hidden all this from the wise and the clever, and have revealed it instead to the simple" (Matt 11: 25).

The Encyclical of Pius XII, *Divino afflante Spiritu*, places the mystery of the Incarnation in a direct relationship with the reality of the Bible. "As the substantial Word of God made himself similar to men in everything except sin (Eph 4:15) so also the words of God expressed in human speech have been made similar to human language in every respect except error." This striking assertion is taken over almost word for word by the Second Vatican Council in the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*. The parallels are not to be overlooked: in becoming man God hides himself in the lowliness of human nature; in the Scripture he hides himself in the lowliness of human words.

By manifesting himself in human speech God anticipates his becoming man and prepares for it. The Scriptures of the Old Testament announce Jesus and direct our attention to him, the Word become flesh; they testify about him and make us recognize him. Jesus himself says it expressly when he reproaches the Jews: "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me" (John 5:39). His death and his resurrection occur, as he himself and his witnesses stress repeatedly "according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-4). After his glorification and return to the Father, his

remembrance is incarnated further in words, which arise under the direction of the Spirit in order to be shared with all and to be forever stamped on history.<sup>5</sup>

The human word of the Bible, although made capable of accommodating God, remains forever arrested in its historical concreteness that is typical of all human realities. It is fixed in a specific context of space and time, reflects the co-ordinates of a specific culture, is expressed by means of a specific language in a concrete literary form. It has human authors, whose names are often known and it is translated and handed on by specific processes of communication. The God of the Bible permits all this gladly and subjects himself to it joyfully, without ever letting himself be imprisoned by it. In the Bible the eternal dwells in the temporal, the creator learns to speak with his earthly creatures,<sup>6</sup> the Almighty hides himself in a book.

The content goes beyond the container. The hidden mystery transcends its manifestation. "The Bible is like an icon, which guards the hidden God, ... it is a witness to the presence as well as to the absence of God in the *kénosis* of the letter."<sup>7</sup> Thus it becomes understandable why there is no immediate and total identification between the Bible and the word of God. "The holy Scripture is not the revelation, but rather a very precious testimony to it."<sup>8</sup> "The holy Scriptures contain the Word of God"; they are the written form of the Word of God intended and guaranteed by God himself. S. Breton has rightly written, "the revelation by means of the Scriptures is the word of God; conversely the Word of God, expressed through the Scriptures, is the revelation."

The Bible is the "tabernacle of the word of God", it is a treasure preserved in an earthen vessel (cf. 2 Cor 4:7), a symbol that is to be understood in the perspective of the Incarnation. By means of this symbol the infinite distance of God and his complete accessibility are joined together. God himself says in Deuteronomy: "For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it." (Deut 30:11-14)

Before the Bible then there can be neither idolatry nor absolutizing, nor, on the other hand, scandal on account of its humble form but only "reverent listening" and thankful astonishment over the wonderful divine condescension.

## 1.2 *The sacramental character*

The sacramental character of the Bible is closely bound up with its integration in the mystery of the Incarnation. As in the Incarnation Jesus hides himself under the veil of the flesh and in the Eucharist under the veil of the bread and wine so also in the Scripture he hides himself under the veil of the word.

The Second Vatican Council stressed especially the parallel between the Word of God and the Eucharist and thereby underlined sacramentality as a basic dimension of the Bible: "The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's Word and of Christ's body".<sup>9</sup> This affirmation is, however, not a novelty of the Second Vatican Council. Rather it is found in an unbroken ecclesiastical tradition, which has been cultivated and strengthened since

the days of the Church Fathers. In this context the words of Origen from a famous homily are well-known: "You who are accustomed to take part in divine mysteries know, when you receive the body of the Lord, how you protect it with all caution and veneration lest any small part fall from it, lest anything of the consecrated gift be lost. For you believe, and correctly, that you are answerable if anything falls from there by neglect. But if you are so careful to preserve his body, and rightly so, how do you think that there is less guilt to have neglected God's word than to have neglected his body?"<sup>10</sup>

Jerome also expressed it very clearly: "Since the flesh of the Lord is true food and his blood true drink, the true good that is reserved for us in the present life is to nourish ourselves from his flesh and his blood, not only in the Eucharist, but also in the reading of sacred Scripture. In fact the word of God which is reached through knowledge of the Scriptures is true food and true drink."<sup>11</sup>

The Bible and the sacrament of the Eucharist are two types of containers, two places of safe-keeping for the memory of Jesus. While the Bible fixes, prolongs and spreads everywhere the salvific event by means of the written word, the Eucharist does this by means of the celebration of the sacraments. The command "Go and proclaim" (cf. Matt 28:19) is inseparable from the saying "Do this in memory of me" (Luke 22:19).

The sacramentality of the Scripture manifests itself also in the fact that the Word of God contained in it often has effects beyond the often inaccessible, limited, or imperfect powers of comprehension of the person. The Word of God is effective almost entirely by itself,



Drawings in this issue by Sr. Regina Bong-Ja Choi, SOLPH (Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help) are an associate member of the CBF in South Korea)



does not let itself be conditioned, for it is "is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12). It is like the rain and the snow, which does not return to heaven without having watered the earth and made it to sprout (cf. Is 55:10-11). It "is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). "In the sacred books," it says in the constitution *Dei Verbum*, "the force and power in the Word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons..."<sup>12</sup>

Just as in the sacraments the perceptible signs do not produce the salvific effects in an automatic way, so also the word fixed in the holy text does not have magical effects, but only in the encounter of reception, above all through the listening of the liturgical community. Every written determination is above all an act of inscription; the thought is expressed, enclosed in certain words, and printed on the paper. As soon as the hand of the writer is removed from the paper, that which is written takes on a life of its own. The author disappears, hides himself, and in a certain way dies in what is written. The latter appears then as his testament, an inheritance, that awaits those who will read it. The books in the library, including the Bible, are at rest as in a cemetery and await their resurrection. The reading of a book is like a reawakening to a new life, to unimagined effect, to potentially unlimited meanings. The encounter of faith with the Bible opens the living Word to the reader and at the same time calls the holy text back to life. The celebration of the liturgy is the privileged place for the re-birth of the Bible, as it is also the place of its birth. In the liturgical proclamation of the Scripture the "It stands written" becomes the

"Today the word of Scripture is fulfilled" (Luke 4:21).

### 1.3 Unity and wholeness of the mystery of salvation

The symbol joins together different realities to create not just a sum of the parts but a unified whole. The Bible is a book and at the same time a library, or more precisely a library that forms a book. The different writings were born over a thousand year period, they tell of many figures, they have different authors, different literary forms, different historical contexts, different languages, but they form a unity in reference to a unique revealing God, to single plan of salvation that unfolds in history. They are inspired by one single Spirit and they are addressed to one community united as one people of God. Above all they have their common center in Jesus Christ.

The word Bible, *biblia*, the plural of *biblion*, reflects the "healthy neutrality of a singular-plural". Likewise the designation "Sacred Scripture", rather than "sacred writings" underscores the unity of the Revelation rather than the concrete form in which it has been fixed in a plurality of texts.

The constitution *Dei Verbum* contains basic principles for the interpretation of the Bible and emphasizes: "But, since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out."<sup>13</sup>

From the beginning a conviction runs through the whole tradition of the Church that all of Sacred Scrip-

ture finds its unity and fullness in Christ. He is the Lamb who opens the book closed with the seven seals, which remains undecipherable and incomprehensible without him (cf. Rev 5:1-10). "God spoke a single Word, when he spoke through his Son," says Ambrose. And Origen writes: "The Word of God, which in the beginning was with God, is in his fullness not a multiplicity of words, not many words, but a single word ... and all the holy books together form a single book."<sup>14</sup> Rupert of Deutz also stresses this aspect: "The entirety of the Scriptures, every single word, was brought together in the womb of the Virgin" – that is, in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary. Christ is designated by many medieval theologians as the *Verbum abbreviatum*, as the abbreviated word of God, condensed in his person.

In Christ the one is closely connected with the whole, for he is "the recapitulation of all things" (Eph 1:10); and the divine Scriptures participate in this characteristic of his. In fact they makes us know everything that is necessary. "Ignorance of the Scriptures, in fact, is ignorance of Christ"; but not only that, it is ignorance of the world, of life, of history, because "everything that a human tongue can say, and the mind of mortal man can grasp, is contained in this volume."<sup>15</sup>

The Bible is thus the symbol that gathers all into one and forms a whole that is not obtained from the sum of the parts. It is a synthesis that does not submit to any analysis. As a consequence, the interpretation of the Bible goes beyond every technical application and bursts the framework of historical-critical exegesis.



The awareness that the Bible, as well as its center, Christ, is "all in one," creates in the reader the assurance that it is not necessary to search elsewhere for what is essential to his salvation. At the same time it spurs him on to sink himself more deeply into the ever new truth, the inexhaustible riches and fascinating beauty of the text, and finally to strive to make this precious good available to all others.

## 2. Symbols, which express the symbolic content of the Bible

In this second step we are trying to describe the symbolic character of the Bible by means of the symbols themselves. After having determined the basic principles, we want to ask ourselves the question whether the symbolic character of the text was discussed in the Bible itself or in the early Church, and if it was, then how was it discussed. In this way we will determine at once that the Bible prefers to present itself through pictures rather than through clearly defined concepts. Likewise among the Church Fathers the need was prevalent to describe the nature of the Bible with symbols and not so much through argumentation. Among the numerous pictures used in the Bible we want to select a few, which, in my opinion, show especially clearly the symbolic dimension of the sacred text.

### 2.1 A Book to drink

The constitution *Dei Verbum* states that the Holy Scripture is "a pure unquenchable source of life" and invites the Christians to be saturated with its Spirit".<sup>16</sup>

The Bible is a book to be drunk, an unquenchable spring, from

which pure, fresh water bubbles forth. The image is very common in the Bible itself and in the Fathers. The prophet Isaiah compares listening to the Word of God with drinking from a spring: "Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters ...; Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live" (Is 55:1-3). In the New Testament this spring is Jesus and his salvific gifts, among which the Church Fathers give first place to the gift of his Word captured in the biblical text. The following invitation comes from Ambrose: "Draw up the water of Christ, this water that praises the Lord. Draw in many places the water that falls from the clouds of the prophets. Whoever collects water from the mountains and brings it into himself or whoever draws from the springs, he also, like the clouds, makes it to rain on others. Fill your soul completely with it so that your earth may be watered and irrigated from its own springs. Whoever reads much [in the Scriptures] and recognizes the meaning of what is read, is filled; and whoever has been filled, can also irrigate others ..."<sup>17</sup> And also: "Drink from the springs of the Old and New Testament, for from both of them you drink Christ. ... One drinks the divine Scripture, indeed one devours them precisely when the lifegiving juice of the everlasting word penetrates the veins of the spirit and the powers of the soul."<sup>18</sup>

In his commentary on the story of the Samaritan woman, Origen points out that Scripture has the function of a symbol, of a trampoline, that brings us to Christ, just as Christ used the water of Jacob's well to bring the Samaritan woman to himself, the true source of the water of life: "Scripture is an introduction, it has the name therefore of 'Jacob's well'; whoever understands it exactly, comes unerringly to Jesus, so that he may give us a

spring from which flows the water of everlasting life."<sup>19</sup>

There is also a splendid page in the works of Ephrem the Syrian where he applies to Scripture the symbol of a bubbling fountain, whose source never runs dry: "We are like thirsty people who drink from a fountain. Your word offers many different aspects, as different as are the viewpoints of those who study it. The Lord has hidden in his Word all manner of treasures, so that each of us may find riches in what we contemplate. One who finds one of these riches should not think that there is nothing else in the word of God than that which he has found. Rather he should be aware that he has been able to discover only one among the many other things there. After being enriched from the Word, he should not think that it has been impoverished. Incapable of exhausting the riches, he should give thanks for its immensity. Rejoice that you have been sated, but do not be saddened by the fact that the riches of the word are beyond you. Whoever is thirsty is glad to be able to drink, but is not saddened because he cannot dry up the fountain. It is better that the fountain satisfy your thirst than that your thirst make the fountain run dry. Be grateful for that which you have received and do not murmur over that which remains unused. What you have taken away is yours, but what remains is also your heritage. What you have not been able to receive all at once because of your weakness, you may receive in other moments with perseverance. Do not have the impudence to want to take all at once what can only be attained in stages, and do not withdraw from that which you can receive only a little at a time."<sup>20</sup>

Just as a spring offers its water to whoever wants to quench his





thirst, so the Bible is open to all, its inexhaustible riches are not consumed with time. Like one who drinks from a spring, the reader of the Bible knows that he is in the presence of something inexhaustible and always available, which he approaches not with the desire to possess it but with the desire to let himself be permeated by it.

## 2.2 A Book to eat

The Bible is the "food of the soul."<sup>21</sup> The image is very familiar to the Bible itself. In Deut 8:3 it says: "And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, .... that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD." This verse is cited then also by Jesus (Matt 4:4).

The manna (the word means "what is it?") is a reality whose consistency does not permit definition. "It is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat" is the only description that Moses is able to give. The Israelites "gathered, some more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, he that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack; each gathered according to what he could eat." Those who wanted to put away some to provide for the future found that "it bred worms and became foul" (Exod 16:12-21). It is a gratuitous divine gift that cannot be expropriated, a food that cannot be measured but that satisfies all degrees of need. Origen sees it as an obvious symbol of Scripture. He writes "Let us, therefore, now hasten to receive the heavenly manna. The manna imparts the kind of taste to each mouth that each one wishes. For hear also the Lord saying to those who approach him: 'Be it done unto you according to your

faith' (Matt 8:13)." And, therefore, if you receive the Word of God which is preached in the Church with complete faith and devotion, that Word will become whatever you desire."<sup>22</sup>

Scripture not only adapts itself to the one who nourishes himself from it, but also has the capacity to transform him and mould him according to his own needs. And, like the Eucharistic bread, Scripture assimilates the one who eats it. It is this that is emphasized in the accounts of the vocation of the prophets, especially that of Ezechiel. God asks him to eat the scroll: "Son of man, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it" (Ezech 3:3). Only in this way, permeated by the Word of God, is the prophet able to speak in his name. Jeremiah experiences emotionally the marvelous effect produced by this food, exclaiming with joy "Thy words were found, and I ate them, and thy words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart" (Jer 15:16). In order that the taste of this food remain for a long time and so that the benefits that derive from it might be interiorized, the masters of spirituality insist on the necessity of *rumination*, that is to absorb thoroughly the Scripture that has been heard and read, turning it over continually in the heart and mind.

Whoever "eats" the Bible lives from it and gradually comes, so to speak, to be "eaten" by it. This reciprocal consuming, mysterious but real, can be grasped only by means of the symbol, which "brings together", creating a new unity by mutual co-penetration.

## 2.3 A Book that runs

The Bible is like a wheel that turns. This symbolical interpretation is linked with the name of Gregory

the Great, who, in order to illustrate the dynamism of Scripture, makes use of the text containing the vision of the four living beings in the Book of Ezechiel. The living beings are moved by the impulse of the Spirit. Beside each one of these, and connected with their movements, four wheels move. "And when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. Wherever the spirit would go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them; for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels" (Ezech 1:19-20).

Already by the second century, as one can read in Irenaeus, the four living creatures were associated with the four gospels. Gregory's attention is attracted, instead, not so much by the creatures as by the wheels, which for him are a symbol of sacred Scripture. "What else does the wheel designate if not the sacred Scripture that turns in every direction in order to adapt itself to the mind of the one who is listening, and is not slowed down by any corner in its proclamation, that is, by any error? It turns in every direction so that it may proceed straight ahead and on the ground, in the midst of adversity and prosperity. The circle of its teachings is found now above, now below: what is said spiritually to the perfect is adapted to the weak according to the letter and what the little ones understand according to the letter, the more learned make rise on high through spiritual understanding."<sup>23</sup>

The wheel expresses the idea that the journey of the biblical word under the impulse of the Spirit is unstoppable and infallible. Paul also uses some very suggestive images to emphasize the liveliness and dynamism of the Word of God. This is "the power of God for sal-

vation" (Rom 1:16); it must "run its course" (2 Thes 3:1), free and tenacious, like an athlete who runs unstoppably toward the goal. Its bearer can be in chains and persecuted but "the word of God is not fettered" (2 Tim 2:9). The Holy Spirit is the moving force in this race. In fact the day of Pentecost signals the beginning of this race from Jerusalem to reach the entire world. The Bible bears in itself all this dynamism of the Spirit. The sacred writings are inspired by the Spirit in a passive sense but they also "breathe the Spirit" in an active sense,<sup>24</sup> that is, the Spirit lives in the Bible and acts in and by means of it. It animates it in its race through the world.

On the day of Pentecost the Spirit enabled all of the hearers of the word of God to understand it in their own language. In its race through the world the Bible is translated in different languages and inculturated in diverse situations. Like the wheel that turns peacefully above the tall and the short, so also the Bible adapts itself sovereignly to all of its addressees. It "becomes all things to all" (1 Cor 9:22); arriving everywhere, it "brings together" all, attracting and involving all in forming unity.

#### 2.4 *A Book that grows*

The dynamism is connected with growth. "And the Word of God increased" Luke testifies at the beginning of the Church (Acts 6:7). The expression is dense with meaning. It is a growth of the visible word, recognizable in the increase of the number of disciples, by the constant diffusion of the Christian message in larger geographical areas, but it is also a growth that escapes statistical measurement: the growth and the development of God's salvific project in history.

Thus it is a growth of the Word itself.

It is true that with the definitive closing of the canon the quantitative content of the Bible is fixed forever. The Bible no longer grows in volume. It can grow only in reproductions, in translations, in new editions. Nevertheless, there is also a growth for the sacred text, invisible but not less real. In fact after the fixing of the canon, the Bible has never ceased to grow in the life of the Church. It grows in believability through those who live it and bear witness to it. It grows more profound through exegetical study and theological reflection. It grows in vitality in the liturgical celebrations and in pastoral activity. It grows in popularity through diffusion and penetration in diverse societies and cultures.

Developing the Gospel parable, Origen compares the Bible to a seed destined by its nature to grow and expand: "I think each word of Divine Scripture is like a seed whose nature is to multiply diffusely, reborn into an ear of corn or whatever its species be, when it has been cast into the earth."<sup>25</sup>

Gregory makes a very apt and well-known affirmation about the growth of the Bible: "Scriptum cum legente crescit,"<sup>26</sup> Scripture grows with the one reading it. It grows as a result of being read. It is a question of a simultaneous growth of the reader and the text, or better, of the reader with the text and of the text with the reader. The Bible, the final product of the fixing in writing of the Word of God, becomes the starting point for a process of unlimited growth. The text is then the juxtaposition of a goal and a launching point, the symbolism of a marvelous dynamism. Gregory also writes: "The Word of God will grow together with you, because from the Word of God you will draw

profit to the extent to which you yourself will progress in it; better, one discovers the marvelous power of the Word of God when the soul of the one who reads is pervaded by love for the things above. Have you reached the active life? It walks with you. Have you reached a certain stability and consistency of spirit? It remains stable with you. Have you arrived, by the grace of God, at the contemplative life? The text flies with you."<sup>27</sup>

This simultaneous growth occurs not only at the level of the individual reader but with even greater intensity in the community. It is Gregory who says also: "I know that often many things in the sacred Scripture that I did not succeed in understanding when I was alone, I did understand when I was in the midst of my brethren."<sup>28</sup> The ecclesial community and in particular the liturgical ecclesial community, the original birth place of Scripture, is also the privileged place for its growth.

#### 2.5 *A Book written within and without*

In the vision of Ezechiel (2:9) as also in that of the Apocalypse (5:1) a book appears written on both sides, inside and outside. The association of this book with the Bible in the exegesis of the ancient Church is more than obvious. The fact that the book is written both on the inside and the outside becomes for the fathers an argument in support of the different senses or different levels of interpretation of the Bible. Origen writes: "By this book is intended the Scripture in its entirety, writing 'outside' according to the immediate, that is, literal sense, and 'inside' according to the deeper and spiritual sense."<sup>29</sup> And Gregory explains: "The scroll of the Word of God is written inside by means of allegory, on the



outside by means of the history; inside by means of the spiritual understanding, outside by means of the simple literal sense adapted to those spirits that are still weak; inside, because it promises invisible goods, outside because it establishes the order of the visible things with the rectitude of its precepts . . . .<sup>30</sup>

However the different senses of the Bible are proposed, one thing is clear: the Bible is polysignificant. It is a symbol in which the different senses can encounter each other without contradicting one another, can coexist without reciprocally excluding one another. The reading of the Bible thus creates a symbolic space in which the learned and the ignorant, saints and sinners, old and young, rich and poor, men and women of all cultures, all races and all times encounter one another to be united in Christ and find in him and in his Word life and salvation. There comes to mind spontaneously here the image that Isaiah uses to describe the messianic harmony and peace: "the calf and the lion will pasture together ... and the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Is 11:6-8). Gregory makes a charming comparison: the Bible is like "a river, low enough for a lamb to cross and deep enough for an elephant to swim in it." And Augustine exclaims with emotion: "O marvelous depths of your revelation! Behold, before us stands their surface smiling at the little ones; but their depths are marvelous. My God, marvelous is the depth! A holy terror compels us to immerse our gaze in it, terror because of honor, tremor because of love."<sup>31</sup>

## 2.6 A Book that inflames

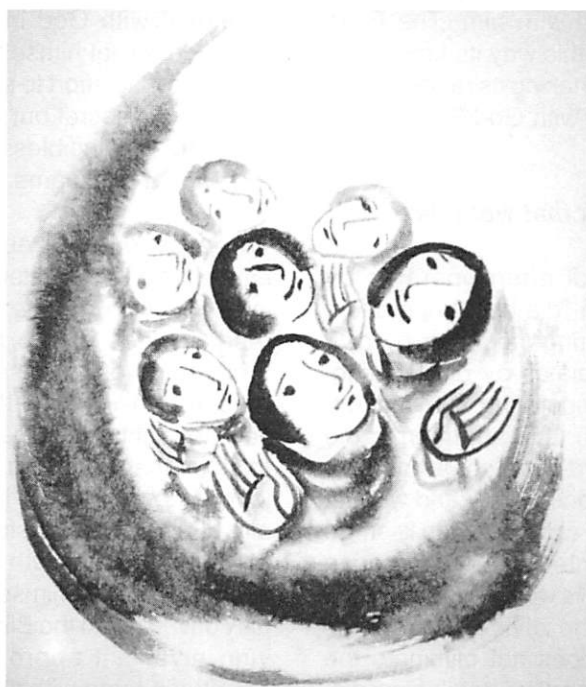
The Bible is not only a book that is read, but it reads its readers and works in them. In its function as

symbol the Bible brings together the word of God "living and active" (Heb 4:12) and the person who receives it, offering itself as the field for divine action. The sacred Scripture is often compared to fire, above all when it is explained by Jesus. The two disciples of Emmaus who experienced this felt "our hearts burn within us" (Luke 24:32).

Fire inflames, burns, spreads, tends to involve and transform everything with which it comes in contact. Thus is the Word of God. It is an overwhelming power; it has the power of irresistible attraction. Jeremiah admits having to surrender before this word: "O LORD, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived; thou art stronger than I, and thou hast prevailed. ... there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (Jer 20:7-9). Origen comments on this passage: "There is in fact a fire that burns the heart and, beginning from the heart, arrives at the bones, and spreading in the bones, penetrates the whole

man and penetrates in such a way that the one who is so burned is unable to bear it. This fire is lit by the Lord who has said, 'I have come to cast fire upon the earth' (Luke 12:40). The Savior begins to cast the fire in the heart of those who listen to him, as Simon and Cleophas confess with regard to his words 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?'"

The Bible seduces, impassions, inflames. Whoever reads it must seek with all his power to let himself be devoured by that ardent fire hidden within. Reflecting on what God says in the Book of Jeremiah: "Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?" (Jer 23:29), Gregory affirms that the Bible is truly like a flint stone, which is cold if it is only held in the hand, but if it is struck, it shoots forth sparks and emits fire. Ambrose associates this fire of Scripture with that which Moses saw in the burning bush, a fire that burns but does not consume, illuminates,





elevates but does not destroy, and also with that which the apostles received on the day of Pentecost, which is the image of the power of the Spirit.<sup>32</sup>

Many other fathers see in the fire symbolizing the Bible the seducing love of God that emanates from the pages and from between the lines of sacred Scripture. Thus Augustine exclaims "O Lord, I love you. I do not doubt it, I am certain that I love you. You have struck my heart with your love and I loved you."<sup>33</sup> To let oneself be inflamed by Scripture is being burned by those tongues of fire of which the Song of Songs speaks (cf. Cant 8:6); it is to receive the kiss of the beloved (Cant 1:1), to encounter the one who "comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills" (Cant 2:8); it is to listen with love to the voice of the bridegroom, it is "to learn to know the heart of God through his words"<sup>34</sup> in order to conform oneself to him. Once alight with this fire, the reader comes gradually to "having the mind of Christ" (cf. 1 Cor 2:16) and to have the same sentiments that were in him (cf. Phil 2:5), to being harmonized with him. The Bible explains in this way its function of symbol by making its reader "*sympathetikós*" with God.<sup>35</sup>

### 2.7 A Book that wounds

The symbol often operates by means of a "dia-bolic" operation, that is, it brings together by dividing, associates by dissociating, unites by separating. The encounter between God and man in the biblical word does not always occur in a peaceful way and without resistance, although man is structurally oriented to God and open to hearing his word. Sympathy, the fusion of the divine and human horizons, does not eliminate the distinction and the ontological dis-

tance and thus the encounter is not immune to conflicts. The book that is eaten is "sweet like honey" in the mouth but "fills the stomach with bitterness" (cf. Rev 10:8-10). Scripture is a kiss of the beloved but also a sharp twoedged sword, "piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow" (Heb 4:12).

The sword is one of the most frequent biblical symbols used to designate the Word of God. If it is a sword, that means that the Word wounds, cuts, provokes a shock, upsets, overturns schemes, takes away security, opens a wound. When Peter, after Pentecost, began to announce the Easter message, all "were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37). The answer is immediate and unequivocal: "repent" (*metanoésate*). The same thing happens to the one who reads Scripture. It is necessary to let oneself be wounded, let oneself be judged, to change and convert to be conformed to its requirements. The reader is called to struggle with this book as Jacob struggled with God in the darkness. He will let himself be wounded not by the effort to snatch from the book its secret but by hearing the word of divine blessing and by receiving a new name.

The experience of Augustine is emblematic. The mysterious divine invitation *tolle et lege*: "take and read", guided him to find in the Bible the sword that set him free from his previous life, the fire that set him alight within, the water and the food that sustained him on the journey toward a new life. Gradually his life was transformed and his relationship with the Bible changed also. He himself recounts his conversion to the Bible: "Deceiving myself, I approached the Scriptures more with the intention

of debating than with the desire of seeking, and thus, with my own attitude, I was closing the door of my Savior in my face; instead of knocking that it might be opened, I was doing everything possible to keep it closed. In my pride I was claiming to search for that which only one who is humble can find..... Wretched me, thinking myself capable of flying, I abandoned the nest and fell before flying. But the Lord in his kindness picked me up and put me back in the nest so that I might not be trampled by the passersby and die."<sup>36</sup>

Origen also, although his path to living the word was very different, affirms with conviction: "as long as we read the divine Scriptures without understanding, as long as what has been written is obscure to us and closed, we have not yet turned to the Lord."<sup>37</sup>

### 3. The reading of the Bible as symbolic experience

We have arrived at the third step in which we intend to explain quickly and by way of conclusion how the reading of the Bible, that is, the authentic encounter with the sacred text, can be considered a symbolic experience. The point of view now, as distinguished from the second step, is no longer the Bible, but the reader who approaches the Bible. Here also we will reflect with images without claiming to be either exhaustive or systematic. We will let ourselves be provoked by a few biblical words that have an intense symbolic power.

#### 3.1 "Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this" (Ps 62:12)

This psalm verse has been used in Rabbinic biblical hermeneutics





to demonstrate the superabundance of meaning in Scripture. Every word, every letter of the Bible is constrained, so to speak, to bear a weight many times superior to its strength. Every biblical word is a challenge to the unutterable, an attempt to say the unsayable. In every word something like "a marvelous contraction of the infinite" is made present.<sup>38</sup> Thus the reading of the Bible is an immersion in the infinite through the means of the symbolism of the text. In this way one can understand an ancient saying that the interpretation of the Bible is infinite.<sup>39</sup> A work of art never ceases to give rise to amazement. Its eternal beauty is not due to the fact that it imposes a single unique sense on different people but because it succeeds in suggesting different senses to a single person.

John Paul II says in this regard: "When God expresses himself in human language, he does not give to every expression a uniform value but uses the possible nuances with great flexibility and accepts also their limitations. It is this that renders the task of the exegete so complex, so necessary and so engrossing."<sup>40</sup>

### **3.2 "who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." (Matt 13:51)**

This saying of Jesus, placed by Matthew at the end of the sermon on the parables, serves to underline the continuity and the perennial newness of the biblical revelation. God's self-communication occurred in history following the rhythm of a historical development in which the new brings to completion the old without nullifying it, the previously unsaid surpasses the tradition without detaching itself from it. The Bible itself, in the mutually penetrating articulation of

its two parts - the Old and the New Testaments - constructs a marvelous symbol that brings together the old and the new. The old is the bearer of the new and the new is permeated with the old.

The symbol is always old and always new because it belongs to all times and succeeds in uniting in itself past, present and future, placing all in a perspective that goes beyond time. In reading the Bible a person inserts his own brief and limited history in this flow of the history of salvation condensed in the text and discovers with wonder that between the "in that time," "today" and "the days are coming", between the Alpha and the Omega, there is a continuity founded on a single design.

In this way the reading of the Bible becomes a experience symbolic of the eschatological tension of the "already" and the "not yet," of the harmony between the understanding coming from the tradition and the discovery of newness bearing the future.

### **3.3 "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." (Luke 2:19-31)**

Luke gives a stupendous description of Mary's attitude living with Jesus, that is, of Mary who reads not the words of God fixed in a book, but the Word of God made flesh and become her Son. Luke has repeated this phrase twice and has used precisely the word *symbolousa*, that is, bring together, juxtapose to produce a symbolic experience.<sup>41</sup> Mary is an excellent model of the Church and of every Christian who reads the Bible. She knows how to read the whole in the fragment, knows how to re-think things in a wider horizon, at a more profound level and in a dynamic way. Her heart is the place

in which the salvific event, previously manifested in historical fragments, is recomposed in unity. She is herself a living symbol.

### **3.4 "To turn the hearts of the children toward their fathers" (Mal 3:24)**

The phrase is from the prophet Malachi, who is speaking of the new Elijah. We may place it alongside the symbolic experience of reading the Bible.

To read the Bible is to listen to the Father who "meets his children with great love and speaks with them."<sup>42</sup> Obviously the reading nourishes the filial love for the Father and provokes the turning toward him by means of Jesus Christ. But there is still another dimension of filial conversion not less real, that is, the communion with the fathers in the faith. The Bible inserts its reader into the chain of believers from Abraham to the contemporary Church creating a mysterious and strong sense of solidarity. Whoever reads the Bible has the experience of contemplating the faces of his own ancestors, of feeling himself "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1). The Bible brings together different histories of faith into the one history of salvation. The Bible is the symbol of human solidarity and communion. In reading the Bible one experiences a mystical living together with the protagonists whose stories are narrated in the books, with the generations of believers who have read them, interpreted them, impressed them on their memory, relived them and transmitted them, and with the future generations who will continue to read them and live them. The Bible becomes thus the heritage of all of humanity and the reading of the Bible an experience symbolic of re-

turning home. One could apply to the Bible what the psalmist says: "The LORD records as he registers the peoples, 'This one was born there.' 7 Singers and dancers alike say, 'All my springs are in you.'" (Ps 87:6-7)

### **3.5 *Read it in the square in the presence of the people* (Neh 8:3)**

The sense of allusion to the description of the liturgy of the Word in the post-exilic community narrated in the Book of Nehemiah is obvious. It underlines the communitarian dimension of the reading of the Bible. The Bible was born in the community of God's people and finds its most authentic place of proclamation, of listening and of interpretation in the community. The Bible can be considered a symbol of the ecclesiastical community, a community that lives and walks listening to the Word of God and in the celebration of its own salvation. In the Bible the community finds its identity and in the community the Bible finds its own vital context.

This symbolism reaches its most profound sense, its fullest mani-

festation, its most authentic truth in the liturgical proclamation.

### **3.6 *"They need no light of lamp or sun"* (Rev 22:5)**

The symbol refers to something beyond itself. It is not an absolute; its function is tied to our historical and contingent existence. So also is the Bible. The word of God is eternal and will never pass away, but it is not so with the Bible. There will be a day when we will be able, like the seer of the Apocalypse, to "turn to see the voice" (Rev 1:12) of the one who has spoken to us through the writings. Then we will cease to read the Bible and we will contemplate him face to face. Then will cease the weary work of symbolic deciphering. The written words will disappear and the eternal Word will remain. The symbol will disappear, because there will no longer be need of something that "brings together"; there will be direct and immediate union.

Augustine has a beautiful page concerning this. I cite it as a conclusion of my reflection: "When the Lord returns, it will be a day so bright that lamps will no longer be

necessary. The prophet will no longer be read, the book of the Apostle will no longer be opened, we will no longer seek the witness of John, we will no longer have need even of the gospel. Therefore all the Scriptures will be eliminated, which were lit for us like lamps in the night of this age, because we will no longer be in the darkness. With all these things set aside, what will we see? On what will our mind feed? In what will our life take delight? From where will come that joy that eye has not seen, nor ear heard, that has never entered into the heart of man? What will we see? ... The Gospel tells us: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' You will arrive at the source from which you received a few drops of dew. You will see openly that light from which only a ray, indirectly and obliquely, has reached your heart still wrapped in darkness and in need of purification. Finally you will be able to see that light and to bear its brightness."<sup>43</sup>

(Transl.: Mark Sheridan, osb)



<sup>1</sup>CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Stromata* VI, 15,125 (GCS 15,494).

<sup>2</sup>LÉON-DUFOUR X., *Lecture de l'évangile selon Jean*, Paris, Ed. du Seuil 1987, 19.

<sup>3</sup>CONSIGLIO DELL' ASSOCIAZIONE PROFESSORI E CULTORI DI LITURGIA (ed.), *Celebrare in Spirito e Verità. Sussidio teologico-pastorale per la formazione liturgica*, Rome, Edizioni liturgiche 1992, 33.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum* IV, 15-16 (SC 136,217-221): "He adapted himself to the weakness of the one who could not bear the radiance and the splendor of his divinity, making himself so to speak, "flesh" and expressing himself in bodily terms so as to permit whoever receives him in this form to raise himself rapidly by means of the Word even to contemplate, so to speak, his principal form"; JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *In Genesim homiliae* 17,1 (PG 53,134): "In the Scripture the condescension of the eternal Wisdom is manifested "so that we might comprehend the ineffable goodness of God and to what extent he, caring and provident in regard to our human nature, has adapted his speech." This is cited by the II Vatican Council, *DV* 13.

<sup>5</sup>See the discourse of John Paul II. of 23 April 1993 at the audience on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* of Pius XII., in Pontificia Commissione Biblica, *L'interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1994,8.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. TERTULLIAN, *Adversus Praxean* 16,4 (CCL 2,1181).

<sup>7</sup>CAILLOT J., *L'Evangile de la communication* = *Cogitatio Fidei* 152,

Paris, Ed. du Cerf 1989, 274.

<sup>8</sup>MARTINI-PACOMIO, *I Libri di Dio* 2.

<sup>9</sup>*DV* 21.

<sup>10</sup>ORIGEN, *In Exodum homiliae* 13-3 (SC 16,263). Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus* (trans. Ronald E. Heine; The Fathers of the Church 71; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982).

<sup>11</sup>JEROME, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem* 3,13 (CCL 72,278).

<sup>12</sup>*DV* 21.

<sup>13</sup>*DV* 12.

<sup>14</sup>ORIGEN, *Commentarius in Evangelium secundum Johannem* V, 5-6 (SC 120,380-384).

<sup>15</sup>JEROME, *Commentarius in Isaiam Prophetam*, Prologus (PL 24,17-18).

<sup>16</sup>*DV* 25.

<sup>17</sup>AMBROSE, *Epistola* II, 4 (PL 16, 918).

<sup>18</sup>AMBROSE, *Enarratio in Psalmum* I, 33 (PL 14,983).

<sup>19</sup>ORIGEN, *Commentarius in Evangelium secundum Johannem* XIII, 6,37 (SC 222,50).

<sup>20</sup>EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *Commentarius in Diatessaron* I, 18-19 (SC 121, 52-53).

<sup>21</sup>*DV* 21.

<sup>22</sup>ORIGEN, *In Exodum homiliae* 7-8 (SC 16,82). Eng. trans. Heine, p. 313 (see note 21).

<sup>23</sup>GREGORY THE GREAT, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam* I,5,2 (CCL 142,57).

<sup>24</sup>Cf. AMBROSE, *De Spiritu Sancto* III,112 (PL 16,837). It is in this sense that *Dei Verbum* says of the Scriptures that "as inspired by God (passive inspiration!) and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the Word of God himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit (active inspiration!)

resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles (*DV* 21).

<sup>25</sup>ORIGEN, *In Exodum homiliae* 1,1 (SC 16,77). Eng. trans. Heine, p. 227 (See note 21).

<sup>26</sup>GREGORY THE GREAT, *Moralia* 20,1 (CCL 143A,1003) as well as in several homilies.

<sup>27</sup>GREGORY THE GREAT, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam* I,7,9; I,7,15-16 (CCL 142,87-88; 92-93).

<sup>28</sup>IBID. *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam* II,2,1 (CCL 142,225).

<sup>29</sup>ORIGEN, *Commentarius in Evangelium secundum Johannem* V, 5-6 (SC 120,380-384).

<sup>30</sup>GREGORY THE GREAT, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam* I,9,30 (CCL 142, 139).

<sup>31</sup>AUGUSTINE, *Confessionum* XII, 14,17 (PL 32,832).

<sup>32</sup>Cf. AMBROSE, *Enarratio in Psalmum* XXXVIII,15 (PL 14,1096).

<sup>33</sup>AUGUSTINE, *Confessionum* X, 6,8 (PL 32,782).

<sup>34</sup>GREGORY THE GREAT, *Registrum Epistolarum* V,46 (CCL 140,340).

<sup>35</sup>*Syn-páthos*, to feel the same. "Sym-pathy is state in which a person is open to the presence of another. It is a sentiment that perceives the sentiment to which it reacts: the opposite of emotive solitude. In the prophetic sympathy, man is open to the presence and to the emotion of the transcendent Subject. He bears within himself the consciousness of what is happening to God." HESCHEL J.A., *Il messaggio dei profeti*. Rome, Borla 1981, 119.

<sup>36</sup>AUGUSTINE, Sermon 51 [ed. P. Verbraken, RB 91(1981) pp.23-45] [this text p. 27].

<sup>37</sup>ORIGEN, *In Exodum homiliae*

12,1 (SC 16,246); trad. Heine, p. 368 (see note 21).

<sup>38</sup> LEVINAS E., *L'aldilà del versetto*, Neapel, Guida Editori 1986,59

<sup>39</sup> Cf. BORI P.C., *L'interpretazione infinita. L'ermeneutica cristiana antica e le sue trasformazioni*, Bologna, Il Mulino 1987.

<sup>40</sup> JOHN PAUL II., Discourse on the interpretation of the Bible in the Church given April 23, 1993 during the audience commemorating the centenary of the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* of Leo XIII. and

the fiftieth anniversary of the encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* of Pius XII., in Pontificia Commissione Biblica, *L'interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa* Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1993,10.

<sup>41</sup> HANEL E.: "The expression *symbolousa*, which occurs only in Luke, means to solve a puzzle, to reconcile apparently irreconcilable opposites, 'to symbolise' in the original Greek sense of 'bringing together,' to shake the dice in the palm of the hand. Maria turns over in her heart then

the words and events provoking a beneficial collision and clarification of each". *Discernement "in spiritu" dans l'Evangile de l'Enfance selon Saint Luc*, in *Cahiers Marials* 24 (1979) 184-185; cf.. also SERRAA., *Sapienza e contemplazione di Maria secondo Luca 2, 19.51b*, Roma, Edizioni Marianum 1982.

<sup>42</sup> DV 21.

<sup>43</sup> AUGUSTINE, *In Johannis Evangelium tractatus* 35,9 (CCL 36,322-323).





## Spiritual Interpretation in Early Christianity - From Paul to Origen

MARK SHERIDAN, OSB

*For Christians of the first centuries who were no longer living in expectation of an immediate end of time and of the imminent return of Christ, an explanation of the role of the Old Testament became an urgent problem. Could the Holy Scriptures of the Jews continue to be Holy Scripture for the disciples of Christ? What was to be done with various prescriptions of the Law? And what about statements that seemed to contradict Christian belief?*

*Origen, one of the outstanding exegetes of this time, traced his own interpretive efforts with respect to the Old Testament back to Paul. In Paul's approach to various Old Testament texts he sees an exegetical method that brings to light the real significance of the texts, illuminates their hidden meaning, explains apparent contradictions to Christian belief. Those who cling to the letter have no access to the deep, to the "Christian" dimension of the text. Only in the light of the New Testament does the Old retain its significance and its status for the Christians of the early Church. This "symbolic" reading of Holy Scripture represents the most ancient Christian praxis (the very word "symbolic" implies that the Old and New Testaments are "thrown together", that the one is read in light of the other).*

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The most influential and prolific of all patristic exegetes, Origen of Alexandria, viewed his own exegetical work as a continuation of that which Paul had begun with regard to the Old Testament and thought that he was employing precisely the same principles of exegesis that Paul had used. At the beginning of his fifth homily on Exodus, Origen states that Paul "taught the Church which he gathered from the Gentiles how it ought to interpret the books of the Law."<sup>1</sup> According to Origen, Paul was aware of the possibility that the books of the Law might be incorrectly interpreted by the gentile converts because of their lack of familiarity with this literature. The danger from Paul's perspective (and Origen's) was that the gentile

converts would interpret the books of the law literally, as had the Jews. "For that reason," says Origen,

[Paul] gives some examples of interpretation that we also might note similar things in other passages, lest we believe that by imitation of the text and document of the Jews we be made disciples. He wishes, therefore, to distinguish disciples of Christ from disciples of the Synagogue by the way they understand the Law. The Jews, by misunderstanding it, rejected Christ. We, by understanding the Law spiritually, show that it was justly given for the instruction of the Church.

In this quotation two phrases in particular should be noted: "examples of interpretation" and "understanding the Law spiritually." From Origen's point of view, Paul has given examples of how to interpret the scriptures. It is for us to analyse these examples and to imitate the principles and procedures which Paul used in order to continue the work of interpreting the scriptures. Secondly, this program of interpretation can be described as "understanding the Law spiritually." The two ideas are united in a similar phrase later in the same homily where Origen speaks of the "seeds of spiritual understanding received from the blessed apostle Paul." When this program is carried out, then the scriptures appear in their true light as "given for the instruc-

tion of the Church." They are not in fact a Jewish book at all but a Christian one, since they have been given "for us." This latter idea is an important principle, which governs the whole process of spiritual interpretation.

Although Origen claims to find principles of exegesis stated explicitly by Paul, he also says that Paul has given examples of interpretation for us to imitate. Some of the examples that Origen cites most frequently are 1 Cor: 10:1-11; 2 Cor 3:6-18; Gal 4:21-24; Heb 8:5 and Heb 10:1. These are texts that involve a "spiritual" or allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures.

One of the Pauline texts most frequently cited by Origen not only as an example of Pauline exegesis but as virtually a program of interpretation is that of 2 Cor 3:7-18. In commenting on Exod 34:33-34 where the veil over the glorified face of Moses is mentioned, Origen describes Paul's interpretation as "magnificent."<sup>2</sup> Then he proceeds to dwell especially on the significance of the "veil" and the question of how it can be removed. Only if one leads a life superior to the common mean can one contemplate the glory on the face of Moses. Moses still speaks with glorified face but we cannot see it because we lack sufficient zeal. The veil remains over the letter of the Old Testament (2 Cor 3:14). Only if one is converted to the Lord, will the veil be removed (2 Cor 3:16). Origen then explains that this veil can be interpreted to mean preoccupation with the affairs of this world, with money, the attraction of riches. To be converted to the Lord means to turn our back on all these things and dedicate ourselves to the Word of God, meditating on his law day and night (Ps 1). He notes that parents

who want their children to receive a liberal education do everything to find teachers, books, etc. and spare no expense to achieve this goal. The same must be done in pursuit of the understanding of the scriptures. As for those who do not even bother to listen to the proclamation of the scriptures but engage in idle conversation in the corners of the Church while they are being read, not only a veil but a wall is placed over their hearts.<sup>3</sup>

When the veil is taken away, however, Christ is revealed as already present in the entire Old Testament. In commenting on the verse of the Canticle in which the bridegroom is pictured "leaping upon the mountains, skipping over the hills" (Cant 2:8) Origen applies it to the interpretation of the scriptures:

This foretelling, of which we read in the Old Testament, has a veil on it, however; but when the veil is removed for the Bride, that is, for the Church that has turned to God, she suddenly sees Him leaping upon those mountains - that is, the books of the Law; and on the hills of the prophetic writings. He is so plainly and so clearly manifested that He springs forth, rather than merely appears. Turning the pages of the prophets one by one, for instance, she finds Christ springing forth from them and, now that the veil that covered them before is taken away, she perceives Him breaking out and emerging from individual passages in her reading, and bursting out of them in a manifestation that is now quite plain.<sup>4</sup>

The "veil" as interpreted by Origen is often simply the literal historical

account or the "letter."<sup>5</sup> In order to remove this veil, however, the coming of Christ was indispensable. In fact Origen goes so far as to say that the "divine character" of the prophetic writings and the spiritual meaning of the Law of Moses were revealed only with the coming of Christ. Before this it was not possible to bring forth convincing arguments for the inspiration of the Old Testament. The light contained in the Law of Moses, covered by a veil, shown forth at the coming of Christ, when the veil was removed and it became possible to have "knowledge of the goods of which the literal expression contained the shadow."<sup>6</sup>

Origen thought that his great work of exegesis was a continuation of that which Paul had begun but had not had time to complete. However, although only a little over a century and a half separate their work, there are important differences as well as similarities, only a few of which can be mentioned here. For both Paul and Origen Christ is certainly the hermeneutical key to understanding the Scriptures. For Paul, the fact that Jesus had been revealed to him as Risen, was evidence that the end time had arrived. He looked in the Scriptures to find validation and explanation for his experience of the Risen Lord. For him the Scriptures testified to the end time, the "now" in which he and the other disciples of Jesus found themselves. Paul already accepted the Law and the Prophets as "Scripture" before his conversion. For Origen, on the other hand, they are more remote. They can be recognised as "Scripture" only because they can be interpreted to refer to Christ. Whereas Paul probably thought he had given the essential exegesis of the Scriptures and expected the return of Christ soon in the end time that had already be-



gun, Origen belongs to a Church that has settled down for a long wait, a Church in which the Old Testament Scriptures play a considerable role and require extensive exegesis to be used as a vehicle for conveying the teaching of

the Master whose coming has been delayed. The "Scriptures" of Paul are now the Old Testament of the Church which has a New Testament upon which it certainly places higher value, which it sees as the fulfillment or completion of

the Old Testament. Much of Origen's interpretation is in fact devoted to finding the teaching of the New Testament beneath the veil of the Old Testament.

<sup>1</sup> *hom. in Ex. 5,1*. The English translations of the homilies on Genesis and Exodus are taken from: *Origen, Homilies on Genesis and Exodus* (trans. Ronald E. Heine; The Fathers of the Church 71; Washington, D.C.:

The Catholic University of America Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> *hom. in Ex. 12,1*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *comm. in Cant 3,(2:8)*.

<sup>5</sup> For other examples of the use of this text, see *hom. in Gen. 2,3;7,1;12,1; hom. in Lev. 1,1; hom. in Num. 26,3*.

<sup>6</sup> *P. Arch. 4,1,6*.

## Biblical Interpretation and Interreligious Dialogue

JOSEPH PATHRAPANKAL, CMI

*The idea that biblical citations are used for every imaginable purpose is not something new. That in the name of the Bible, people of other religious persuasion have been oppressed, tortured, even killed belongs to the tragedy of the history of Christendom. This essay brings out in a horrifying way the extremes to which a superficial and narrowly motivated approach to the Bible — as with any other "Holy Text" — can lead. It also deals with the question of a responsible interpretation that does not stick to a literalistic reading of the text.*

*Pathrapankal does not only, however, address in his article the tragic consequences of such an approach to the Bible; rather he shows that the Bible itself urges tolerance, openness and dialogue with other religions, with all human beings, whatever their religious convictions. A closer look into the biblical texts shows openness with respect to other religions: the openness of the People of Israel, the openness of Jesus of Nazareth and Paul's readiness for dialogue. In the challenges of interreligious dialogue that often confront us the Bible can be of invaluable assistance as a point of reference.*

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One of the most challenging dimensions of biblical interpretation in our times seems to be the need of a new attitude the Churches have to develop in their approach to the world of religious faiths and world religions. From the time of Constantine, Christianity grew up as a religion of domination and intolerance towards other religions. The missionary activity of the Church during the past several centuries, associated with colonialism, often was an exercise of this spirit of domination.

There is considerable change in this attitude among the Christians in our times. The World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church have both taken bold steps in their understanding and appreciation of other religions. In the World Council of Churches the first interreligious meeting was held in

1969 at Ajaltoun, Lebanon, and later on, in 1971 a separate sub-unit for "Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies" was established. In the Roman Catholic Church a major breakthrough came with the Vatican II Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions in 1965, known as *Nostra Aetate*. In 1986 the Pope, John Paul II, initiated a day of prayer for peace at Assisi to which he invited 50 Christians and 50 leaders of other Faiths, which was "an act of dialogue in the highest degree". The implication of this event goes far beyond the event itself. It confers a theological legitimacy, necessity and imperative for interreligious dialogue, not only for the sake of the various religions to come together and relate to each other but also for the religions to become conscious of their task of bringing

about peace at all levels in our contemporary society. On February 5, 1986 Pope John Paul II addressed a gathering of about 300 representatives of world's greatest religions, such as Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism in Madras and spoke to them about the importance of interreligious dialogue for the welfare and progress on humanity. He characterised India as the "cradle of religious traditions" and paid tribute to the spirit of tolerance and co-operation among religions that had always been part of Indian heritage.

But the language and the tone in which some of these documents of the Church are cast is one of superiority. There is at times a spirit of accommodation to other religions. Thus in the documents of





Vatican II we have such expressions as: "elements which are true and good" (OT 16), "precious elements of religion and humanity" (GS 92) "seeds of contemplation" (AG 18), "elements of truth and grace" (AG 9), "seeds of the word" (AG 11, 15) and "rays of the truth which illumines all mankind" (NA 2). Is not the Church here assuming the role of a self-appointed judge on matters of truth and falsehood, right and wrong about other religions?

When we try to analyse the reasons for this often negative attitude of the Christians to other religions as a whole, we can see that a too literal, uncritical and unscientific reading and understanding of the Bible has very much contributed towards this intolerant approach to the world religions. Exegetes did not pay sufficient attention to the fact that the Bible is the Word of God in human language and that the human dimension of the Bible accounts for many negative statements about other religions. The oracles against the nations in the prophetic writings, the holy wars waged by Israel against the nations and their gods, the strong criticism of idolatry and polytheism in some books of the Old Testament, the hatred and antipathy practised by Judaism towards the Gentiles, all helped the early Church to continue the same attitude towards other religions, including Judaism. In Mt 10:5 Jesus was presented as one who prohibited his disciples to go to the Samaritans and the Gentiles. Mt 15:26 was cited as Jesus referring to the Gentiles as 'dogs'. Some passages from the letters of Paul also were used for this negative attitude, which will be analysed later. In this kind of interpreting biblical passages a very important principle of biblical hermeneutics was forgotten, namely, the need of a healthy balancing of

diachronic and synchronic approach. The Bible is the Word of God in human language committed to the Church and her theologians, who have to respect both these dimensions as well as their own specific historical, social, religious and cultural context.

### **Israel and its openness to other religions**

The religion of the Israelites had a specific role to play in the Fertile Crescent. Over against a distorted concept of God and humankind prevailing among the neighbouring religions, the Old Testament writers attempted at developing a healthy and authentic concept of God as an imminent and at the same time transcendent one, and of a humankind as created in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27) and as having the breath of God in it to animate its life (Gen 2:7) and activities. Once this fundamental perspective had been established, the Old Testament writers were very much open to and appreciative of other religious and cultural realities of the neighbouring peoples. It is interesting to note that even the specifically Israelite understanding of God and humankind is presented by the Old Testament writers using mythological concepts and literary forms borrowed from the neighbouring religions. It was not a question of total rejection of these literary forms current among other religions but of a reconception and reformulation of prevailing concepts among them.

### **From openness to exclusivism and its challenge**

During and after the Babylonian captivity in certain circles of Judaism headed by priestly leadership we see instances of intolerance and exclusivity towards

other religions. It was during the exile that religious interest had concentrated particularly on the observance of the laws associated with the name of Moses, and it fostered a kind of exclusiveness. The concept of election, the deliverance from Egypt, the making of the covenant and the conquest of the land, all these became issues constituting the superiority of Israel over the other nations. The Gentiles were criticised for their polytheism and idolatry. The returned exiles were concerned not only with the reconstruction of the temple and the city but also with social and religious problems, such as freeing the community of foreign elements of all kinds and establishing religious practices in strict conformity with their own understanding of the Mosaic law. The best example of this new attitude is Ezra. One of his main agenda was a major purification of Judaism from all forms of religious syncretism, especially in his directive to the expulsion of foreign wives (Ezr 9:1-10:44). But here we have also to look at how this tendency to exclusivism was challenged by the author of the didactic story in the book of Ruth, where a Moabite woman is presented as an ideal wife, so much so that she is presented as the great grandmother of David. Here we have a subtle piece of propaganda against the view that one's position within Israel was dependent upon purity of blood and correctness of genealogy, and it is a powerful and critical demonstration of how a Gentile woman can be a beneficial element for the community of the Jews.

Such tensions related to complementary thinking in interreligious relationship continued to exist during the following centuries also. At a time when Jewish exclusivity was growing, wisdom teachers

were reflecting on the meaning of religion in an atmosphere of thought that was more open and universal. Such a prophetic and wise universalism and complementary thinking find their sober expression in the book of Jonah. The author presents his message of openness and complementarity in the guise of a story concerning a prophet who lived at a time when the prophets were very active in the history of Israel. Through a didactic narrative the author tries to drive home to the readers a prophetic message that Yahweh's sovereignty is not circumscribed by the boundaries of the chosen community. He shows his mercy and love upon whom he wills and reveals his salvation in the most unexpected places. The author rebukes the Jews for supposing that Yahweh's plans and purpose are restricted to the preservation of the Jewish community, even at the cost of the destruction of the enemies of the Jews, and they are reminded that other people, supposedly rejected by God, are also embraced within Yahweh's mercy and love.

### **The openness of Jesus of Nazareth to other religions**

It is against the background of this pluralistic and complementary thinking on religion and relationship with other religions found in the various books of the Old Testament that we have to analyse the ministry and message of Jesus of Nazareth who also came as a critical prophet of contemporary Judaism in order to reveal through his words and deeds his God-given commission of inaugurating a new religious movement, not at all circumscribed by the narrow ethnic and racial considerations of Judaism. He came on the threshold of history with a specific message about God and humankind

which is condensed in the concept of the kingdom of God based on the universal abba-hood of God. Jesus associated himself with all, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, holy and sinners. He emphasised the need of a non-localised religion and a form of worship in so far as God is spirit and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth (Jn 4:23). It is interesting that this whole discussion on the essence of religion and worship took place in Samaria, far away from Jerusalem, the official seat of Jewish religion which thought that it had the full right to interpret the meaning of religion for itself and for others as well.

In the light of these considerations we have to evaluate the inner meaning of some narratives in the Gospels where we see Jesus transcending the boundaries of his own religion and appreciating the Gentiles and Samaritans for their profound religiosity. Here we have a typical case of openness to other religions and religious complementarity. Seeing the profound faith of a Roman officer of Capernaum, who went to Jesus with a request to cure his servant who was ill, Jesus told those who followed him: "Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of God, while the children of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness" (Mt 8:10-12). To the Canaanite woman who showed her unflinching faith and trust in his saving power Jesus said: "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire" (Mt 15:28). The attitude of Jesus to the Samaritans is yet another clear proof to show how keen Jesus was to bring together communities of opposing loyalties by his courageous travelling through

the region of Samaria, much against the conventions of his own parent religion (Jn 4:4-52). In the parable on "who is the neighbour?" it is a Samaritan who is presented by Jesus as the ideal neighbour (Lk 10:25-37). As a Jew it should have been very difficult for Jesus to speak in this manner, but as one who had the capacity to transcend the externals, human conventions and considerations, he praised the Samaritan for his readiness to become the neighbour, and presented him to the lawyer as an example to be followed: "God and do likewise" (Lk 10:37). The same truth is once again affirmed in the story of the ten lepers. The one who came back to thank Jesus for the gift of healing he had received was a Samaritan. Jesus' reaction to this extraordinary gesture and the turn of events is noteworthy: "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (Lk 17: 17-18). These stories and parables bring out very clearly the fact that for Jesus religion and faith were not the exclusive privilege of the Jews, and that there must be a dimension in religion through which we have to reach out to the others and appreciate them for their goodness.

The story of the Greeks who went to Jerusalem to worship wanting to meet Jesus, as it is narrated in the last chapter of the Book of Signs in the Gospel of John, is one of the most challenging stories in the Gospels which shows how Jesus understood his own religious identity and his relation to the followers of other religions (Jn 12:20-26). The story provides for us some profound insights about the need of openness and appreciation that should be characteristic of the followers of all religions. The inner message of the



story consists in how Jesus reacted to the concept of religious identity as understood by the Jews in general and by the two disciples, Philip and Andrew, who must have thought that Jesus would have his own reservations about meeting and speaking to those Greeks, for the simple reason that he was a Jew. The reaction of Jesus to this wrong impression of the disciples is centred on the concept of *glory* he was looking forward to, namely, the moment of his passion and death, when he would cease to be a Jew and would be lifted above all considerations of creed and caste (Jn 12:32). All that the Christians do to discriminate the followers of other religions from them as inferior to them is not so much prompted by their love for Christ as their own selfishness and self-centredness. The Jesus of the Gospels is far different from the Jesus that is presented by many of his zealous followers.

### **Paul's attitude towards the other religions**

It is true that in certain letters of Paul there are negative statements about the followers of other religions. So in the letter to the Romans Paul writes about the Gentiles as having "suppressed the truth" (Rom 1: 18) about God, and consequently they are presented as practising idolatry and immorality (Rom 1: 19-32). Here Paul is speaking about the sinfulness of the whole humankind, of which the sinfulness of the Gentiles is explained in Rom 1:18-32 and the sinfulness of the Jews is described in Rom 2:1-3:8. So also in 1 Cor 10:20-21 Paul writes about the sacrifice of the Gentiles in a very negative manner: "I imply that what Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup

of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of the demons". In fact, it is a passage which has prompted many missionaries in the past to consider the religions of other believers as the works of demons. In the Church of Corinth Paul had to deal with several problems, such as divisions among the Christians, libertinism, sexual promiscuity and prostitution. The Corinthians had the custom of taking part in the sacrifices and the social gatherings of their Gentile relatives and friends. Paul was asked to give his opinion about such practices (1 Cor 8:1). With his own Jewish background and as he was dealing with an infant religion struggling to define its identity in the midst of a Gentile world during the first century of the CE, Paul had to be extremely careful in guiding the Corinthians in their interreligious relationships. It is precisely here that the principles of diachronism and synchronism have to be applied. To take such passages of Paul out of context as the basis of the permanent attitude of the Church towards other religions is wrong because it was not the mind of Paul. He wanted only to guide the community of Corinth in its concrete pastoral situation. Moreover, although Paul was negative about participation in religious gatherings, he was very positive about Christians participating in the social gathering of the Gentiles, in which Christians were allowed to take part without any fear or scruple (1 Cor 10:25-32). Paul was guiding a Church as a theologian and pastor.

A very bold presentation of complementarity and openness in religious thinking in the New Testament is the letter to the Hebrews, where the author presents the person of Jesus Christ to his readers

as someone whom they should follow at all costs, showing them how he was the priestly mediator for them in their struggle of Christian life. As they were about to give up their newly accepted Christian faith in favour of their old faith and its practice, the author explains to them the grandeur of their Christian call which is centred on the person of Christ, who was a better and greater priest. The author explains this priesthood of Christ taking the model from a priest of the Jebusites, known as Melchizedek (Gen 14:17-24). He did not have any scruple to take a model from another religion to present his theology of the priesthood of Christ because for him the important thing was how best this priest realised in himself the ideals of a good mediator between God and the humans. This he could not see in the priesthood of the Old Covenant characterised by externalism but only in the priesthood of Melchizedek (Hb 7:1-28).

### **Interreligious thinking and a new theological tension**

When Vatican II promulgated its Declaration on the relationship of the Church with other religions almost 32 years ago, several bishops and also theologians were afraid that the Church had come very close to religious indifference. But the late Cardinal Augustine Bea, the chief architect of the document, said: "The Declaration on the Non-Christian Religions is indeed an important and promising beginning, yet no more than the beginning of a long and demanding way towards the arduous goal of a humanity whose members feel themselves truly sons (and daughters) of the same Father in heaven and act on this conviction". It is this task that theologians have to take up as part of their commitment to the Church and to the whole hu-



mankind. Though the origin of this document was immediately related to the problem of the relationship of the Church to Judaism with its sad history of antisemitism, the document, as it stands now, is an open one extending itself to embrace all the major world religions, and it is a matter of satisfaction that the most ancient religions of India, Hinduism and Buddhism, are treated first in it: "The (Catholic) Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions" (NA art. 2).

But as we try to articulate our reflections about this complementary approach in the relationship between religions, we are sure to land in a very complex situation. It may be called a theological tension and polarisation between the loyalty we owe to our traditional theological language and the openness we try to develop in our inter-religious relationship. After having opened the doors partly to the strangers so long kept outside the gates, the Church now seems hesitant and doubtful whether or not to admit them into the household of God. Theological hesitation seems to be in tension with spiritual hospitality within the heart of the Church. This is particularly true about some theological issues, such as Christology, Ecclesiology and Missiology. In fact, the uneasiness and anxiety that are being felt now are expressed in different ways by theologians and also by the official teaching of the Church, at least in the Roman Catholic Church. This is a problem which constitutes an issue only in the Church and not in any other religion because the other religions have never claimed any kind of uniqueness as Christianity has done during the past several centuries. The question of the uniqueness and universality of Christ is a crucial and vulnerable issue in Christian theology. Theologians

have developed three specific types of thinking in this area, known as exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Whereas exclusivism is practically given up by all theologians which accepts the possibility of salvation only for those who directly believe in Christ, inclusivism holds that even those who do not believe in Christ can and will be saved, but they are saved only through Christ, even though they do not know about it. This is the position held by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in its document *Dialogue and Proclamation* to which we have referred. But many theologians are not happy with this position because basically it is only a concession the Christians make to the followers of other religions. Here the salvific value of the other religions is not sufficiently taken into consideration. S. J. Samartha in his *One Christ - Many Religions* goes into the various aspects of this problem. If we do not admit the possibility of salvation for the followers of other religions as happening through their own religions, we are not yet come to understand the salvific value of these religions.

Here again, the theological problem is based on the Bible. Recourse is often made to several biblical passages, where Christ is presented as the unique and only mediator of salvation. Peter spoke to the Council of the Jewish leaders: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among the humans by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). So also we read in 1 Timothy 2:5: "There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself to win freedom for the whole humankind". How are we to evaluate these biblical statements? In our view, here we have to make a clear distinction be-

tween *faith* statements and *meta-physical* statements. What we have in the above passages are faith statements accepted and articulated by those who believed in Christ and for them they are binding. But we cannot take these statements out of their social and religious context and make them metaphysical statements as if their content is binding for all humans. From the fact that it was understood, taught and accepted so for several centuries by the Christians, it does not follow that therefore we have to somehow defend it. A sense of finiteness and limitation in the understanding of the Infinite is at the root of religious pluralism. It is not a question of relativization of Christian theology, but the acceptance of a basic truth fundamental to the theology of religious pluralism. In fact, Jesus told his disciples: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into the whole truth (*pasa aletheia*), namely, the totality of the truth (Jn 16:13). The Spirit is free and unpredictable. The Spirit cannot be bound by doctrines and institutions. The Spirit relates people to people, people to things and all creation to God. We are all pilgrim theologians and, as such, we do not possess the whole truth. We are still groping and trying to discover the meaning of the whole truth about God, about the world, about other religions, about the Church and about ourselves. It is an expression of our Christian humility, which all need to cultivate.

### **Challenge of a complementary thinking in interreligious dialogue**

Identity and complementarity are two aspects of all realities which together constitute fullness and fulfilment. Whereas identity is that aspect of a reality by which it maintains its selfhood, complementarity is the aspect through which a rea-





lity opens itself to be completed and fulfilled by something else. Identity can be understood either as an individualised and isolated one or as relational and complementary. Whereas individualised identity tries to grow in isolation from other realities, relational identity denotes the basic orientation of a reality towards relatedness and consequent fulfilment which it tries to obtain from that relationship. It is the inbuilt tendency of all spirit-matter realities to have both these polarised tendencies in them, whether it be at the personal or at the social level, and the nature and quality of a person or a society are measured by the priority given to one or the other by the individual or the society.

When we apply this principle of identity and complementarity to the realm of religion, there arises a host of problems. First of all, religion is a very sensitive and emotionally charged area where people are the least willing and prepared for any kind of complementary thinking. It is true that there is no question of surrendering one's religious convictions and identity and becoming indifferent to one's own religion. But there is a dimension in which people can maintain their own religious identity and authenticity and at the same time open themselves to relate to other religions and thereby experience a new vitality and dynamism in the realm of their own religious experience. Any real religious identity is to be marked by authenticity and openness through which every religion articulates its inner meaning and grow up in an atmosphere of mutuality and co-operation. One of the salutary signs of our times is that religions as a whole are showing such healthy signs in this area.

India is a land of religious pluralism. All the major world religions have their homeland in India. It is

not only a fact; it is a philosophy of that country. Hence it is accepted as part of the rationale of the very Constitutions of the Republic of India understanding itself as a secular state, which means that the government of India respects all its religions as having equal rights to practise their faith in that country. Christianity is one of the most ancient religions in India, claiming to have its beginnings going back to the middle of the first century CE. Though Christianity constitutes only 2.5 % of the Indian population, Christianity is a very much respected and appreciated religion in India, especially because it has contributed very much to India's progress in the fields of education, medical care and other social developmental programmes. At the same time, Christianity has its own bad repute of appearing like a foreign religion, that its culture is still very Western, that it is not yet inculturated into the Indian life and thinking. Of late, the various Churches are getting more and more involved in the social and cultural life of the people. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India has a separate Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue which looks after the dialogal mission of the Church in India. Both in theological reflection and in actual dialogue many positive steps are being taken to bring about harmony between religions. But here again, there is always a fear of taking the risk, there is an overall atmosphere of caution. It is a fear about surrendering the Christian uniqueness, relativizing the Christian claims about Christ and the Church and of neglecting its practice of evangelising the people and converting them to the Church.

The question we have to be asking ourselves continuously is: What then is unique about Christianity? The uniqueness of Christianity is not its exclusiveness and claim for

superiority over other religions, rather its capacity to transcend the categories of historically determined religious traditions and its broad-based approach to all other religions. It is an area of exploration which Indian theologians and theological institutions in India have to carry on as a major task committed to them by the Church. What we all need is a courage to recognise that God is above all considerations based on caste, colour and culture. Indian theologians have to develop a dialogical method of theologising which is based on the principle of complementarity as the outcome of inter-faith dialogue. They have to be sensitive to the context of their theological reflection and be aware of the fact that they are dealing with a pilgrim theology. On the one hand, they have to be totally committed to their religious convictions and, on the other hand, they have to open their mind and heart to see the inexhaustible mystery of God present in every religion. They must also recognise the limits of their own religious experience and its expression and the need of self-purification, readiness to share with others what they have, and a genuine love that calls for an empathetic identification with the others without losing their own identity. An enriched consciousness of God's plan about the whole human race, which includes different religions, challenges the Christian theologians to work together with the theologians of other religions in harmony and understanding. This does not entertain indifferentism or relativism, but attempts at giving birth to a Christian theology capable of adequately accounting for the presence of other religions also, convinced of the fact that one cannot understand oneself except in relation to others. It is our firm conviction that inter-faith dialogue, very much encouraged by all the

Churches today and practised at various levels in India, is one of the major theological issues of our times and that it should become the concern not only of Indian theologians but also of the international community of theologians in spite of the fact that it would involve certain uneasiness for the traditional understanding of Christianity as necessary for the salvation of the whole humankind.

The words of Paul Knitter are very much to the point: "If Christians, trusting in God and respecting the faith of others, engage in this new encounter with other traditions, they can expect to witness a growth or evolution such as Chris-

tianity has not experienced since its first centuries. This growth will paradoxically both preserve the identity of Christianity and at the same time transform it. Such a paradox is no mystery; we are acquainted with it in our personal lives as well as in nature." It is this enriching and transforming experience which Christian theologians are now called upon to articulate, and this they have to do with the same intensity of faith commitment to God who guides the whole human history and leads it to eschatological fulfilment. In the words of Raimundo Panikkar, what the Roman Catholic Church now needs is not a Vatican III, but a Second Jerusalem Council, a Council

which will clearly articulate the role of the world religions in the plan of God, which is to be done with a renewed commitment to the very principle which guided the discussions of the first Jerusalem Council. It all means that the biblical as well as systematic theologians have to accept their role in the Church as prophetic theologians, sometimes making it necessary to uproot and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow in order to build and to plant (Jer 1:10). The sooner the theologians accomplish this task, the better it is not only for Asian Christian theology but also for Christian theology taken as a whole.





## The Bible as Word of God - Questions from an Islamic Perspective

*The Holy Scripture of Islam, the Koran, is for Moslems the verbally inspired Word of God. Only the original text in Arabic can claim to be the "Word of God"; possibilities of interpretation are very limited from the outset. However, even among Koran scholars there are currents of thought that distinguish between teachings of faith, legal prescriptions and historical expressions, and that make room for possibilities of interpretation that go beyond the literal in the case of the last two categories.*

*Against this background of their own hermeneutic it is easy to understand the difficulties many Moslems have with the Bible as the "Word of God" of Christians. A group of Christians, who have lived for years in Tunisia, have been collecting typical problems and questions from an Islamic perspective, under the leadership of Fr. Robert Caspar m.afr. Before they attempt an answer from a Christian perspective, they examine the mentality and faith conviction out of which such questions arise.*

*This contribution enriches the dialogue between Moslems and Christians through an honest handling of central questions. In an exemplary way, it also enriches every interreligious dialogue through its style of competent and at the same time very practically orientated exchange with people of another religious conviction. And it enriches all of us who must give an account of our convictions in conversation with others.*

*The contribution appeared as a chapter of the publication: Trying to answer Questions. Fr. Robert Caspar and a group of Christians living in Tunisia. Series 'Studi arabo-islamici del PISAI' No.3. Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica, Rome 1989.*

### The Questions:

**W**hy are there four Gospels, and not just one? Which one is the real one?

- These Gospels are full of discrepancies and contradictions. Is this not the proof that they have been falsified?

- The authentic Gospel was in agreement with the Qur'ân, and announced the coming of the Prophet. Christians have lost this Gospel, or changed its text, or have failed to understand it properly. Actually, people believe that this authentic Gospel has been rediscovered. It is the Gospel of Barnabas.

- The Gospels, like all the books of the Bible, cannot be the Word, since they bear the names of their authors: Matthew, Mark, Isaiah, etc. who, at best, can only be the transmitters.

- And even these transmitters do not represent a continuous chain of witnesses, for some of them, like Luke, have never met Christ.

### *1. The mentality underlying these questions:*

Essentially, the Gospels, and indeed the whole Bible, are judged by the Qur'ân, which is taken as the model for all Scripture. The Qur'ân is directly the Word of God, revealed word by word to the

Prophet, who is merely transmitter of this Word. The text is unique and immutable, excluding any interference from human factors. The Qur'ân, and accordingly any genuine Scripture, are immediately the Word of God.

The Qur'ân is the standard of truth by which all Scripture must be tested, the Bible including the Gospels, can only be regarded as the insofar as it is in agreement with the Qur'ân. The only authentic teaching contained in the Gospel is the teaching of the Qur'ân. One who possesses the Qur'ân does not need to read the other Scriptures, which, in any case, have all been tampered with. Therefore, among the Muslims, there is little



interest in reading the text of our Gospels, except out of curiosity, to see where our beliefs come from, and the source of our religious life.

## *II. Muslim teaching:*

1. There is only one eternal Scripture, the Mother-Scripture, which is with God (Umm al-kitâb, Q. 3,7; 13,39; 43,4). It is the very written and preserved on the "well-guarded Table" (al-lûh al-mahfûz, Q. 85,99). This primordial Scripture has been revealed, in the course of time, to certain great prophets: to Moses, in the form of the **Torah** (by and large the Pentateuch) to David, in the form of the **Psalms** (zabûr), to Jesus, in the form of the **Gospel** (injîl), and finally to Muhammad, in the form of a plain **Arabic Qur'ân**. All these Scriptures were "dictated" by God to the prophets, whose task was simply to transmit them faithfully.

2. Though each of these Scriptures corresponds to a new stage in the progress of humanity, they are only the successive **editions** of the same eternal Scripture, and they all carry the same message, essentially a command to worship the one and only true God. Therefore, they must be in agreement, and particularly, they must be in agreement with the Qur'ân, the last, complete and perfect 'edition', the staple of truth for all Scripture. If it happens that there is disagreement, it is because their guardians, Jews and Christians, have 'falsified' (harrafa, tahrîf) their Scriptures. The genuine 'edition' of the Gospel was (originally) in agreement with the Qur'ân.

3. Muslim theologians and apologists prove in various ways that the Torah and the Gospel have been falsified.

- The Torah speaks of the death of Moses (Deut 34), while it was to him that the Book was revealed.

It hardly speaks of resurrection which is an essential article of faith. In fact, the actual Torah was invented by Esdras, at the time of King Josiah.

- The Gospels, as we have them, are full of contradictions: about the genealogy of Jesus, about Peter's denial, about the entry into Jerusalem... Furthermore, they are the work of four different authors, of whom one at least never met Jesus. Therefore, they do not answer the basic criterion for reliable transmission: the "hadîth mutawâtir" (a prophetic saying, the text of which may have been handed down by different uninterrupted series of transmitters, but which all go back to the same author of the text).

- Christians admit that they have discarded a certain number of Gospels (called the 'apocryphal' gospels), one of which must have been the genuine Gospel, the one which agrees with the Qur'ân. However, it seems that this real Gospel has been recovered: it is the Gospel of Barnabas (in fact it is a forgery, fabricated in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by a Spanish Muslim, and which substantially agrees with the Qur'ân).

- Above all, the announcement of the coming of Muhammad has been removed from both the Torah and the Gospel (cf. Q. 7, 157; 61, 60). Nevertheless, there are still traces of this prophecy in the text which has been retained. The Torah speaks of a prophet "the like of Moses" who is to come<sup>1</sup>, while the Gospel speaks of the Paraclete "who will come and teach all truth to you" (John, ch. 14-17).

- Nevertheless, there are highly respected people among Muslim scholars who admit the textual authenticity of the Bible as we have it today, and who think the falsification lies in the interpretation

which has been made of it: Avicenna, Ibn Khaldûn, Muhammad °Abduh. Some contemporary writers, who are well aware of modern hermeneutics, do accept as a possibility the interpretation of the Apostles and the first Christians, which produced the text of the Gospels on the basis of the historical fact of Jesus. They add however, that this does not exclude the possibility of other interpretations, among them the Muslim interpretation.

In the same way, scholars are beginning to apply to the Qur'ân also the principles of modern exegesis and literary analysis.

## *III. Christian doctrine:*

1. For the Christians, as well as for the Jews, the is not in the first place the written word of Scripture but rather the event to which the Scripture bears witness, namely God's action in human history. In the Old Testament it is the Exodus, the deed which originated the people of Israel, the entry into the Promised Land, the return from Exile ... In the New Testament, it is Jesus Christ as event, the perfect revelation of God, through what he is, the Son of God, the Word of God.

2. If the Bible, including the Gospels, is not, strictly speaking, the direct, it remains its privileged witness. Following a period of oral transmission and this stands for both the Old and the New Testaments (see for example in the Acts of the Apostles the first oral proclamations by Peter that Christ is risen), the message was progressively committed to writing, under the warrant of the Holy Spirit (what we call the inspiration of Scripture), and the result is the actual text of our Scriptures, witnessing to God in a very special way. Christ and the Apostles are continually referring to Scripture (that





is the Old Testament and what the Jewish culture of the 1<sup>st</sup> century acknowledged as Scripture). Therefore, we need to pass through Scripture to discover the Word of God.

3. Consequently the Scriptures are an interpretation, though a privileged one, of the Word of God. Furthermore, in the case of the Gospels, this interpretation is adapted (it is made "actual") to the needs of the various early Christian communities. This explains why there are differences and divergences between the Gospels, and between them and the other writings of the New Testament; they are the facets of the same prism. So are the genealogies of Jesus, the miracle stories, the accounts of the Last Supper and the Passion; even the way to look at the person of Jesus: the deeds and sayings of his historical life are reviewed in the light of his resurrection, which is the perfect unveiling of his real personality.

4. The principles of historical and literary criticism (exegesis) can therefore be applied to the text of the Scriptures, in order to trace back the stages of its shaping, to find out what can be ascribed to the interpretation of the early Christian congregations, so as to grasp the life and message of the historical Jesus, including his death and his resurrection. In this way, using as a guide the basic rules of the interpretation which has already taken place in the Scriptures, we can "actualise" Jesus for our present time. All these new interpretations have to be made in the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

#### *IV. Possible answers to the questions and objections:*

1. Avoid discussing differences between the four Gospels, or trying to bring them into harmony.

2. One must be conscious of the logic underlying the Muslim position when judging the Gospel by the Qur'ân. If one feels that his/her Muslim partner has the proper disposition, then why not invite him to understand the Christian position regarding the and the Scriptures.

3. For us, the is Jesus himself, as indeed the Qur'ân calls him (kalimat Allâh, Q. 4,171; cf. 3,3945). The Gospel is not in the first place a book. The Greek word 'euangelion' means the **good news** of salvation (al-bushrâ), which is the message of Jesus. This message was delivered orally by Jesus, then transmitted, orally also, by his disciples (cf. the 'sahâba', the Companions of the Prophet), who have lived with him and became the witnesses of his life, his death and his resurrection.

What we call **the four Gospels** represents four traditions, first announced orally, and later put in writing, during the 1<sup>st</sup> century of the Christian era. All four traditions can be traced back to the Apostles who have known Jesus. St. Luke says that he took information from eye-witnesses before beginning the redaction of his Gospel (Lk. 1, 1-4) and St. Mark was the disciple of St. Peter. These four Gospels are therefore connected with the person and life of Jesus, but they represent four different ways to tell the facts of Jesus' life and the mes-

sage he taught, according to the needs of different audiences: Christians converted from Judaism, others with a Greek background. And this explains both the essential agreement between the Gospels and their accidental disagreements.

4. The text of the Gospels has remained the same since they were edited in the first century, apart from some minor variations. We possess papyrus manuscripts of the Gospels dating from the beginning of the second century, which is less than 50 years after the redaction of the last Gospel (the oldest manuscript of the Qur'ân can be dated from about 50 years after the <sup>U</sup>tmân edition). Critical editions of the Gospels have been published, which take into account the slightest textual variations.

5. For the promotion of Christian-Muslim dialogue, it is a requirement that each party should acknowledge the authenticity of the partner's Scripture, on which each one's faith is based, as it was requested during the meeting in Tripoli (Libya, February 1976).

6. The traditions contained in the four Gospels represent the Christian interpretation of the **event** called Jesus Christ. They have been drawn up in the light of faith in the Risen Christ, and they require the same Christian faith if the reader wishes to meet Christ as the object of that faith. Outside the Christian faith, other people can use the same text, like any other historical document, as the point of departure to offer different readings of that same event. This is what is done by rationalists, Jews,

marxists... and perhaps Muslims<sup>2</sup>. Each interpretation deserves to be respected, provided that it is rooted in a critical study of the texts, and that its author is prepared to accept the possibility of other interpretations.

<sup>1</sup> The argument of the Muslim polemicists, back in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, is a clever one. Moses has announced that, after him God would send a prophet like him "taken from among your brothers" (Dt. 18,15). But then, the "Brothers" of the Hebrews are the Arabs, aren't they? So, this was the

announcement of the coming of Muhammad.

<sup>2</sup> On that particular topic, one can consult GRIC (Groupes de Recherches Islamo-Chrétiens), *Ces Écritures qui nous questionnent: la Bible et le Coran*. Paris. Le Centurion, 1987, 160 pp.



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## Life of the Federation

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### 25 Years of Bibelpastorale Arbeitsstelle in Switzerland

*Since its founding in 1973, Bibelpastorale Arbeitsstelle (Biblical-Pastoral Service) has played a central role for Bible work in the whole of Switzerland. In a little celebration in the halls of the BPA in Zurich in December of 1998 this twenty-five year history was commemorated. A map put together for this occasion contains documentation that offers a progress report of the BPA today in addition to an overview of the last twenty-five years of its history. The following reflection on the history and task of the BPA is based on this map.*

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E-Mail: bibelpastoral@bluewin.ch

### Reading and Living the Bible Together

DANIEL KOSCH

Four people are discussing a piece of land. "This piece of land is productive", says the farmer. "This piece of land is beautiful", says the poetess. "This land-lot is expensive", says the real-estate agent. "This piece of land is a gift of God — given to us in trust", says the pastor. Each of the four says something different — and yet all speak the truth, all are right in their own way.

#### *Multiple Access*

So it is with the Bible. "It gives me strength for life", says the woman in a Bible-study group. "I often find it disturbing", says a critical reader. "It is a piece of world literature", says an English teacher. "It is a book with a long, complex history

of origins", says a theology student. "It is God's Word in human language", says a CCD instructor. "It has contributed greatly to the suppression of women", says a feminist. "It is full of revolutionary ideas", says a socialist Christian. So the same is true here: everyone says something different — and all speak the truth, all are right in their own way.

This variety of experiences, of approaches and of evaluations can be exciting and enriching — and it is even more interesting when it sparks a real exchange of ideas on the Bible between men and women with such different points of view. The different viewpoints mutually enrich one

another, but also challenge one another: does God really speak in the Bible in a human way? Or should we say, more precisely, that he speaks in a male way? What change has taken place when we become aware that the text we are reading, which we conclude at mass with the confessional formula "the Word of the Lord", was written for other people of another time — not for us?

#### *Common Experiences*

And an encounter with the Bible can become still richer and more meaningful for our lives when the biblical text is not merely talked about, not merely academically discussed, but put to song and dance, visually depicted and

staged, in common meditation and celebration.

To enable a common reading and experience of the Bible has been the primary goal of the Bibelpastorale Arbeitsstelle. Since its beginning twenty-five years ago it has encouraged this: by way of courses, by way of periodicals, in the form of travel to biblical lands, with the help of biblical-pastoral service, often in collaboration with others — even ecumenical partners. The aim has never been primarily to sell as many bibles as possible, nor even to further a scientific knowledge about the Bible, but rather to enable a living and life-related exchange with this "sociable book".

### *Different Emphases*

The farmer, the poetess, the pastor and the real-estate agent each has a unique perspective on a piece of land. In much the same way, the various members of the Biblical-Pastoral Service (SKB) have, in the course of time, developed different approaches to, and emphasized different aspects of the Bible. Its work has had its effect and has left its mark on the "biblical landscape" in the German-speaking part of Switzerland.

*Fr. Anton Steiner*, the first Biblical - Pastoral Service leader, had a background in advanced biblical studies, became deeply engaged in ecumenical work and drew on the liberation-theology readings of the Bible that were current in Latin America. *Silvia Schroer*, the second agency leader, brought a strong appreciation of the worldview of the ancient Orient to her work, on the one hand, and on the other, she strongly emphasized feminist readings of the Bible and Bible work with women. *Hans Schwegler*, longtime theological co-worker, was always calling attention to the significance of Judaism and of Jewish-Christian dialogue on the Bible. Many know him as a travel guide and course leader. At present *Regula Grünenfelder* and *Daniel Kosch* are responsible for the theological work of the Biblical-Pastoral Service. They have taken up the former emphases and carried them forward. By way of new accents, we should mention: the effort to find simple, accessible, but not naive-uncritical forms of encounter with the Bible and the search for credible and substantial forms of biblical spirituality.

### *Significant Developments*

A review of the history of the Arbeitsstelle since 1973, which is closely tied in with ecclesial developments in the post-conciliar period, yields a number of interesting observations:

- While in the early days, the most prominent agents and promoters of the Biblical Apostolate were priests and religious, today the majority are lay-persons.

- Although interest in the Bible has in many ways been pronounced dead, the demand for helps for on-site work, for periodicals and well-documented information, but also for courses, etc., is as great now as it ever was.

- If in the early days the primary emphasis was on communicating the results of historical-critical biblical research, today the approaches are numerous and varied. The pluralism of our contemporary society, the many methods of adult education, the new approaches in biblical interpretation and the many, very diverse voices that come to expression in the Bible itself are resulting in a situation where dialogue with the Bible remains lively, stimulating, and creative.

(Transl.: Leonard Maluf)





## Subregion of the Middle East

### Publications of the Subregion

The periodical *Biblia*, with a range of 12-18 pages, devotes itself in each issue to a particular biblical theme. Thus far two issues have appeared on Matthew and two on the Psalms. In collaboration with the University Saint-Esprit of Kaslik and biblical scholars of the federation issues on the Holy Spirit and on God the Father are now being planned. Although work with the Old Testament does not fit well in the political context of Lebanon, the periodical considers it important to alternate between treatments of Old Testament and New Testament themes. Fr. Chahwan is responsible for the publication.

The originally single issue of "Notre vie liturgique" (Our Liturgical Life) has now become four issues. A large group connected with the Antonian Fathers are collaborating on this project. The four issues that have come out to date have the following contents: The celebration of the Mass with biblical commentaries for Sunday homilies; studies on Christianity and the religions; biblical themes for the youth, and the Word of God for children, ages 7-12.

The "Revue sacerdotale" (Journal for Priests) was founded in the 1950's and is intended for priests. It purports to be a biblical-theology journal and devotes itself in a single issue per year to biblical and theological themes, without of course excluding questions of a moral or pastoral nature.

*Al-Bouchra* (The News) is the catechetical journal of the Centre

Catholique de Catéchisme in Lebanon. It comes out three times a year with a 6,000 copy circulation that is supplied, cost-free, to the countries of the Middle East.

*Voix de la Charité* (The Voice of Love) is the name of a Christian radio-transmission that is on the air 24 hours a day. Each day the texts of the liturgy of the day are commented on, each week a *lectio continua* from the Bible is offered, beginning with texts of the Old Testament. Currently, the book of Genesis has a central place in the *lectio continua*. A method of biblical interpretation is used similar to that employed by the Fathers of the Church, where the New Testament illumines the Old and the Old is seen as the foundation of the New.

### Preparations for the Sixth Bible Congress

The subregion of the Middle East is preparing intensively for the Sixth Bible Congress which will take place from January 24-30th in Notre-Dame du Puits in Jall ed-dib (Beirut). The theme of the Congress will be the Gospel of John. The preparations include representatives from Iraq, Egypt, the Sudan, the Holy Land and Syria; about one hundred participants are expected.

### Iraq

The Bible Center in Mossul continues to show important and successful accomplishments. The numbers alone demonstrate this: about 400 participants, of both sexes, in Bible courses; thirty of

these are engaged in more advanced studies, some are already in their eighth year of training; 69 participants are studying the Old Testament in 3 courses; 140 are taking two courses on the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles; there are 150 participants at the moment in a course of introduction to the New Testament.

### Lebanon

The Sisters of the Cross (Soeurs de la Croix) have organized four courses on both of the Corinthian letters. Sixty of them have already taken these courses. The courses began in July 1998 under the direction of Fr. Féghaly and lasted each from Sunday to Friday. Each day began with a mass, including a homily on a preselected biblical text. There followed three lectures and two group work-sessions, and in the evening, the common evaluation. The sisters had prepared intensively for these courses for two whole months with readings of the biblical texts and a study of two books on the Corinthian correspondence.

### Syria

Courses on the Bible are again taking place in six cities of Syria in 1998, namely, Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Tartous, Hassaké and Khabab. The major theme of the courses is "The Relationship between the Father and the Son in the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles". In the future, courses will also be held in the city of Rakka; so the number of Bible centers in Syria has now risen to seven. The Syrian Bible

Commission has established the last Sunday of January or the first Sunday of February as Bible Sunday. The committee is also considering the possibility of reducing the price for the Catholic edition of the New Testament in Syria. One of the coordinators suggested the founding of biblical documentation centers in the various regions of the country.

A growing interest in courses on the Bible from the side of the laity could be observed. This happy development calls for corresponding measures: the distribution of leaflets in Damascus and Aleppo, the founding of a Bible society

(Fraternité de la Bible) in Homs, the founding of local mixed commissions to take charge of the preparations for and implementation of Bible courses, the organization of exhibitions, the production of videos and computer-programs, and many other things. All participants in Bible courses receive the illustrated book on the Bible *Dieu chemine avec son peuple* (God journeys with his people), which was financed through the Church in Need. Moreover, through the subsidy of the Church in Need, the purchase of five-thousand copies of the New Testament and a per unit reduction of price by 50% has been made possible.

The one-time secretary of the Syrian Bible Commission was nominated Director of the Syrian Caritas. His successor as secretary of the Bible Commission since October 1998 is the Maronite priest, Fr. Elias Tobji. Fr. Tobji completed his biblical studies in Rome and has long been a coordinator in Aleppo.

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## IMBISA-Region (South Africa)

### LUMKO-Institute, South Africa

The LUMKO-Institute is conducting Bible courses in three dioceses of the South African Bishops' Conference in connection with its training program "Called to Serve". A one-month course was also held in the De Mazenod Center.

The first book in the new catechetical series for children "The Christian Heritage" has been completed. Every reading comprises

four simple work steps. The telling of a story from the Gospels is one of the steps. The use of colored posters gives the children more ready access to the biblical stories.

The LUMKO-Institute also engages itself with the smaller Christian communities. In these, there is great demand for further training in the area of Bible sharing. To this end, LUMKO has put together a new booklet that can be used for independent study.

The yearly International Apostolate Course was given at the end of 1997. Thirty participants from fourteen countries took the one-month course, whose central focus was Holy Scripture.

#### Information:

LUMKO Institute  
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## Subregion of Latin America

### Mexico

Once again in 1998/1999, the Mexican Biblical Apostolate Institute (Instituto de Pastoral Bíblica) is offering courses for interested persons who have completed a basic study program. The purpose of the course is to provide solid training in the Biblical Apostolate, that includes general biblical theme-complexes as well as the important concerns of each of the biblical writings.

The entire span of the program of courses amounts to 210 class hours, divided over 30 weeks. The themes of the program year 1998/1999 are: Introduction to the Bible, God the Father, the Letter to the Hebrews, Jesus of Nazareth, the History of Salvation, the Pentateuch, the Acts of the Apostles, the

Prophets of Israel, the Gospel of John, the Lord's Passover, and the Letters to the Galatians and to the Romans.

#### Information:

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Moneda 85, Tlalpan  
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Fax: +52-(0)5-573 56 13

### Chile

Catecheticum is the name of the Institute for Apostolate and Catechesis in Chile that is an associated member of the Catholic Biblical Federation. Catecheticum is also the name of the newly published journal, the first issue of which appeared in the autumn of 1998. The plan is to have one issue per year in which both re-

search results as well as reflections on the praxis of catechesis and biblical ministry in the Latin American countries and in the Caribbean will be collected and published. Besides these studies, news items from the field of Catechesis, commentaries on church publications and book reviews will also be included.

Concentrating on key areas, Catecheticum concerns itself with themes from catechesis, Christian education and the Biblical Apostolate, and it is aimed primarily at an academic readership.

#### Information:

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## Subregion Latin Europe

### Malta

#### Radio - TV

The Malta Bible Society places high value on the use of radio and television. Members of the MBS are urged to produce appropriate programming, to take part in interviews and to design suitable biblical materials. Three broadcasting stations offer the MBS the possibility to air programs, and negotiations are under way with two others. A request has been sent to the national television channel for time on the air; there is also a good prospect for broadcasting time with another television station.

#### The Youth

Great emphasis is also placed by the Malta Bible Society on Bible work with the youth, who are reached in schools, parishes and clubs. A Bible quiz, a Bible Sunday for youth and Bible camps constitute the framework for this engagement in Bible ministry.

### Publications

#### Children's Bibles - "Picture Bibles"

An edition of the Bible for children ages six to nine is currently being prepared. It will contain retold Bible stories. Moreover, four young artists are working on putting together picture books that illustrate New Testament stories for children of ages five to eight.

#### Lectio Divina

The MBS is publishing a series of booklets that will introduce methods and ways of a *lectio divina* of Holy Scripture for various target groups. The series is addressed to couples, families, youth and school groups.

#### Information:

The Malta Bible Society  
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### Bible Congress in Paris

In collaboration with the Protestant Équipes d'Animation de Recherche Biblique the Service Biblique Catholique Évangile et Vie is organizing a Bible Congress in Paris on 17 and 18 April 1999 on the theme "Violence et Parole de Dieu" (Violence and the Word of God). In lectures and work-groups the following themes and issues, among others, will be treated: violence in the Bible, violence today and the celebration of the Jubilee Year, the theological dimension of violence, the animation of Bible groups, the acquiring of common projects. The event will lay heavy emphasis on praxis.

Information and Registration:  
Service Biblique Évangile et Vie  
8, rue Jean Bart  
75006 Paris, France

Tel: +33 (0)1-42 22 03 89  
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E-mail: sbev.stricher@wanadoo.fr

### 50 Years Associazione Biblica Italiana (ABI)

On 30 September 1948, 126 biblical scholars from Italian Institutes of higher learning met in the Aula Magna of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and founded the Associazione Biblica Italiana. This occurred in the context of the tenth National Bible Week. In connection with the thirtieth National Week of the ABI this year the fifty years of its work were commemorated. Above all, the members of the first meeting were remembered as were all those who have helped to shape the thrust and the tasks of the ABI through their engagement.

The thirtieth National Week of the ABI took place from 7 to 11 September in Rome and had as a theme "the Spirit of God and Holy Scripture in the biblical witness". The sessions were packed full of lectures and workshops which treated the theme from history of religions, exegetical-hermeneutical and pastoral perspectives.

Information:  
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(Transl.: Leonard Maluf)





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## Books and Materials

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### Translations and Revised Editions of the Bible

#### The Kalmuck Bible

The Kalmuck are a primarily Buddhist people who live in the south of Russia and who constitute their own Russian republic. Under the leadership of a Kalmuck Franciscan biblical texts were first translated into the Kalmuck language. In early December 1998 the Children's Bible in Kalmuck was brought to completion, thanks to the financial support of the Middle European Region of the Catholic Bible Federation.

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Fax: +43-(0)2243-329 38-39  
E-mail: oekb@xpoint.at

#### The Bible in Kahua

Following the New Testament, the Prophets and the Psalms are now also available from the Bible So-

ciety in the South Pacific (Suva, Fiji) in Kahua, the language of the So-lomon Islands. The translation was once again the work of P. Wawusi and G. Bruns, S.M. The title is: Na Buka Ni Ki - Ma Na Buka lata Na Poropste.

#### Information:

Fr. G. Bruns S. M.  
Wainoni Bay  
San Cristobal  
Solomon Islands

#### The Urdu Bible

In collaboration with the Daughters of Saint Paul (Logo Paoline, Lahore), the Pakistani Bishops' Conference has completed the fifth edition of the Bible in Urdu. The project was subsidized by Missio, the Church in Need and the Daughters of Saint Paul. Thirty thousand copies can be distributed by February 1999.

#### Information:

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#### Bible of the Sisters of Saint Paul

The New Testament of the "Bibbia Paoline" has been published in two volumes. The text of the Italian Bishops' Conference was used. This edition of the Bible is characterized by the fact that the biblical text is supplied with a verse-by-verse commentary on the opposite page from the text itself. The "Bibbia Paoline" contains an introduction, a number of chronological tables and maps. The completion of the entire edition is planned for the year 2001.

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## Books and Materials

**F. Rossi De Gasperis, A. Carfagna: Prendi il libro e mangia! Dalla creazione alla Terra Promessa** (Take the Book and Eat! From the Creation to the Promised Land). In: *Bibbia e Spiritualità*. EDB Bologna 1998.

The Bible as food for the soul is an image that already appears in the Old Testament (Deut 8:3). To unlock the Word of God as spiritual nourishment: this is the aim of the Jesuit De Gasperis in his most recent publication. He recounts Old Testament stories and interprets them. In a chapter of her own, Antonella Carfagna presents selected texts—mostly Psalms—in the form of a *lectio divina*.

The book follows a simple method of narrative Bible reading and combines exegetical accuracy with personal spirituality. The aim of the book is to stimulate the reader to a personal "lectio".

Information and Ordering:  
Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna (EDB)  
Via Nosadella, 6  
40123 Bologna, Italy  
Tel: 39-051-30 68 11  
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### Biblical Apostolate Material from Ecuador

The Biblical Apostolate Commission of the Ecuador Bishops' Conference has again published material for the year 1999. The publications are designed for Bible work in groups and are expected

to contribute to a more profound preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000. The title of the material is "Caminamos hacia el Padre" (We journey to the Father). A study booklet for leaders of Bible groups, a workbook for groups, drawings for instructional use, two cassettes and a poster have already appeared.

Information and Ordering:  
Conferencia Episcopal Ecuatoriana  
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### Bible and Ecumenism

As a fruit of their meeting in Mexico in August 1998 the presidents and directors of the Commission for Ecumenism of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops' Conferences composed a declaration that, among other things, gave a central role to the Biblical Apostolate. Among the priorities of Ecumenism are engagement in the field of the Biblical Apostolate, since the Bible is the common denominator of Christians and as such the point of convergence between the confessions.

(Transl.: Leonard Maluf)



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 of fellowship with God and with each other.

**Wilhelm Egger, Bishop of Bozen-Brixen, President CBF**

