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## **Biblical Pastoral Ministry in a Pluralistic World: Challenges and Prospects**

Sixth Plenary Assembly  
of the CBF



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The pictures in this edition show - unless indicated otherwise - participants in plenum, during workshops or services. Our thanks to Petr Chalupa, Cecilia Chui, Anton Gessler, Theo Kersten, Thomas Osborne and Ferdinand Poswick for their photo material.



## EDITORIAL

### Dear Readers,

This double issue of BDV is concerned with the results, the recommendations and the reforms of the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation. Central to this discussion is the Final Statement of the Plenary Assembly. Since its publication this document has been translated into 15 languages; in all parts of the world it has received many positive responses. Commentaries on the Final Statement explain its fundamental ideas, reflect on its relevance, discuss its contents from a regional point of view. The concrete recommendations articulated by the Plenary Assembly in the Final Statement are treated in articles found under the title "Priorities 2002-2008" and written either from a central perspective or from that of the regions and subregions.

Besides these - in part new - emphases in the work of the CBF, the Plenary Assembly in Lebanon also brought reforms into the structures of the Federation. These are visible above all in the new faces: from the President, through the members' representatives in the Executive Committee and the General Secretary, to the new coordinators. Their faces smile at you from the pages of this review, sometimes in conjunction with concise informative pieces and sometimes with longer articles. We should not, of course, forget that this countenance of the CBF remains shadowy "from above" and takes on distinctive features only when we look at the work of our members at the grassroots' level.

The delayed appearance of this issue harbors a hidden advantage as well: namely, that we have been able to take into account events that have occurred all the way up to and including the beginning of 2003. This fact above all makes a first look at the implementation of the recommendations and priorities of the Final Statement both possible and interesting.

The central concerns of the CBF for a biblical pastoral ministry at the beginning of the third millennium, priorities for the period 2002-2008, and the new faces - much in this issue of the BDV evidences the "impetus of the beginnings", the new thrust bestowed by the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Federation. The article of our President at the beginning of this Bulletin also speaks of this enthusiasm at the start of the new millennium - and so serves as an interpretive key for the entire issue. The words of Jesus to Peter: "Put out into the deep!" challenge us to set out with renewed commitment to "cast anew the nets of the Gospel into people's lives." They should provide us encouragement to take on the challenges and opportunities of a biblical pastoral ministry in our pluralistic world with renewed energy and confidence.

Alexander M. Schweitzer

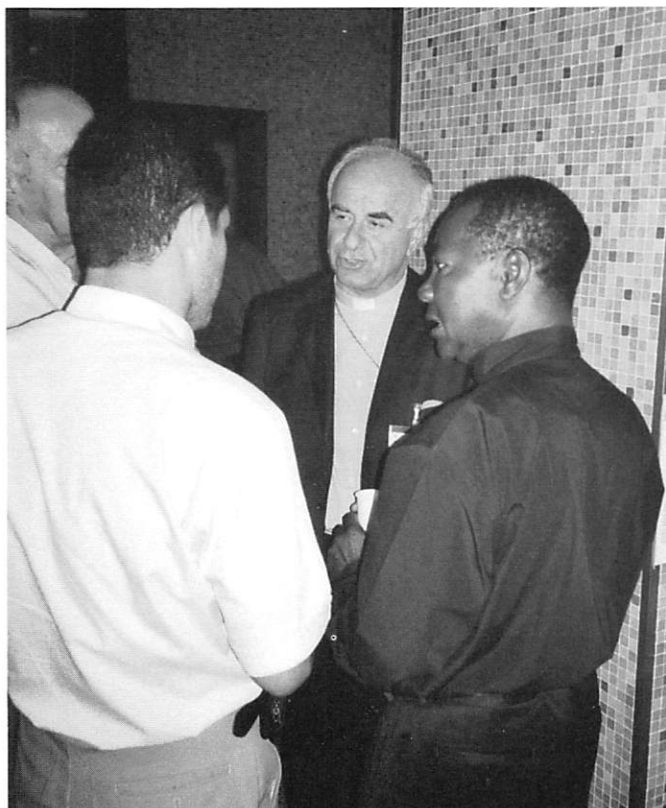


# NOVO MILLENNIO

## The Word of God in the *Novo Millennio Ineunte*

Address of the new President of the Catholic Biblical Federation, Vincenzo Paglia, on the occasion of the Sixth Plenary Assembly

I believe it is superfluous to underscore how great an influence the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* has had in the various Catholic Churches throughout the world in view of the pastoral directives for the beginning of this third millennium. I cite a single example with which I am closely familiar. When the Italian Episcopal Conference outlined the pastoral directives of the next ten years in a document entitled *Comunicare il Vangelo in un mondo che cambia* (communicating the Gospel in a changing world) it drew both on the spirit and on the contents of the papal text.



But to return to my subject: "The Word of God in the *Novo Millennio Ineunte*", it could be said that the entire document is robustly supported by biblical themes. The words of Jesus to Peter: "duc in altum! Put out into the deep!" which open the entire Letter and serve as its leit-motif are, as it were, an exhortation inviting the reader of

today to repeat the apostle's response: "At your word I will let down the nets" (Lk 5:4-5). In a certain sense what has been done thus far does not count. Even if we have been working hard all night and caught nothing, a new time has come, or better, a new word has come. And this, in my opinion, is the force of this evocation of the Gospel passage: faith in the Word of God stands at the beginning of a new miraculous catch of fish. The scene described by Luke in his Gospel, which the Pope recalls at the beginning and the end of this text, well brings out the centrality of the Christocentric perspective. This perspective is in fact the key to understanding the whole text.

"Start again from Christ", writes the Pope. This is an exhortation that seems to echo the first words shouted to the world from Saint Peter's Square: "Do not fear to open the doors to Christ!" And with a lucid pastoral wisdom, a wisdom quite opportune in a Church so afflicted with the malady of hyper-efficiency, he affirms: "It is not therefore a matter of inventing a 'new program.' The program already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its center in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated" (n 29). But, for those who might be tempted to use these words to mask their own pastoral laziness and their lack of evangelical boldness, he immediately adds: "This is a program that does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication. This program for all times is our program for the Third Millennium" (n. 29). And it is the one we will be listening to in the communications that will follow.

If the point of departure proposed by John Paul II is precisely that of keeping our gaze fixed on Christ, the way in which we put out into the deep, into the open sea of the new millennium is clearly indicated in the priority given to evangelization. The Pope writes: "Today we must courageously face a situation which is becoming increasingly diversified and demanding, in the context of 'globalization' and of the consequent new and uncertain mingling of peoples and cultures. Over the years, I





have often repeated the summons to the *new evangelization*" (n. 40). This is the meaning of the command "Duc in altum!", which the Pope causes to reverberate to all the Christian Churches. To this urgent appeal the Church's commitment to cast anew the nets of the Gospel into the lives of men should respond. And to cast them "widely" and "into the deep", as is indicated by the Greek word "bathos" used by Luke. The text should be translated: "go out into the deep water", or "extend the field of mission, but also penetrate in depth". The Pope exhorts himself and all Christians to cast the nets with the same "impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardor of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel' (1 Cor 9:16). This passion will not fail to stir in the Church a new sense of mission, which cannot be left to a group of 'specialists' but must involve the responsibility of all the members of the People of God" (n. 40).

We are emerging from a century, the twentieth, which was certainly marked by a strong missionary character. I will not speak on this at length, although it would be quite useful to do so. But I cannot refrain from at least mentioning the long, interminable band of martyrs of the proclamation of the Gospel, explicitly recalled in the *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, with the addition of this singular explanation: "In them the Word of God, sown in good soil, yielded a hundredfold" (n. 41). Their blood continues to be poured out even down to our own times. Allow me to recall but one among all of these martyrs, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, a bishop killed at the altar at the moment of the offertory. I am the postulator for the cause of his beatification and the Pope, writing in his own hand, inserted his name into the prayer book for the day of the new martyrs at the Colosseum during the Holy Year. John Paul II does not hesitate to pray that the shining example of these witnesses "sustain and guide us in this confident, enterprising and creative sense of mission" (n. 41).

On the other hand, however, it also has to be said that after two thousand years the mission of the Church is still at its beginnings. In the *Redemptoris Missio* the Pope writes: "The mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, is still far from completion. As the second millennium after Christ's coming draws to an end, an overall view of the human race shows that this mission is still only beginning" (n. 1). This is a strong statement that has nothing of rhetorical expediency about it. Moreover, we all still need to grow in the understanding of what the Gospel is telling us. A Russian Orthodox priest, Fr. Alexander Men, who was killed in 1990 under obscure circumstances, on the day

before his assassination wrote: "Only people of limited understanding can imagine that Christianity has reached its fulfillment... The fact is that Christianity is only taking its first, timid steps in the history of the human race. Many of Christ's words still remain obscure... The history of Christianity is only beginning. What was done in the past, what we now call the history of Christianity, is only a series of attempts". In sum, this Russian priest reminds us that there is a gradual growth in the knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures on the part of Christians. Allow me to say that if in theology one can speak of a development of dogma, how much more can one speak of a development in the understanding of the Bible on the part of Christians? John XXIII himself, in the fascinating but certainly not easy days of the new conciliar Pentecost, wrote: "It is not that the Gospel is changing, it is that we are beginning to understand it better".

Then there are the upheavals that have happened in the world in these last decades, which require a new proclamation of the Gospel. It is a matter of implementing a true, new mission of our own: to announce the Gospel of all times but in the language of today. Moreover, no generation is "naturaliter christiana". And if in a climate of "Christian society" a pause in missionary activity might be conceivable, such a pause is entirely impossible in a secularized world, in a world that has "exited from God", as the French put it, and rather effectively I would say. The text of the Papal Letter explicitly calls for a new missionary thrust, and this precisely because of the new situation of the world. John Paul II devotes the entire section 40 to this theme: Proclaiming the Word. The Gospel must be newly communicated to this generation and, as is obvious, we need to find the words and the means to insure that people can understand it. And you all know what extraordinary commitment this all requires. Already in *Redemptoris Missio* John Paul II had said with great clarity: "Today the Church must face other challenges and push forward to new frontiers, both in the initial mission *ad gentes* and in the new evangelization of those peoples who have already heard Christ proclaimed" (n. 30). Mission is in fact a reality that passes over into the whole life of the Church, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. It is not a matter of two distinct missions; they stand together and mature together, or, as they say in Latin, *simul stabunt, simul cadunt* (they stand or fall together).

The Pope does not hesitate to say that the responsibility of communicating the Gospel to the new generation "is surely a priority for the Church at the dawn of the new millennium" (n. 40). And it is a priority that concerns all Christians, without any exception. "Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him



for themselves; they must proclaim him", he writes (n. 40). At this point, but perhaps this takes us beyond our competency, we are obliged to pose a question to ourselves: if the mission is to communicate – good news, are our communities today ready, or rather are they able to communicate it? The question is largely rhetorical, and for this reason I ask myself: is there not a connection between a certain decline in missionary fervor in our Churches and that continuous turning in on self which cannot but have an impact even on the apostolic life? If this is true it becomes even more strikingly clear that the rebirth of mission in the Church is not simply a matter of new forms of organization to be found. The rebirth of the Church arises from men and women who have been genuinely in contact with Jesus and whose lives have thereby been transformed. The New Testament itself is born of mission, of the need that all Christian communities have to communicate the Gospel of Christ. But the whole of Christian history is a story of calls that transform lives. This is the reason why there is a close connection between the renewal of the Church and a renewed hearing of the Word of Jesus.

In this context, in fact, the Pope inserts the paragraph on the Word of God. In number 39 of the Letter he writes: "There is no doubt that this primacy of holiness and prayer is inconceivable without a renewed *listening to the Word of God*". This is a statement to which great attention must be paid: holiness and prayer are linked in an inseparable way to the hearing of Scripture. This means that the center of the missionary question, which is therefore the center of the Church of the third millennium, consists wholly in lifting up the hearts of men and women with the Word of God, or, in other words, in causing the Word of God to descend into their hearts. We are all aware of the centrality of hearing the Word of God in the life of the Church as well as in that of individual believers. Here I underscore only the fact that the story of the communication of the Gospel is always a story of encounters, a story of concrete witnesses who have had their hearts touched by the Word and who in turn know how to touch the hearts of those with whom they come in contact. This is a kind of repetition through the course of the generations of the story of Peter and John. To the cripples who sit and beg on the paths of life Christians must say: "I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:6).

The papal text reminds us that "in the life of the Church, great progress has certainly been made in devout listening to Sacred Scripture". And with satisfaction, more than justified given the scant attention paid to it prior to Vatican II, he observes: "Scripture has its rightful place of honor in the public prayer of the Church". This state-

ment is particularly significant when read in connection with another directive that emerges from the Letter, namely, the primacy to be given to Sunday and in particular to the celebration of the Eucharist. Among the many concerns that are born of these proposed directives is one which I would view as particularly significant for our Federation and which regards the official text of the Bible to be used in the liturgy. The Italian Episcopal Conference just this year has completed the new and definitive translation of the Bible to be used in the liturgy. You can imagine how important it is, from a pastoral point of view, to have an official translation of the Bible used both in liturgical texts and in ordinary Bibles.



Obviously the Pope's exhortation does not stop at considering the rightful place restored to the Bible in the Liturgy of the Church. He turns from this immediately to the faithful and to the necessary relationship they should have with Sacred Scripture as nourishment for their daily lives. Those individuals, including lay persons, who devote themselves to a deeper understanding of the Word of God, are commended. In particular the text notes the revitalization of catechesis that has taken place through the sacred Scripture. These are points which, obviously, could not be ignored in a text like the *NMI* and which give still further impetus to our Federation in its work. And we feel particularly addressed to us these words: "Dear brothers and sisters, this development needs to be consolidated and deepened, also by making sure that every family has a Bible. Our creativity should be placed at the service of this lofty goal".



A valuable reference is then made with mention to *lectio divina*: "It is especially necessary that listening to the Word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever valid tradition of *lectio divina*, which draws from the biblical text the living Word which questions, directs and shapes our lives" (n. 39). I will not dwell at length on this point. But the centrality of Scripture in the lives of the believer and of the Church emerges here with great clarity. This preoccupation should to some extent challenge that hyper-efficiency that is so common in our parishes and in our communities. Indeed it not uncommonly happens that we risk relegating the Bible to the biblical group, that we leave it to a group of so-called "lovers" of the Bible. But, mind my words, a Church that cannot make the Bible the center of its entire life can hardly understand itself as *ecclesia*, as the assembly of those called by God. How can such a consciousness be raised if no attention is being paid to the one who calls and who convokes? There can be no doubt that the way in which one conceives one's relationship to Scripture has a direct impact on one's very conception of the Church. So then, the appeal the Pope makes to the education of the youth, who will be the Church of tomorrow, is particularly opportune. It is a matter of forming a new generation of believers to a

more biblical, more Christocentric faith, and one that is probably more free, more capable of confronting itself in a simple, direct manner with its evangelical roots and with the life of Jesus itself.

I would like to draw your attention to one final point. The Pope in the third paragraph of number 40 writes: "In the third millennium, Christianity will have to respond ever more effectively to this need for inculturation". To this vast theme I would add the challenge that the Pope brought to the attention of believers: namely, ecumenical dialogue, interreligious dialogue and intercultural dialogue. On these frontiers depends the future of the Church in the third millennium. Assuming that the dialogue to which the Pope is inviting us does not annul mission, I maintain that familiarity with Scripture enables us to confront these challenges that are so decisive with greater wisdom. Because sacred Scripture is itself the fruit of a vast and complex dialogue. Is it not itself the fruit of an encounter between a God who speaks and the human cultures, beginning with the most ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures and on down to those of the Hellenistic world? And did not Christianity itself exit from the too tight meshes of Judaism for the encounter with, among others, the Hellenistic world and





its cultures? Indeed, one can draw a kind of parallel between the Hellenism of yesterday and the globalization we speak of today and affirm that we need to avoid conferring the status of myth on the cultures or on globalization. The Gospel at the same time animates and transcends both. Scripture, then, promotes an attitude of dialogue and at the same time one that is aware of its own values and its own certitudes: and this is a prerequisite of entering into dialogue with men and women of other religions and other cultures. In sum, the Bible is the book that can make Christians the soul of the new millennium, or, to use a more evangelical expression, the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

And the conclusion of the Letter is highly significant: "I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council as *the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century*: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning". And our Federation can be proud of being a small - and beautiful - part of this grace of the Council that continues in the life of the Church.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)







## FINAL STATEMENT

# The Word of God: A Blessing for all Nations - Biblical Pastoral Ministry in a Pluralistic World

## Final Statement of the Sixth Plenary Assembly

### I. THE CONTEXT OF THE SIXTH PLENARY ASSEMBLY

**1. The journey of the Catholic Biblical Federation into the new millennium.** We, the 150 delegates of member organizations of the Catholic Biblical Federation from 70 countries have met near Beirut in Fatka, Ghazir, Lebanon from September 3-12, 2002 for our Sixth Plenary Assembly. We have gathered here, mindful of our commitment and of our conviction that the Word of God is meant to be a "blessing for all nations" (Gen 22:18) and that God "shows us ways of life" (Acts 2:28).

Called and mandated in a special way to proclaim the Word of God unto the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1:8) unhindered and with boldness (cf. 28:31), we have come together to share, like Paul and Barnabas returning from their missionary journeys, what God has done through our ministry (cf. 14:27; 15:3), to reflect on today's challenges of our biblical pastoral ministry (cf. 15:7b-12) and to recommit ourselves to our ministry in facing the new challenges with courage (cf. 15:22-41).

Our sharing, reflection and re-commitment have been inspired and guided by our daily encounter with the Word in the Acts of the Apostles, our encounters with one another coming from the four corners of the world, and the daily celebrations of our unity in diversity in the Eucharist, as well as our encounter with the Christian communities and people of Lebanon.

Thus we experienced ourselves anew as fellow-travellers with the Word in the Catholic Biblical Federation, continuing its journey which has been marked by the milestones of previous Assemblies in Vienna (1972), Malta (1978), Bangalore (1984), Bogotá (1990) and Hong Kong (1996). We gratefully acknowledge, in our journeying together, the many impulses these assemblies have given to the Federation; but also - and perhaps even more so - we are encouraged to face together the new challenges for the ministry of the Word and for the Federation at the beginning of the new millennium.

**2. We met in Lebanon:** a land of the Bible, visited by Jesus himself and his disciples (Mt 15:21); a land

- between Jerusalem and Antioch - where the Gospel was preached by the first ministers of the Word; a country in which adherents of the three religions of the children of Abraham are at home; a country at the cross-roads of cultures and religions; a country which has suffered from rivalries and wars and now experiences a new revitalization; a country in which "interreligious dialogue is a respectful and sincere meeting in which the encountering parties want to know each other, to learn from one another, to enrich each other and to love one another" (Message of the Synod of Bishops for Asia, n. 5); a country which is both a symbol and a message. In Lebanon we have remembered and have been inspired by that first Pentecost at the beginning of the first millennium.

**3. We are part of the pilgrim Church.** We recalled in Lebanon that the mandate of the Catholic Biblical Federation at the beginning of this new millennium arises from the vision and promise of a new Pentecost in our pilgrimage which began with the Second Vatican Council. We are inspired by the teaching of the Church, which reminds us in post-conciliar and post-synodal documents, especially in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, of its reason for existing and its primary duty: to listen to and to proclaim the good news of salvation (DV 1; NMI 39-40). We are grateful to Bishops and Church authorities for giving guidelines for the biblical pastoral ministry, among which the recent documents of the Pontifical Biblical Commission deserve special mention. We are part of the community of Christian Churches with whom we treasure together the Sacred Scriptures as Word of God.

### 4. We live in a pluralistic world

**4.1** Our journey has made us increasingly aware that plurality is woven into the very fabric of our human family. There is a plurality of worldviews, cultures, religions and ways of organization of society. Today, close proximity and contacts among cultures, religions and diverse forms of spirituality are a pervasive phenomenon. Thus intercultural and interreligious identity is becoming part of the contours of many nations in the



world and plurality is being acknowledged as a constitutive aspect of our world.

**4.2** Our experience of plurality and diversity is also becoming painfully and increasingly ambivalent and ambiguous. On the one hand, diversity becomes enrichment; on the other, it is often perceived as an obstacle by some, leading to intolerance and suppression especially of the minorities and the weak. Understanding of and living with difference and plurality is a major struggle in many societies. This gives rise to tensions and divisions in civil society, Church and religions.

**4.3** Monolithic power structures especially in the economic and political arena tend to impose monocultural patterns of living with devastating effects on the poor who are systematically excluded from participation in decision-making and from their share of the goods of the world. The modern communication media, so powerful in bringing people together, often tend to become a tool in the hands of these forces, bent on creating a homogenous culture for the sole purpose of power and profit.

**4.4** Ecological violence and destruction is another area where the natural symbiotic relationship of creation has been severely affected by human greed. Globalization of the market is a major phenomenon of this ambiguity of our society. While in some places there is greater consciousness of the dignity and equality of persons, in others there is increasing violence, which often affects the poor and innocent people, in particular women and children; in addition women are still all too often excluded from socio-cultural and political decisions on matters affecting them directly. Diseases like HIV/AIDS wipe out families and ever-growing numbers of people, causing untold suffering and great anxiety.

**4.5** We have excellent international declarations on human rights and many initiatives to protect them, but unfortunately, these ideals are violated by oppressive and degrading practices in several parts of the world. Similarly, denial of religious liberty in several countries is a flagrant affront to human dignity.

**4.6** There is great regard for the value of religious tolerance, but fundamentalist religious and ethnic forces are becoming more and more rampant and violent in many parts of the world, reducing the space for minorities, crushing their legitimate efforts for recognition and justice, sometimes even annihilating them.

**4.7** Pluralism is a reality more and more present even in the Church, called since its beginnings to be one in diversity. But the Church itself struggles with difficulties

because of a certain fundamentalist and exclusive mentality of some of its members. In the ecumenical context, the reading and interpretation of the Bible itself becomes a stumbling block on our way to unity.

**5.** It is within this context and faced with these challenges that we have come together to discern "ways" for us to walk as co-pilgrims with others in our ministry of the Word, especially the biblical pastoral ministry.



## II. INTERPRETATION OF THIS REALITY IN THE LIGHT OF THE WORD OF GOD

**1. Jesus our way, the ways of Jesus.** When we attempt to discern the "ways of life" that we want to walk in our pluralistic world, we as Christians turn first of all to Jesus Christ who is our Way. Jesus proclaimed by word and deeds the universal Fatherhood of God. Therefore, his life was singularly characterized by solidarity with the outcast, sinners, the poor, the Samaritans and Gentiles (cf. Mt 15:21-28; 25:31-46; Lk 4:18-21). The kingdom of God that he proclaimed is opposed to any narrow ethnic or racial understanding of God's saving presence and action in our world (cf. Mt 3:9). He envisaged a non-localized religion and worship in spirit and truth (cf. Jn 4:23), as we discovered anew in our Plenary Assembly in Hong Kong. The Gospels manifest to us the Jesus who transcended cultural and religious boundaries in order to be faithful to the plan of God for all people (Mt 8:5-13; 12:15-21; Lk 10:25-37).



## 2. The ways of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles.

During our Assembly, we searched for the light of the Word especially in the Acts of the Apostles, wherein we read that the Holy Spirit constantly makes the disciples transcend boundaries. The variety of languages, cultures and nationalities to which the one Good News reaches out on Pentecost Day is a vivid affirmation of plurality as the design of God for humanity (cf. 2:6,8,11). In the story of the conversion of Cornelius, we also recognize another "conversion", that of Peter, expressed in these words: "Now I see that God shows no partiality" (10:34). For he discovers that the Holy Spirit is at work in the "other" just as in himself (cf. 10:47; 11:17-18). By making them cross the boundaries of ethnicity, culture and language, the Spirit enables them to discover that all "are God's children", "living, moving and existing in God" (17:28).

**3. Going beyond.** We need to go beyond geography, nationality and ethnicity. No land is to be made absolute, no nationality, no ethnic group, no culture, and no language. The Spirit's ways are unpredictable (cf. Jn 3:8). The Church has to always remain attentive to the dynamic movement of the Spirit for uniting people by new bonds. It is distinctively a movement for co-pilgrimage with the "others", those who are different from us. In this sense, to be religious would also mean for us that we should seek the path of an interreligious approach to life and service. This demands willingness to know, learn from and relate with others.

**4. The figure of Abraham.** A re-reading of the Abraham traditions in the First Testament further corroborates this perspective. Jews, Christians and Moslems all consider themselves related to the patriarch Abraham. To consider one group as the exclusive heirs of Abraham is contrary to the plan of God manifested through Abraham. For God's blessings to Abraham were destined for all people (Gen 12:2-3). But history testifies that Abraham had been and continues to be an object of dispute and division among his descendants. At this moment of history it is possible for all children of Abraham to go beyond the exclusive understanding and seek to discover in these traditions the seminal insights of the universality of God's design that embraces all peoples. New courage is needed to do this re-reading which, if pursued with commitment, can set us on a course of breakthrough at the beginning of this new millennium.

This demands that we rediscover Abraham as a bridge among members of religions who have the common heritage of the faithful Abraham. We might thus find new energy to destroy the mighty barriers of fear, suspicion and violence that characterized our relationships in the past. We may thus prepare a way for a new future free

from mutual distrust and become co-pilgrims with a common bond - Abraham who believed and obeyed God. The move from exclusive particularism to a more open universalism can begin when we search the deepest identity of Abraham as the one who believed and trusted in God's Word. This vision will facilitate a movement away from a horizon of biological descent and geography towards the discovery of the faith and obedience of Abraham as his fundamental identity.

**5. The emerging ecclesial consciousness.** The emerging consciousness in the Church since Vatican II can be spelt out in the words of Pope John Paul II:

*The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, people, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of noble ideas and undertakings, which benefit humanity on its journey through history (Redemptoris Missio, n. 28).*

Religions are thus recognized also as an arena of the Spirit's presence and action. Religions, insofar as they uphold and live human values, are signs of the presence of the Spirit in our world. In this sense they can be considered as gifts of God to humanity. We believe that they are all related at a deeper level in the mystery of Christ the Saviour who emptied himself for the wholeness of humanity and of the entire creation (cf. Col 1:15-17). This most important and compelling force drives us to seek ways of communion among all God's children.

**6. A unifying vision.** At the end of this Plenary Assembly, we recommit ourselves to explore a new biblical and theological vision as well as approaches in quest of that spirituality of communion that should be the characteristic of the new millennium. Instead of being estranged from one another either violently or by mutual distrust or indifference, we need to engage in such a task for the sake of a future - a more united human family with its diversity. It is incumbent upon us not to repeat the mistakes of the past - of harmful and violent estrangement from one another in the name of God or Holy Books.

## III. THE POWER OF THE WORD OF GOD FOR TRANSFORMING THE WORLD AND THE COMMITMENT OF THE CATHOLIC BIBLICAL FEDERATION

### 1. The power of the Word

**1.1** In designing our response to the reality as ministers and servants of the Word, we turn to the Word of God as





the source not only of our vision, but above all, as **the source of divine power** (cf. Gen 1:3ff; Jn 1:3; Rom 1:16). The Spirit and the Word can overtake us as in the case of the Apostles and empower us provided we allow the Word to have a claim on our lives and on the life of the Church. The energizing power of the Word is felt only in an obedient surrender like that of Abraham and of the Apostles, whose ministry we have contemplated as we read and prayed the Word in the Acts of the Apostles.

**1.2** The question Pope Paul VI posed in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, "... what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man's conscience?" (n. 4), continues to challenge us. God's Word is creative: it is the Word of power for renewal and transformation. Our task therefore is to **seek ways of making the Word of God the source of energy in the heart of the Church and world**. Bringing about a change of consciousness, a change of behaviour and a change of structures is all part of the one mission of the Church. All activities of the Church are in one way or another ministry of the Word. Therefore the Church has the Word of God in the centre of all her life and mission. Without it, we would miss the lifeline of power and blessings.

**1.3** How can we experience the Word as the source of

life? Without the light and grace of the Spirit, the Word will not generate the energy needed for transformation of life and society. Prayer accompanied by docility to the Spirit should become the hallmark of the ministry of the Word (cf. Acts 13:2). At this moment of history, we should listen to the pressing invitation of the Word of God for a **deeper conversion** of our vision, our attitudes and behaviour towards the "other" - religions, cultures and ethnic groups, and especially the poor, women and all those who are victims of exclusion and discrimination in our societies. A re-reading of the Word in such life-threatening contexts is an imperative that we can not set aside. For the Word of God comes to us with its power to impel us to live in solidarity. It is only when we feel the irresistible power of the Spirit that we can become effective instruments of transformation.

**1.4** We reiterate our commitment to **self-critique of our way of reading Scripture** in the Church - individually and collectively. Do we allow the power of the Word to have its impact on the contexts of society? Have we used texts of Scripture to legitimize attitudes of superiority, discrimination and violence towards others? Fundamentalist and purely spiritualistic interpretations of the Scripture are an ever-growing phenomenon in almost all Churches. Biblical pastoral ministry has an urgent task in this field in countering a sectarian and





fundamentalist reading of the Word that builds walls of separation and discrimination. Along with this, we need to highlight the plurality that is a characteristic feature of the Bible: plurality of world-views, of interpretations of sacred texts, of theologies, of ecclesial structures.

**1.5** In order to achieve this, **contextual hermeneutics** will have to be developed in every area of our involvement. Biblical formation of laity and clergy should have such a thrust. In the light of our reflections during this Plenary Assembly it is important, wherever possible, to undertake a dialogic reading of the Word of God, letting the echoes and resonance of the various religious traditions, scriptural or otherwise, enrich our experience of the Word, mysteriously present in our world. This will enlarge our vision of God and promote a depth-level dialogue among religions. Such a reading might help us to see the multifaceted face of God the Father and Mother of all and the face of Jesus the Word incarnate.

## **2. The Word of God itself determines our options for reading the Bible**

The Word of God in Sacred Scripture releases its power if read appropriately. In fact the Bible itself teaches us the options for reading it properly and for living the Word. In this way, we are faithful both to the original message and to the people to whom it is proclaimed as Good News (cf. EN 4).

**2.1** We are committed to **an attentive and respectful reading** of the biblical text. Being a book of a different time and culture, it must first of all be respected in its otherness. It is to be read in its original - historical and cultural - as well as in its literary context. "Our reading of the Bible should enable people to discover the true content. All efforts to interpret the Bible in order to justify political and ideological positions should be considered as a betrayal to the message" (Bogotá 7,3). Even people who are not able to handle scientific and scholarly methods can be guided in an attentive reading of the Bible, and this in order to avoid the pitfalls of a fundamentalist reading which refuses to take into consideration a historical and pluralistic character of the Bible (Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* [IBC], I.F).

**2.2** The Bible, in its canon as well as individual books, is a pluralistic phenomenon, an outstanding example of unity in diversity, a symphony of many voices. Convinced that "all the different ways of reading the Bible are not equally apt" (Bogotá 7) but also that no one method captures the richness of the meaning of the Scriptures, the Federation advocates a **plurality of**

**methods and approaches** which "contribute effectively to the task of making more available the riches contained in the biblical text" (IBC Introduction).

**2.3 Reading the Bible and celebrating the Word in community:** The Bible is the book of the community, an expression of its faith experience, and meant for building it. It has an important place in the liturgy and in catechesis. "The Scriptures, as given to the Church, are the communal treasure of the entire body of believers". "All the members of the Church have a role in the interpretation of Scripture". Even those who, "in their powerlessness and lack of human resources find themselves forced to put their trust in God alone and in his justice, have a capacity for hearing and interpreting the Word of God which should be taken into account by the whole Church" (IBC, III.B.3).



**2.4 Reading Scripture in the life context:** The Bible is the book of life in as much as it deals with life in all its manifestations. God has given us two sacred books: that of creation and history, and that of the Bible. God's Word enshrined in the latter is to throw light on and help us decipher the first. The Bible has "to be re-read in the light of new circumstances and applied to the contemporary situation of the people of God" (IBC, IV.A). Exegetes "arrive at the true goal of their work only, when they have explained the meaning of the biblical texts as God's Word for today" (IBC, III.C.1). We are committed



to this life-related reading of the Bible, as formulated in several of the Final Statements of the Catholic Biblical Federation. "We should start with the reality in which we actually find ourselves today, and we should allow the Word of God to throw light on this reality" (Bogotá 7,1).

**2.5** Mindful of the different contexts and cultures in which we live and having reflected on how the Word of God has been received in different cultures, we are convinced that we not only have to pay attention to the Word itself, but also to the different soils in which it is to be sown. The conviction that the Word is capable of being spread in other cultures "springs from the Bible itself ... in the blessing promised to all peoples through Abraham and his offspring" (Gen 12:3; 18:18) and extending it to all nations (cf. IBC, IV.B). An "**inculturated**" reading presupposes a respectful and in-depth encounter with a people and its culture and starts with the translation of the Bible into the language of the people, to be followed by interpretation which then leads to the formation of a "local Christian culture, extending to all aspects of life" (IBC, IV.B).

**2.6** The poor are the first addressees of the Good News (Lk 4:18-19; Mt 5:3). What God has hidden from the wise and learned, He has revealed to the little ones, to those of little or no significance (Mt 11:25). This fact demands that Christian communities **read the Bible from the perspective of the poor**. "There is reason to rejoice in seeing the Bible in the hands of people of lowly condition and of the poor; they can bring to its interpretation and to its actualization a light more penetrating, from the spiritual and existential point of view, than that which comes from a learning that relies upon its own resources alone" (IBC, IV.C.3). Reading the Bible in such a way will lead us necessarily to taking an option for the poor.

**2.7** The Bible as Word of God can only be welcomed if we approach it also as the Church's basic source of prayer and if we cultivate the **prayerful reading of Scripture** (cf. Bogotá 7.2; Hong Kong 1.2). *Lectio divina*, formerly cultivated mainly in monasteries and religious communities, is more and more appreciated by all the Christian faithful (cf. DV 25). The Pontifical Biblical Commission has devoted an entire section to *lectio divina*; in numerous apostolic and post-synodal exhortations; notably in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (no. 39) and in his Letter to the Church in Lebanon (no. 39), John Paul II has insistently invited us to make use of this ancient and still valid method of reading the Word of God. This form of prayer challenges, gives orientation to and forms our existence.

### 3. The mandate of the Catholic Biblical Federation

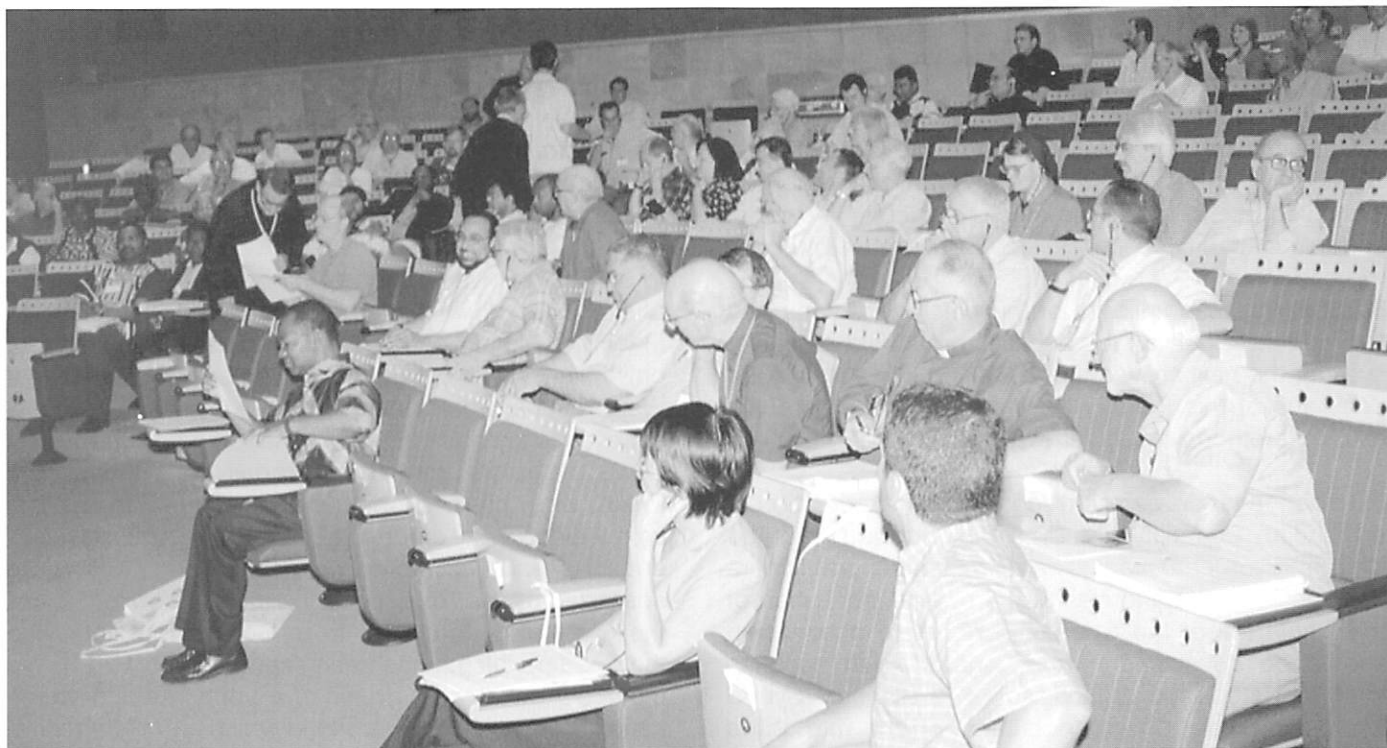
The mandate of the Catholic Biblical Federation is the biblical apostolate, the biblical pastoral ministry, the biblical "animation" of the pastoral life of the Church, providing the Church with spiritual nourishment, indeed with its very soul (anima). Its objective and mandate is "that the Word of God may become more and more the spiritual nourishment of the People of God, the source for them of a life of faith, of hope and love - and indeed a light for all humanity" (IBC, Introduction B). Its objective is "to make known the Bible as the Word of God and source of life" (IBC, IV.C.3).

The Catholic Biblical Federation is the organization of the Church, at the service of the local Churches (Bishops and Bishops' Conferences), which has been given an official mandate to implement the directives of the Second Vatican Council concerning Sacred Scripture in the life of the Church. The Federation has recalled this in particular in its Bogotá Plenary Assembly, on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Dei Verbum*. On the occasion of this Sixth Plenary Assembly, the members of the CBF renew their commitment to this mandate.

### 4. The priorities for 2002-2008

**4.1** Taking into account both the challenges identified by this Assembly and the concrete life and needs of its members, the Plenary Assembly defines the following **general priorities** for the Catholic Biblical Federation, at its different levels, for the upcoming six years:

- the promotion of a greater awareness of the importance of the Bible within the life of the Church in general and among the Bishops and ecclesiastical institutions in particular
- the development of biblical formation programs for people at all levels of the Church and society at large, but in particular and urgently for the poor and those who are excluded from their rightful place in our societies
- the making available and accessible of appropriate, pastoral and affordable translations of the Bible, taking into account the cultural and socio-economic situation of our peoples, as well as the ecumenical and interreligious context of our Christian communities
- the development of biblical pastoral material which takes into account the particular social and cultural situations of the different groups of the world population



ation and which will help them to participate in the construction of a world in which justice, peace and mutual respect contribute lastingly to human development

- the reinforcement of the communication and sharing network within the Catholic Biblical Federation, whether this be on the level of the regions, sub-regions or zones, or across the entire Federation
- reflection and research in regard to the fundamental issues of the biblical pastoral ministry in a cultural and religious pluralistic world characterized by the globalization of communications and economies as well as by extreme situations of political and economic injustice and religious intolerance.

**4.2** The Plenary Assembly recommends that the members of the Catholic Biblical Federation **collaborate with other Church organizations, non-governmental organizations and other institutions in working towards economic justice in the world and the protection of the environment.** This will necessarily entail prophetically denouncing economic and social injustice, the violation of human rights and the denial of religious liberty.

**4.3** The Plenary Assembly recommends that the various member organizations **collaborate with the World Council of Churches' "Decade to overcome violence"**

by developing biblical pastoral materials for Bible groups and organizing activities which help to identify the real problems behind human violence and find lasting solutions permitting men and women of different cultural and religious origins to live with one another in mutual respect, fundamental justice and peace. In this regard, all possible measures must be taken to protest against oppression and persecution of Christian and other minorities in totalitarian countries.

**4.4** In response to requests coming from the Region of Africa and Madagascar, the Plenary Assembly recommends that the support of **the biblical pastoral ministry in Africa** be a **major priority** of the Catholic Biblical Federation at large during the next six years. In particular, the Plenary Assembly encourages the Executive Committee, in close collaboration with the bishops of Africa, to seek new ways of supporting the African efforts to implement the recommendations of *Ecclesia in Africa* (n. 58)

- in biblical pastoral formation for clergy, religious and laity,
- in the translation, publication and distribution, in collaboration with Catholic editors and the United Bible Societies, of affordable Bibles adapted to the African cultures,
- and in the further development of centres of the biblical pastoral ministry in Africa.





5. For the realization of these priorities, the Plenary Assembly makes the **following recommendations**:

5.1 The Plenary Assembly recommends that communication within the Federation as well as public relations in general be further developed, in particular through an increased use of electronic media and other means of communication (website, *Bulletin Dei Verbum*, etc.).

5.2 It is the responsibility of the different regions and subregions to define their priorities and concrete objectives for the next six years while taking into account the decisions of this Plenary Assembly and in foreseeing efficient methods of regular evaluation.

5.3 The Plenary Assembly recommends the creation of a Standing Committee on "The Bible in the Life of the Church" in order to work towards a greater commitment of ecclesiastical authorities to the biblical inspiration of the whole life of the Church. A concrete action plan should be developed in this regard which sees as important steps the organization of a Bishops' Synod and/or an official Church document on the role of the Word of God in the entire life of the Church.

5.4 Financial responsibility within the Catholic Biblical Federation must be assumed at all levels of the Federation and should be guided by the double principle of subsidiarity and solidarity. In order to insure the necessary financial resources for the realization of the Federation's projects in the future, the Administrative Board should intensify its efforts to find new methods of fund-raising.

6. In response to the appeal of its new President, the Catholic Biblical Federation meeting in Plenary Assembly has decided to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Vatican II's Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* for and with the whole Church by organizing an **International Colloquium on "The Sacred Scriptures in the Life of the Church" in Rome in 2005.**

In our quest for an adequate response to the invitation of God's Word which we heard in Lebanon, we turn to Mary, the Mother of the Word Incarnate. For Mary not only believed in the Word but surrendered herself to that Word with her whole being (cf. Lk 1:45). Like her, we feel impelled to proclaim the God of history who "has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly", who "has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty" (1:52-53). In spite of our inadequacies and limitations, we commit ourselves to be energized by the Word, believing that God's Word is like the rain that does not return to God without achieving the end for which it has been sent (cf. Is 55:10-11). We make our own Mary's dream of a world free of discrimination and exclusion, a world in which all will be recognized as God's children, in accordance with the promise made to Abraham (cf. Lk 1:55; Acts 3:25). ■



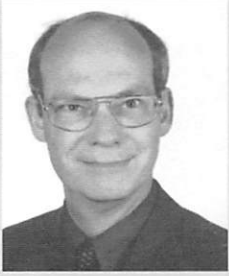




## FINAL STATEMENT

# Comments on the Drafting Process and the Basic Ideas of the Final Statement

Thomas P. Osborne



*Thomas Osborne worked for many years in a position of responsibility with the Service Biblique Diocésain in Luxembourg. From 1996-2002 he served as coordinator of the subregion of Southern and Western Europe.*

When I was first asked to make a few comments on the Final Statement of the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF), I hesitated to accept. It is not easy in fact for one who played the role of the "wise woman" in the drafting and birth of a document of this kind to take an objective, non-apologetic, critical look at the child of such efforts. In any case, the most important "commentaries" will be those made by the Executive Committee, the General Secretary and the coordinators, as well as the comments of each of the members of the CBF when they get down to the task of converting this declaration into a plan of action. For my part I will limit myself to a few somewhat random reflections on the drafting process of this document, and on the basic directions it outlines. Finally, I will offer a reflection on two fundamental questions that are of particular concern to me.

### 1. The drafting process

The decision to begin the preparations for the Final Statement (FS) long before the Plenary Assembly (PA) was made by the Executive Committee at the time of its meeting in Lebanon at the beginning of 2001. Through an ad hoc survey the members of the CBF were given the opportunity to express themselves as to their own experiences, expectations and hopes regarding their work as biblical-pastoral ministers in general and the CBF in particular. A number of subregions organized meetings, or conferences to reflect on themes that might be treated at the time of the PA. At the end of the year 2001, the General Secretary compiled the responses and a synthesis of the replies was drawn up in

January 2002. On this basis, a preliminary draft, to be submitted to the Plenary Assembly, was prepared in concert with the members of a first Drafting Committee, comprising representatives of four continents, a member of the Executive Committee and the Acting General Secretary. It included at the same time a few recommendations for improving the functioning of the structures of the CBF and a statement of some priorities for the coming six years. This draft was presented to the delegates at the very beginning of the PA so as to allow time for a fruitful exchange of ideas among them.

The Drafting Committee was somewhat hesitant in deciding on the structure and literary genre of the Final Statement. Should it be two distinct documents, one clarifying the general policy of the CBF in the years 2002-2008 and addressed primarily to the members of the CBF, and then a document of theological and pastoral reflection on the theme of the PA aimed at a wider public? Or should it be a single document aimed at a wide audience, on the model of previous Final Statements, comprising both of these two aspects, beginning with the reflections of the Assembly and ending with a number of concrete recommendations? In either case, the plan was to attach a brief message to the document for diffusion to the press immediately following the PA. In the end, it was the single document idea that was retained. This choice led to the abandonment of the preliminary draft, some of the ideas of which were, however, included in the Final Statement.

The back and forth between the Assembly and the enlarged Drafting Committee allowed the Final Statement to be worked on by the Assembly as a whole and to reflect the preoccupations, points of view and engagements of a large part of the members of the CBF. The involvement of the entire Assembly in the drafting process was facilitated by the work of translation, based on the English, into the two other official languages of the PA. Each linguistic group always had access to the drafts in its own language. The Assembly was thus able to experience the problems as well as the richness of communication between different languages and cultures. Babel and Pentecost!



If I have gone into some detail on the various aspects of the drafting process of the FS it is only to underscore the importance of a preparation that goes far beyond the framework of long nights of work at the time of the Plenary Assembly and allows for regular consultation with the full body of CBF members. Moreover, I think it is important and useful to reflect on the “literary genre” of this kind of document, while clearly specifying its purposes (to define the general policy of the CBF, to reflect the spiritual path of the PA) and its intended audience.

## 2. The fundamental ideas of the CBF

**2.1** The FS notes with clarity the real and complex situation of our pluralistic world and Church in which we are called to engage in the work of biblical pastoral ministry. Cultural, economic and religious pluralism can constitute an opportunity, but also a challenge when structures of the dominant culture are attempting to impose themselves in such a way as to exclude, indeed to abolish cultural, economic and religious minorities.

**2.2** The Plenary Assembly expresses the hope and desire that the Word of God, communicated through the biblical text and in Jesus Christ, may be good news and a blessing for *all* the nations. At the same time, it was conscious of the fact that a blessing that is not shared, that is the exclusive property of a given group, will quickly and inevitably become the source of conflict and curse for all nations.

**2.3** The Bible encourages us to rediscover the common roots of the different peoples. For Jews, Christians and Moslems Abraham can be an important link. He is the repository of a blessing for all the families of the earth. In the biblical imagination he is, along with Noah, Adam and Eve, one of those individuals who is charged with representing the fundamental connection between all human beings of this earth and between all generations through time. With them, he represents a call to brotherhood and solidarity among all the members of the human species.

**2.4** In its Final Statement, the Assembly expressed its hope and conviction that the Word of God be able to enter into contact with all the cultures of the earth and to enrich them. This process of inculturation takes place slowly, in respect for the values of each culture, in a refusal to impose particular cultural forms on all the other cultures. In this domain, the CBF has for years been accumulating a long experience with the joys and problems of “the inculturation of the Christian faith”. The Federation is a locus where its members can share their experiences and reflect on them. It is in a position to

help the Church as a whole in finding those modalities and forms of inculturation of the Word of God that fully respect the cultures of our earth.

## 3. Two options for the reading of the Bible

The Final Statement highlighted different options for reading the Bible. Each of these would merit an in-depth study of its own. I will content myself with offering a few comments on two of these options.



### 3.1 The fundamentalist reading and our way of reading the Bible

By way of inviting us to a critical evaluation of our way of reading the Bible, the FS calls our attention to the fundamentalist reading of Scripture that is widely practiced around the world, and to some extent even inside the Catholic Church.

How would one define the fundamentalist reading? It is first of all a reading that imagines one can exhaust the intended meaning in an exclusively literal understanding of the biblical text. The appropriation of a particular narrative takes place in an immediate way, without taking into account the cultural distance between the signification of a text at the time of its composition and of its first reception and the meaning it produces in new communicative settings. In a fundamentalist reading, the way a text is understood is most often established in a definitive way, not subject to discussion, by an individual who claims authority and who does not tolerate any other interpretation or any other interpreter. The personal responsibility of the reader with respect to extracting the meaning of the text is entirely suspended or negated.



The fundamentalist reading has its appeal. It responds to a very human need, when confronted with the complexity of human existence, to have secure landmarks. It obviates the need to engage one's own responsibility in the analysis of a situation, in the reading and comprehension of a text or in concrete life commitments. The "literal" understanding of a meaning fixed by God Himself allows the one who is in a position to define what that is to establish his authority and his power.

The fundamentalist reading is to be criticized

- because it does not recognize that the meaning of words changes with time and with the development of language, vocabulary and human culture,
- because it fails to recognize that the way meaning is produced changes with the development of the culture,
- because it does not recognize that Scripture always has several levels of meaning and that we must employ a number of reading methods in order to begin to grasp these meanings,
- because it does not recognize that the search for meaning takes place within a community in dialogue.

How can we "combat" the fundamentalist reading? I venture to propose a few leads:

- In the first place, one must learn to read the biblical text in its ever widening literary contexts, and this in order to discover the diversity of Scripture itself, to discover that a text is in dialogue with others, that the angle a particular text offers us is always partial.
- One must undertake an attentive, respectful and honest reading of our own life situation with which the biblical word will be entering into dialogue.
- One must consciously assume a personal and communal responsibility for the reading of the Bible as well as for the commitment that flows from this reading.
- One must take into account the fact that this reading is partial, in at least two senses of the term, and that it should mature through dialogue with the community of those who read the Bible.
- In short, the reading of the Bible is more a humble procedure of "searching for meaning" than it is an anxious effort to establish once and for all *the* meaning of a text.

### 3.2 Reflecting on the theme of violence on the basis of the biblical text

In its recommendation III,4.3, the FS calls on the members of the CBF to collaborate with the World Council of

Churches in its campaign entitled "Overcoming Violence". It invites them to develop tools of biblical pastoral ministry that can help people reflect on violence and promote mutual respect, justice and peace among human beings. This is an enormous and urgent challenge, when one takes into account the violence that profoundly marks our world today. It also constitutes a test of our sincerity when we loudly proclaim that the Word of God is a blessing for all nations. The challenge is made all the greater in that the biblical text itself reflects human violence in all its forms.

In our way of reading the Bible do we legitimate the use of violence so as to bolster the exclusive claims of one person or group against another (in view of the possession of land, in view of superiority or domination)? Do we appeal to the idea of a God who is "with us" and against others? Or do we instead take the violent texts of the Bible to be narratives of intolerance, injustice, exploitation ... in short, of sin - not only that of our biblical fathers and mothers, but also of ourselves? This last reading style requires of us a fundamental conversion so as to become "workers of peace", laboring to break the vicious circle of violence.

In order to commit ourselves to this path of conversion and reconciliation among individuals and peoples we must work on the anxiety and the fear that are the source of all aggression and violence. We must recognize the factual solidarity of all human beings in their fundamental fragility.

Such a path, in my opinion, can only be accomplished by pooling the forces of the CBF members at a number of levels:

- by calling for reflection and prayer
- by developing biblical pastoral procedures well adapted to the different cultures of our planet.

In a number of countries, members of the Federation have begun to work in this direction. We must see to it that these individuals are put in contact with one another and help them to enrich one another mutually. This project is important and even urgent. If we do not put this into practice, the solemn proclamations of the CBF on the "Word of God" as "Source of Life" and "Blessing for all Nations" will, I fear, remain nothing more than pious wishes.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)

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## Remarks on the Relevance of the Final Statement in Today's Pluralistic World

Jacob Theckanath



*The diocesan priest Jacob Theckanath was Director of the National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC) in Bangalore, India, for several years and subregional coordinator for South East Asia from 1990-1993 and from 1996-2002.*

In these reflections I do not intend to provide a commentary on the Final Statement of the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF). They are meant to show the relevance of the theme and the emerging consciousness in the Church. As for the title of the Final Statement and the overall theme of the Plenary Assembly (PA), what comes to my mind are the words of John Paul II:

*As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing for the world. This is the common task awaiting us. It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews, to first be a blessing to one another*

(quoted in Eugene J. Fisher and Leon Klenicki, (eds.), Pope John Paul II: *Spiritual Pilgrimage: Texts on Jews and Judaism, 1979-1995*, New York, Crossroad, 1995, p. 169). What is said about the relationship between Christians and Jews can be applied also to the relationship among people of different religions and cultures in our world today. The theme and the reflections at the Plenary Assembly (PA) are to be understood in the light of this concern to be first a blessing for one another and thus be a blessing for all the world: Word of God - A Blessing for all Nations.

### The context

Behind the Lebanon Final Statement (FS) of the CBF lies a long process of experience, reflection and pas-

toral planning and implementation of the biblical pastoral ministry at various levels and contexts in the Church. It does not intend to gather together all the varied and contextually relevant reflection and activities that have been going on since preparations for the Sixth Plenary Assembly commenced. The various subregions and individual members of the Federation have contributed in different ways to the process and its culmination at Lebanon. It is in fact the fruit of a collective effort undertaken in view of discerning a thrust for the biblical pastoral ministry in the coming years.

### Why this theme?

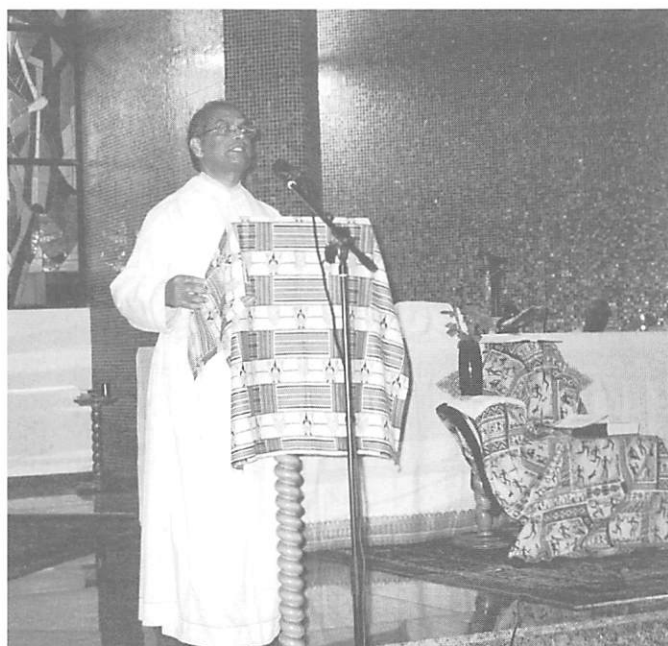
Pluralism and cross-culturality mark our lives today. We are all interrelated and we cannot live in isolation or in a false self-sufficiency, nor can we discover ourselves and fulfil our mission without mutuality at all levels of our life. We look at the context of the PA from two angles, one, the journey of the Federation and the venue of the PA itself and the other, the emerging scenario of pluralism in our world. In FS I,4, we look at the context of pluralism in our world. Plurality is not the same as pluralism. Pluralism is not merely the fact that there is plurality and diversity. Pluralism is a new way of looking at reality in its plurality, a new lens, as it were. It is an attitude of celebrating diversity as a design of God, while we move as pilgrims towards our common goal. Pluralism acknowledges the tension of diversity and plurality, without enforcing an artificial unity. When plurality is acknowledged as a constitutive aspect of our life and our world, we grow towards an intercultural and interreligious living, joining together with "others" in the adventure of the human family and undertaking what can be called a co-pilgrimage. Today more than ever we are challenged to live this human identity of being co-pilgrims with all people.

The Lebanon Statement focuses primarily on the biblical pastoral ministry in the context of pluralism in our world in its varied aspects, and that of religious and cultural pluralism in particular. Pluralism has become a component of our contemporary world, a basic aspect of our





thinking and life. We can see plurality as a problem or as an opportunity. On the one hand, we can see the growing awareness and respect for plurality and, on the other, there is, in our times, a growing incidence of conflicts and divisions arising from social, cultural, economic, political and religious plurality. The need of the hour is not to be neutral to the "clash of civilizations", cultures and religions, but to be a catalyst to promote a new way of being human and religious, channelling the resources at our disposal for promoting a healthy pluralism. As biblical pastoral ministers, the great resource available to us is the Word of God. Therefore the urgency of interpreting the reality of pluralism and discerning the path of mission is incumbent upon us.



As the International Theological Commission (of the Vatican) puts it:

*Christianity does not and cannot remain on the margins of this encounter and consequent dialogue among religions. If the latter have sometimes been and still can be factors of division and conflict among peoples, it is to be desired that in our world they should appear in the eyes of all as elements of peace and unity. Christianity has to contribute towards making this possible. (The International Theological Commission, Christianity and World Religions, no. 2, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997).*

Biblical pastoral ministry is at the centre of the life and pastoral practice of the Church. Therefore there is a certain urgency in confronting the issue of pluralism and particularly religious plurality, and offering a vision for

the thrust of the biblical pastoral ministry in the coming years. Reading the signs of the times in the light of Scripture has been the hallmark of the Federation from its inception. Pluralism is a sign of the times, which we are called upon to read and respond to in the light of the Word of God.

### The new millennium's challenge

This millennium's challenge is that of unity of peoples, irrespective of their cultures and religions etc. This task is the most daunting one before the human family. Vatican II had already indicated it in various documents, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*. In *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (NMI), John Paul II expresses it in these words:

*In the climate of increased cultural and religious pluralism which is expected to mark the society of the new millennium, it is obvious that this dialogue will be especially important in establishing a sure basis for peace and warding off the dread spectre of those wars of religion which have so often bloodied human history. The name of the one God must become increasingly what it is: a name of peace and a summons to peace (no. 55).*

In I,3 of the FS, we acknowledge the contribution of the recent documents of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. The first one of these is *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993). It shows the pastoral challenges for biblical pastoral ministry in the context of a prevailing and pervasive fundamentalism in reading and interpreting the Word of God. It also offers encouragement for diverse approaches in interpretation and for a contextual reading of the Word of God and for inculturation, all of which have reference to the concerns of the PA in Lebanon - pluralism in reading and interpreting the Word of God.

*While actualization allows the Bible to remain fruitful at different periods, inculturation in a corresponding way looks to the diversity of place... This diversity is, to be sure, never total. Every authentic culture is, in fact, in its own way the bearer of the universal values established by God. (The Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (hereafter P.I.C.), Indian Edition, NBCLC, 1994, p. 117).*

The fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible contains in its ideology the approach of exclusivism, excluding any use of modern methods of interpretation. The funda-



mentalist approach is a naïve literalist view of the Word of God. Fundamentalism "demands an unshakeable adherence to rigid doctrinal points of view and imposes, as the only source of teaching for Christian life and salvation, a reading of the Bible which rejects all questioning and any kind of critical research... blocks any dialogue with a broader way of seeing the relationship between culture and faith... serves to reinforce political ideas and social attitudes that are marked by prejudices – racism, for example quite contrary to the Christian gospel... Fundamentalism invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide. It injects into life a false certitude, for it unwittingly confuses the divine substance of the biblical message with what are in fact its human limitations" (P.I.C., pp. 70-72).



### The path of co-pilgrimage

In the interpretation of the reality of plurality in our world, especially in the context of the diversity of cultures and religions, we see that the way for us is that of co-pilgrimage (FS II,3). The Holy Spirit invites us to undertake such a pilgrimage with others, for the Spirit is present in the journey of others, too. Thanks to this fresh awakening brought to us by the Second Vatican Council, we have well-founded directions for such an approach. The day of Prayer for Peace (Assisi, October 27, 1989) was such a powerful symbol or icon, in that it was a gesture

full of meaning and conviction to put into practice what the Council had affirmed. On that occasion John Paul II spoke so intuitively: "Let us see in it an anticipation of what God would like the developing history of humanity to be: a fraternal journey in which we accompany one another toward the transcendent goal which he sets for us" (quoted in Michael Fitzgerald, "Pope John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue, A Catholic Assessment", in John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue, Byron L. Sherwin and Harold Kasimow, N.Y. Orbis, 1999, p. 209). The dynamic presence and movement of the Spirit is meant to bring all into communion, not necessarily into an absolute unity. Our differences have meaning within such a perspective. In the proclamation of the Word and of Jesus, the Church is invited to follow the path of solidarity, to follow Jesus who transcended cultural and religious boundaries in order to be faithful to the Father's plan (FS. II,1). This approach of solidarity in mission demands, among other things, a new style of reading the Word within the Church, within the Federation.

### A dialogic reading , the consequence of co-pilgrimage

While reading the Bible, Christians in different contexts should hear the echoes and resonances of the religious and scriptural traditions of the wider human family, discovering harmony, reinforcement in their own faith and even welcoming a fuller discovery of the mystery. The reading of scriptures of other people should enable us to enter into depth-level dialogue.

Besides, a dialogic reading can be compared to different lamps casting their light on the one painting - the mysterious face of God. Yes, such a reading might help us see the face of Jesus with greater brightness and to experience the face of God as multi-coloured.

Mahatma Gandhi invited Christians to read the Bible in dialogue with the spiritual treasures of peoples:

*It becomes perhaps necessary to reread the message of the Bible in terms of what is happening around us. The word is the same, but the spirit ever broadens intensively and extensively, and it might be that many things in the Bible will have to be reinterpreted in the light of discoveries - not of modern science, but in the spiritual world in the shape of direct experiences common to all faiths. The fundamental verses of St. John do require to be reread and reinterpreted. I have come to feel that, like us human beings, words have their evolution from stage to stage in the contents they hold... To you who have come to teach India, I therefore*



*say, you cannot give without taking. If you have come to give rich treasures of experiences, open your hearts out to receive the treasures of this land, and you will not be disappointed, neither will you have misread the message of the Bible (quoted in Robert Ellsberg (ed.), Gandhi on Christianity, Orbis, New York, 1991, p. 41).*

The community that reads the Word of God will thus become the prism through which the splendour of God will shine. The Bible and the Bible-reading community will then become a bridge between the Word in the Bible and the seeds of the Word in the scriptures and traditions of the religions of the world. Such a quest is needed today from the part of all believers, so that we can usher in an era of depth-level dialogue.

In our ministry we need to focus our attention also on that which unites believers. In Lebanon, we looked at Abraham as a common "father of our faith" for the three religions related to him, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Pope said to Moslems in the Philippines in 1981:

*I deliberately address you as brothers; that is certainly what we are, because we are members of the same human family... But we are especially brothers in God, who created us and whom we are trying to reach, in our own ways, through faith, prayer and worship, through the keeping of his law and through submission to his designs (Fitzgerald, ibd. p. 217).*

## Conclusion

If we engage ourselves in the task of contributing towards the realization of the reign of God, the goal of human history, then we will see in the Word of God what can energize us to move toward greater sense of oneness in diversity. What Paul Tillich has said seems to be very relevant in this context:

*Myths of origin, be they religious or ethnic, politically conservative, they hold up the past as a model and raise up barriers against outsiders. Myths of destiny, by contrast, look towards the unfolding of the rational possibilities in society. They dream of the future society defined in terms of equality and justice. (Quoted in Felix Wilfred, "Interreligious Dialogue as Political Quest", Journal of Dharma, Jan-March 2002 (vol. XXVII, No. 1, p. 27).*

We need to dream a new society, a new humanity at the beginning of this new millennium. The Lebanon Final Statement articulates in some way that dream for the biblical pastoral workers and for the Church as a whole. But for this we must dream together. Hence a Final Statement. The Final Statement of the CBF at Lebanon, as the other Final Statements of the Federation can enthuse us towards such a dream, to be dreamt together. ■





## Reflections on the Final Statement from a Latin American Perspective

Valmor da Silva



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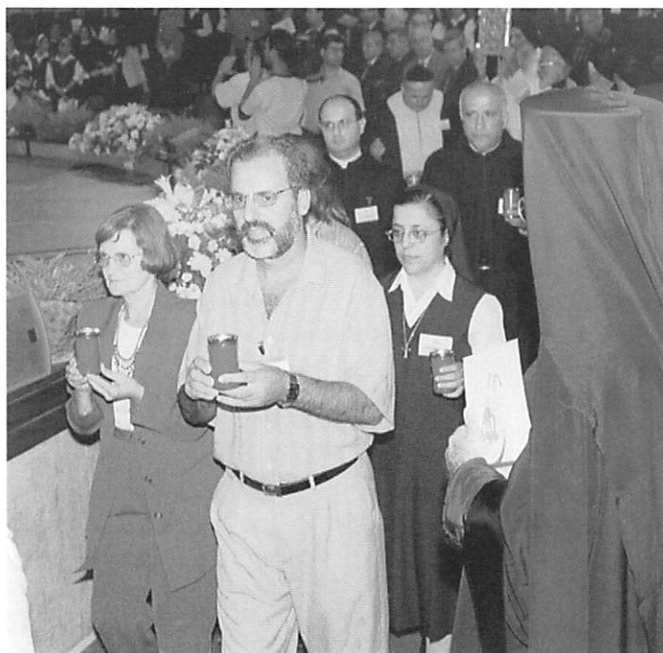
In some respects, Latin America and the Caribbean are a developed part of the world, in other respects they are perhaps somewhat underdeveloped. However, with respect to Bible reading they are in full forward stride. The rich religious heritage of the continent is a fact that its former colonizers are unfortunately unable to acknowledge. In countries where the hunger for food is a shameful reality to be extirpated, the thirst for the Word of God is a still greater yearning to be satisfied.

The Final Statement of the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the CBF fits in the Latin American context like a ring on a finger. Written in Lebanon, a country with a complex make-up, it reflects on the scenario of violence and oppression in the five continents. Perhaps this is why it offers such a penetrating insight into the situation in our lands. The strongest point of similarity is the social inequality that gives rise to misery and oppression. The Final Statement comes out of this situation and for this reason can take firm root in the Latin American and Caribbean situation. In other words, the Final Statement depicts our situation. The periodical of the FEBIC-LAC *La Palabra Hoy* lost no time in publishing it (Vol. XXVII, n. 105/106, 2002, 71-86). A few aspects of the document will be passed in review here, by way of illustration. An in-depth analysis would of course be impossible within the limits of this commentary.

The Final Statement has a three-part structure, in accordance with the three methodical steps of *seeing*, *discerning*, *acting*. What is new here? Nothing, because these approaches are a constitutive part of our operating procedure. The Final Statement emerges from the proposal of the Assembly itself: to compare its operational proce-

dures to that of the communities of the Acts of the Apostles. A conference by Pablo Richard on the Acts of the Apostles, echoing the voice of our continent, illuminates the connections.

In the *seeing* section, the Final Statement speaks of pluralism, with its values and its dangers. It treats themes that are critical for Latin America and the Caribbean, such as systems of exclusion, poverty, violence against women and children, discrimination against minorities, among others. The *discernment* part starts with Jesus, whose life was characterized especially by "solidarity with the outcast, sinners, the poor, the Samaritans and Gentiles" (II,1). Moreover, it calls on us to evaluate the journey of the Church of the Acts of the Apostles, the ways of the Spirit, the figure of Abraham as interpreted by the three great religious traditions. The *action* chapter is particularly rich in connections with our situation, as will be confirmed by a few examples.



"God has given us two sacred books: that of the creation and history, and that of the Bible" (3.2.4). We are very fond of this idea of the Bible as a second book.



The first book is life itself, and it is the more important of the two. The Bible acquires its true value when read in the context of life. Moreover, the Word of God should illuminate the concrete, relevant realities of the human situation. This idea is not new; it comes from the documents of previous Plenary Assemblies, mainly that of Bogotá. However, it acquires still greater force for these countries, because here life itself has been under threat for centuries. And to the extent that life is more fragile in these parts, it is also more profoundly in need of protection.

"The poor are the first addressees of the Good News (Lk 4:18-19; Mt 5:3)... This fact demands that Christian communities read the Bible from the perspective of the poor" (III,2.6). Another Latin American and Caribbean gem! The preferential option for the poor is an exigency in places where life is constantly under threat. But such an exigency hardly derives merely from local circumstances, nor is it merely a matter of fashion. "The Bible itself teaches us the options for reading it properly and for living the Word" (III,2). Personal options can change, as in fact they do. Even the Church's own options can change, and they have done so throughout history. But the options of the Bible remain the same. God always takes the side of the weakest members of society. He has hidden his wisdom from the learned and the clever and revealed it to mere children (cf. Matt 11:25).

"Reading the Bible and celebrating the Word in community" (III,2.3): The Bible is viewed as the book that comes out of communities, and is written for communities. This implies that community existed before, during and after the writing of the Bible. In other words, the purpose of Scripture is to form and foster communities. In Latin America and the Caribbean it is common practice to read the Bible in community. This manifests itself in Bible circles, reflection groups, ecclesial basic communities and church movements. Bible reading turns into liturgy, because it is conducted in a spirit of prayer that celebrates at once the great acts of the Bible and the events of every-day life.

"The mandate of the Catholic Biblical Federation is the biblical apostolate, the biblical pastoral ministry, the biblical 'animation' of the pastoral life of the Church, providing the Church with spiritual nourishment, indeed with its very soul (anima)" (III,3). Herein lies a great idea and ideal that remains a challenge. In theory it is continuously affirmed that the Bible is the soul of the Church and that it should illuminate the whole of the pastoral apostolate. In practice, we have a long way to go before this conviction is implemented at a concrete level. The number of persons involved in this mission extends far beyond the CBF. They exert a formative influence on groups, on parishes and on dioceses.

The priorities established by the Final Statement are undoubtedly the same as our own: a growing awareness of the importance of the Bible in the life of the Church; the development of programs of biblical formation; pastorally sensitive and affordable Bible translations; biblical materials adapted to concrete situations; the strengthening of communication and exchange; reflections and evaluations of the biblical pastoral ministry; collaboration in support of economic justice and the protection of the environment; cooperation with the "decade for overcoming violence"; support of the biblical pastoral ministry in Africa.



With reference to this last point, "the Plenary Assembly recommends that the support of the biblical pastoral ministry in Africa be a major priority of the Catholic Biblical Federation at large during the next six years" (III,4.4). Concretely, the Latin American and Caribbean countries have a very strong missionary presence in Africa. This effort could be increased. The supplying of Bibles and biblical materials for the continent of Africa is already a reality in many churches, congregations and groups. This form of exchange can also be intensified. In the case of Brazil and of other neighboring countries, they are even historically indebted to the African continent.

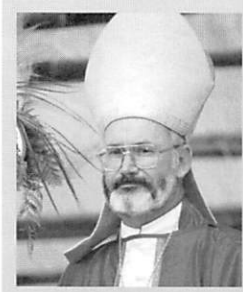
Finally, the recommendations of the Final Statement are more than opportune. In full accord with it, the FEBIC-LAC has already mapped out its work plan for the next six years. The emphasis is: "See to it that the Word of God becomes a guiding light for the whole of pastoral action".

(Transl.: L. Maluf)



## Reflections on the Final Statement from the Perspective of the Local Church of Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea, Subregion of Oceania

*Douglas W. Young*



*Divine Word Father Douglas W. Young is Auxiliary Bishop of Mount Hagen and Bishop Deputy of the General Assembly of the Catholic Church of Papua New Guinea.*

The Final Statement echoes many themes that are current in this local church.

1. Journeying together. The archdiocese sees itself as on a journey of evangelization. It sees itself as a pilgrim Church in search of renewal (a new Pentecost). It must always return to the Scriptural roots of that journey.
2. We see ourselves in a culturally and ecumenically diverse environment. Papua New Guinea (especially the New Guinea Highlands) is regarded as one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse regions of the world. We are proud of the harmonious diversity that characterizes the country while still aware of the strong undercurrents of ethnocentrism and ethnic conflict that are always in danger of surfacing. Because of the rich soil of the Waghi Valley, the traditional landowners are host to a number of ethnic groups from other areas. Hosts and immigrants are generally able to live harmoniously together. It is often the common religious foundations that facilitate this. Appeals to the forgiveness and reconciliation of the Gospel can override traditional payback mechanisms. Still, Papua New Guinea like many other places, is in danger of viewing difference as deficiency.
3. The threats to the environment, to human rights, and to religious liberty are also apparent in our situation, as is the challenge of fundamentalist religious and ethnic forces, also within the Catholic Church. We are also very conscious of ourselves as weak pilgrims on a journey with equally weak co-pilgrims. We are often quick to find reasons for separating ourselves from others, forming new and smaller communities not out of the desire for greater depth in relationship but to emphasize difference from others.
4. Many people are conscious of the role of Jesus in transcending boundaries. In the anthropology of Papua New Guinea it has been pointed out that borders are not barriers but rather "zones of encounter", places in which interaction is able to occur. Borders are seldom firmly fixed and they can change over generations, although the "heartland" remains stable. This is a good model for interreligious dialogue: there is so much room to move at the boundaries without having to lose anything that lies at the true heart of one's own heritage. Papua New Guinea has also made use of a means of intergroup reconciliation that appears to be unavailable to many cultures, that of intermarriage. It is a common feature of "enemy" groups that they actively practice intermarriage as a means of reducing tensions and founding a generation which will keep loyalty to "both" sides, a superordinate source of reconciliation. It is a pity that that mechanism is less available to people in the Middle East. It is, for example, a profound means of transcending boundaries.
5. The role of a common ancestor in providing a source of unity is also well known to Papua New Guineans and Highlanders. The common ancestor is often appealed to in oratory as a basis for seeking reconciliation, and "getting back to" an original relationship of harmony. Usually this ancestor is Adam. It would be valuable to explore how Abraham could be used in this context.
6. The spirituality of communion is also a strong theme within the diocese. It is promoted also nationally as we proceed along the journey of the process of the General Assembly of the Catholic Church of Papua New Guinea, with the theme *We are Church Alive in Christ*. The task of the Assembly is to promote renewal by mobilizing all of our people to participate





in developing a vision and mission and priorities for the new millennium in the light of *Novo Millennio Ineunte* and *Ecclesia in Oceania*. All of the discussion papers have a biblical motif. There are some dioceses and groups that wish to develop this even more; in this way they are saying the same thing as the Final Statement: make the Word of God the source of energy in the heart of the Church and the world.

7. We definitely face the challenge of an attentive and respectful reading of the Word. Many prefer an aggressive approach, looking for "answers". I believe that a plurality of methods is in use, although the Lumko seven-step-method is taken as a norm and followed. There is a lot of room for trying new methods.
8. We do not use sufficiently the available translations of the Bible other than the Tok Pisin version. Most of our missionaries are not able to communicate well in any of the local languages and the Catholic people are not fluent in reading the Bible in their own languages. We do not give sufficient attention to this, and even encounter a resistance to it from our priests - including indigenous clergy - and educated people. There is a mental block that has to be overcome.
9. There is room for much more emphasis on the importance of the Bible in the life of the Church. The liturgical treatment of the Bible and the overall cele-

bration of the Liturgy of the Word in Mass, in Sunday Services without a priest and in other Sunday Services (without communion) is poor. Week after week there is an inadequate liturgical catechesis of the presence of Christ in his Word. People feel that without communion there is no "presence". It is extremely important that we develop a better and more reverent treatment of the Word in the liturgy as this is a weekly catechesis, often the only catechesis that people are receiving, for better or for worse.

10. The development of biblical pastoral material is certainly a priority. However, it is best if Scripture is integrated into ALL pastoral and liturgical material, so that our Catholic people come to take it for granted that material without scriptural references and allusions is somehow lacking. We have done this with our Papua New Guinea Catechism, which sets out to make much greater use of Scripture than the Universal Catechism. It is part of our General Assembly discussion papers. It is part of our Diocesan Renewal Retreat. We have to continue in this line with an ever more profound and thoughtful use of Scripture; not just grabbing at verses that seem to fit but offering the fruit of a reflection that can draw on a profound intimacy with the Word of God in Sacred Scripture. ■





## Reflections on the Final Statement from an Asian Perspective

*Sr. Emmanuel Gunanto*



*Ursuline Sister Emmanuel Gunanto is the foundress of the Angela Merici Biblical Center in Bandung, Indonesia. Since 1996 she has served as coordinator of the Southeast Asian subregion of the CBF.*

I am writing this on Valentine's Day, the international day of love. Cards I receive through ordinary and electronic mail, what I hear from the radio and watch on TV, read in the daily paper and magazines with regard to this day of love, tell me how much we still believe in love, how much we care for one another, how much we need to give and receive love.

The CBF Plenary Assembly in Lebanon, held in September 2002, was an expression of love: First of all of God's love communicated to us through his "love letter", which is the Bible. It was his love that united us from east and west, north and south to hear again his message of love. It was in response to this love that we came to Lebanon to share with one another the love we have experienced, to enrich, inspire and strengthen one another to continue walking on the road of love and make love a reality, not merely a sweet sentiment, to revitalize our dying world.

The Final Statement places our biblical apostolate in the harsh reality of our world today. A world in agony because of evil and hatred in all their forms, that tear families, communities and nations apart. In this gloomy world where we live, we hear a word of hope: God's promise to Abraham, that still holds true to our day. A blessing for all nations, now, in 2003 and in the years to come. We are invited to go back to our roots, to Abraham, our common father who wants to see all his children united, not divided.

We are aware that this cannot be achieved by our own efforts alone. During the Plenary Assembly we had our daily *lectio divina* on God's Word, alive and active, always

going beyond, with its tremendous power to transform individuals and communities as witnessed in the Acts of the Apostles. The Final Statement invites us to make *lectio divina* our second nature:

- read and study the Bible, with the right approach, guided by the teaching of the Church
- meditate the Word of God, find its relevance for our world today, in dialogue with our culture, with other Scriptures of our brothers and sisters who profess a different faith but believe in the same God or Supreme Being
- pray the Word by reciting it repeatedly with love to make it our own, to let it take flesh and blood in us
- contemplate the Word, create a deep inner silence allowing God to transform and recreate us into new beings, to empower us to become leaven in the world, a BLESSING for all nations.

The Final Statement gives a beautiful and allround program for all biblical ministers. We are reminded of our homework. There is still much to do, and the work is not easy. There are mass challenges:

- In many countries in Southeast Asia, the Christian faith came with the colonizers. There is still the image that this is a foreign religion. Inculturation is often limited to the surface and does not penetrate to the roots.
- Christians are generally found among the middle class up. Reaching out to the poor is often regarded as "christianizing", which is considered a crime.
- Dialogue with other faiths is often met with suspicion.
- The biblical apostolate is relatively young. Often it does not get deserving recognition among other commissions in the diocese.

However, the Lord will certainly help us to realize this project of love. But his help comes to us through one another. For that reason we have a Catholic Biblical Federation. Do we have a sense of belonging? Are we aware that this is our Federation? I underline the Plenary Assembly's recommendation for networking and better communication among ourselves. ■



## FINAL STATEMENT

# Reflections on the Final Statement from an African Perspective

*The Team of BICAM*



*The diocesan priests Henry Terwase Akaabiam and Moïse Adekambi and the Donum Dei Sisters Euphrasia Simati, Blandine Sondo and Marie-Thérèse Sedogo are the CBF collaborators who make up the staff of BICAM (Catholic Biblical Center for Africa and Madagascar), which is responsible for the coordination of work in biblical ministry on the African continent.*

## Introduction

The Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation held in Lebanon from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>, 2002 was an enriching experience for delegates from Africa and Madagascar. The 23 participants from the African continent (the highest number in the history of CBF) had the opportunity to reflect on, share and celebrate the Word of God together with people of other cultures across the globe. The recommendation of the Plenary Assembly that the support of biblical apostolate in Africa be a major priority of CBF for the next six years can be regarded as a moment of grace and challenge for the continent and its surrounding islands. And we have no doubt that all this will assist in the efforts towards a more fruitful biblical pastoral ministry in the region.

## The Word of God, the source of life, faith and hope

There is a growing interest and eagerness in reading and sharing the Bible among Christians in Africa and Madagascar. This poses a challenge to continue to promote a greater awareness of the importance of the Word

of God as a source of life, faith and hope of humankind. It is also evident that when the Word of God is rooted in the hearts of Christians it leads to a transformation of perspective, a new vision and a new life. In the light of this development, we shall continue to seek ways of making the Bible the basic source of the life and mission of the family of God in the continent. Bible Days shall be organized in collaboration with all those involved in biblical apostolate in order to make the Bible and its message known, loved and lived by all Christians in Africa and Madagascar. Individuals and groups shall be encouraged to read/study and share the Bible, make it a guide for everyday life and a source of daily prayer. The Word of God shall remain the center and basis of our biblical apostolate programmes/activities.

## Radio programmes

Given that quite a number of Christians in the continent are not able to read the Bible, even in their mother tongues, we think that one way of making the Word of God accessible to them is through the radio. We shall, therefore, encourage the production and airing of Bible programmes on different radio frequencies in languages understandable to such people. We are aware that there are very few Catholic radio/media stations and there are countless languages in the continent, and for those reasons it may not be easy to reach many people but we think that such efforts are worthwhile and may yield the desired results in due course.

## The incarnation of the Gospel message in African life and culture

The growing interest in the Bible among Christians in the continent calls for efforts towards the incarnation of the message of the Bible in African life and culture. Though the translation of the Bible in indigenous languages is a major step in the direction of achieving this task, concerted efforts must equally be made to communicate the Word of God in African/Madagascan thought patterns, categories and images. A commendable attempt has





been made in this direction by the short introductory remarks and notes found in the African Bible. Another commendable effort is the African "Bible on the Ground" project, initiated by a Benedictine Monk in Nanyuki, Kenya. The project is aimed at presenting the Bible message in African traditional thought patterns and creating awareness among Africans that they form part and parcel of biblical history.

Training of animators of biblical apostolate who will eventually facilitate Bible study/sharing groups in indigenous languages is another way of assisting in the communication of the Bible in categories readily understandable to the people. In this regard, workshops and seminars shall be co-jointly organized with regional or national coordinators of biblical pastoral ministry in different places in the continent. To ensure a variety of African expressions and thoughts, we shall endeavour to invite people of various cultural backgrounds and expertise, denominations notwithstanding, to our workshops, seminars etc. We shall also participate in similar workshops or seminars organized by brethren of other confessions.

As part of the efforts towards the incarnation of God's Word in African/Madagascan life and culture, we shall search for resource persons all over the continent who will assist in the realization of this objective in different parts of Africa and Madagascar. Such resource persons shall be assigned specific tasks based on their experience or expertise e.g. the translation of the Bible or the provision of Bible study/sharing aids or the animation of Bible workshops, seminars in indigenous languages.

### Fundamentalism in the continent

The growing and widespread Christian and Islamic fundamentalism in Africa and Madagascar, which sometimes leads to conflicts, bloody clashes and even wars, poses a challenge to biblical pastoral ministry in the continent that calls for urgent attention. In order to curb the fundamentalist trend we shall continue to encourage readers of the Bible to rely on its power to create the right changes in both individuals and communities in our continent (cf. 2 Tim 3.1-17), no matter how long it may take. We are also certain that the meaningful interpretation of the Bible as well as interreligious dialogue shall be of tremendous assistance in solving the problem of fundamentalism. Bible reading/study guides, short commentaries, posters, audio- and videocassettes shall, therefore, be provided to enhance a deeper understanding of the Bible message and to avoid a misleading or fundamentalist interpretation. We hope to provide copies of the Bible either free of charge or at affordable prices to the poorest people of the society if we are able to get finan-

cial support from individuals, groups or donor agencies who are committed to the spreading of God's Word. The same applies to Bible materials or aids to understanding the biblical message.

We shall continue to work together with the United Bible Societies in Africa, other individuals and groups on Bible translation projects in the continent, so as to make the Word of God available to Africans in languages they can read and understand. Ecumenical dialogue with Christians of other denominations and adherents of Islam shall also continue to be encouraged through publications and seminars in the hope that we shall, one day, arrive at the unity of humankind prayed for and desired by Christ (cf. John 17). We shall encourage our Catholic members to invite brethren of other denominations to their Bible study/sharing sessions.





### Issues of injustice in the society

Religious fundamentalism, war, ethnic conflicts, corruption, economic and social injustice and other vices plague Africa and Madagascar today. These problems, in our opinion, cannot be speedily solved by mere change of one government or political party to the other but by a change of heart on the part of the leaders and the citizenry. And one way through which such a change can be effected is the constant courageous denouncement of the vices on the part of Church leaders, by agents of biblical apostolate and other committed Christian men and women within and outside the Church. We shall also produce biblical materials that help to identify causes of political thuggery, economic exploitation, social injustice, the violation of human rights etc. with a view to finding solutions to them through discussions in workshops or in small Bible Study groups.

The choice of biblical topics for our workshops and the Bible Days in different parts of Africa and Madagascar shall be based on the current social, economic, religious, cultural and political situation of the people. The outcome of the discussions, workshops and Bible Days shall be collated and publicized. Furthermore, all Christians in Africa and Madagascar shall be challenged to bear witness to Christ by personal example and to work towards the realization of biblical values like unity, love, justice, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness etc. It is hoped that all these efforts will bring lasting solutions that will enable people of different cultural backgrounds and social status to live together in mutual respect, peace and unity.

### Conclusion

As coordinator of biblical pastoral ministry in Africa and Madagascar, the BICAM team shall visit different parts of the region with a view to sharing the on-the-spot experience of animators or coordinators of biblical apostolate. We shall ensure that useful experiences or projects of one place or a group are made available to other places or groups in the region. The visits shall also afford the BICAM team an opportunity to identify areas where all agents of biblical pastoral ministry in the continent can support each other in the common efforts towards a deeper knowledge of the Bible in Africa and Madagascar.

We hope to intensify the existing contact and collaboration with ecclesiastical institutions in the continent, especially departments of biblical studies or biblical scholars within or outside academic communities. This will enable us not only to draw from their cumulative experience but more importantly, to seek, together with them, more effective ways of making the Word of God known, loved

and preserved in the hearts of all Christians in the continent. We shall request biblical scholars from such institutions to contribute to translation projects, the African Commentary of the Bible or research projects on topical issues.

As can be deduced from the above, the vision of the BICAM team is that every Christian in Africa and Madagascar should become an actor on God's Word and an imitator of Christ in every circumstance or aspect of life. We are certain that the impact of the Bible will be more felt in the continent and its surrounding islands when its values become part and parcel of the daily life of every Christian in Africa and Madagascar.

In view of the above vision and programmes, we, the agents of biblical apostolate in the continent and its islands, call upon other CBF members worldwide to support us in our efforts towards the incarnation of God's Word in African and Madagascan life and culture. We are open to advice, suggestions and ideas on how to improve on biblical pastoral ministry in the region. May we earnestly appeal to everybody to commit the biblical Apostolate project in the continent and its surrounding islands to God in prayer, for without Him nothing can be achieved. □



## Implementation of the Recommendations of the Sixth Plenary Assembly by the Executive Committee and the General Secretariat

*Alexander M. Schweitzer, General Secretary*

Though only a few months have passed since the Plenary Assembly and the Executive Committee has just recently met for its first work session, I venture to submit an interim report on the implementation of the recommendations and priorities of the Plenum. The time is too short and the concerns too wide-ranging to imagine that one could already present a proud recitation of results. On the other hand, before any house can be built one must first acquire a plot of land and lay the foundation stone. So I would envision this report not so much as an interim balance sheet as an initial survey of the terrain marked out by the Sixth Plenary Assembly. But this survey will not be a kind of wandering off into the void! Foundation stones have already been laid; enthusiastic work is already being done on many building sites.

In its third part, the Final Statement of the Sixth Plenary Assembly formulates general and specific priorities as well as recommendations for their implementation. A number of the priorities are addressed to the Federation as a whole; others are more narrowly targeted to individual member organizations (e.g. in 4.3, where collaboration with the World Council of Churches in the decade for the overcoming of violence is urged); the same is true of the recommendations. Since this is not intended to be a systematic commentary on the Final Statement, I will refrain here from taking a closer look at these differences. Instead, I would like to take a more pragmatic approach and to indicate the concerns that have already begun to be addressed by concrete steps, the building sites that have already brought in the cranes. Of course we can only be taking a survey with binoculars here. Detailed information on the initiatives presented here will be found in the circular letters from the General Secretariat to the members and, in part, in future issues of the BDV.

### **The Bible in the Life of the Church (4.1/5.3/6)**

High on the list of general priorities stands a concern that more or less summarizes the task of the CBF: the promotion "of a greater awareness of the importance of the Bible within the life of the Church in general and among the Bishops and ecclesiastical institutions in par-

ticular" (4.1). The concrete recommendations under Point 5 take up this priority in that they recommend "the creation of a Standing Committee on 'The Bible in the Life of the Church'" (5.3). In the last point of the Final Statement the CBF commits itself to devoting an International Congress to this theme on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Dei Verbum in 2005 (cf. 6).

The preparations for this Congress have already begun: a preparatory group authorized by the Executive Committee has met for its first session in Rome and marked out some fundamental lines. The title of the event is to be: "The Sacred Scriptures in the Life of the Church. International Congress on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Dei Verbum". The organizers are the Catholic Biblical Federation and the Pontifical Council on Christian Unity. Besides the members of the Catholic Biblical Federation we hope to draw a significant number of bishops from all regions of the world, representatives of groups engaged particularly in the biblical field, representatives of other churches and church communities, the Pontifical Biblical Commission and others. Without wishing to be a substitute for a bishops' synod, the event will however also and especially be directed to bishops (cf. 4.1 and 5.3). As to its basic contents, it has been decided that the three central days will contain an element of review and evaluation of the past, an element of theological and pastoral foundation and reflection and an element of planning for the future. The major themes for this planning are: the role of Holy Scripture in the formation of leaders in the Church (the closing of the gap between academic-scientific and practical, life-related interpretation of the Bible), the Bible in the life of the faithful (reading in context) and the Sacred Scriptures in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue (among other things, work on the theme of fundamentalism). As of now we are expecting something on the order of 300 firm participants. The site of the event is Rome; dates: Tuesday, September 20 to Saturday, September 24, 2005.

Like the Plenary Assemblies of the CBF this Congress, too, will mark the life of the Federation throughout the preparation period. The themes of the Congress will





inspire preparatory meetings at the local and regional levels and we hope also the work of individual members. We will make every effort to insure a fruitful process that will invite as much participation as possible. In the framework of the activities for the preparation and fulfillment of this lavish Congress the Executive Committee sees the effective realization of the work of the Standing Committee mentioned in 5.3.

#### Emphasis on Africa (4.4)

On the list of priorities of the CBF for the period 2002-2008, a recommendation for a particular commitment in the "support of the biblical pastoral ministry in Africa" (4.4) is also to be found. Here, too, we have succeeded in taking some first concrete steps. Among these number the revitalizing of cooperation with some CBF members (as e.g. with the AMECEA Pastoral Institute in Kenya), the support of our African regional coordination in the area of networking through Internet, the planning for African students of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome of regular meetings on the theme "Reading the Bible in an African Context" and the preparation of an info-kit with organizational and substantive information on the biblical pastoral ministry in the countries and regions of Africa. Another important measure to be taken in connection with this priority is the sensitization of the entire Federation to the situation of Africa, e.g., through the relocation of the meeting of all the CBF coordinators in early 2004 to Kenya.

At the center of our Africa concerns of the past months, however, has been the effort to support BICAM as the central site of the CBF for the coordination of the biblical pastoral ministry in Africa and Madagascar and to give it a new vital thrust. The facilitators of this project are, besides the General Secretariat of the CBF, above all the new direction team of BICAM and the "Africa Task Force", a work group for Africa composed of representatives of BICAM and SECAM, the funding agencies and the CBF General Secretariat. The three-year plan (2003-2005) recently worked out by the BICAM team in conjunction with the General Secretary provides for the following main points, among others: For November 2003 a workshop for animators is planned in BICAM, which will bring together representatives of approved initiatives from the various areas of the biblical pastoral ministry in Africa to exchange experiences and to develop strategies for collaborative work. Moreover, we have given some thought to a yearly workshop for the ongoing education of those responsible for the biblical pastoral ministry (especially the leaders of the Small Christian Communities). The publication of simple materials on the central themes of the biblical pastoral ministry in an African context is also now in preparation. A sign of an effective networking that is beginning to get off the ground are some very fresh initiatives for collaboration and on the spot joint ventures, such as that between BICAM and the Pauline Publications (both in the area of the production of materials and in that of Bible week-ends) or that between the AMECEA Pastoral Institute and BICAM (e.g. in the area of ongoing education and



*At the EC meeting in Terni/Italy in December 2002. Absent: Archbishop Diego Rafael Padrón Sánchez and Fr. Gabriel Naranjo Salazar.*



development of new approaches to the Bible in the African context).

All of these projects are the fruit of collaborative work of the named agents in the - regional and worldwide - network of the CBF and they owe their motivation and thrust not least to the priority for Africa insisted upon in the Final Statement.

### **Reinforcement of the communication and sharing network within the CBF (4.1/5.1)**

First steps have been undertaken in the direction of further development of our central website ([www.c-b-f.org](http://www.c-b-f.org)) which is still centered in the General Secretariat. Further development 'ad intra': the subregions and regions of the CBF will be receiving their own individual places on the website, with their own organizational abilities. Development 'ad extra': at the moment, [c-b-f.org](http://c-b-f.org) functions primarily as a platform within the CBF; in the future our Internet presence will also address "outsider" Internet users who may be searching for topics related to the biblical pastoral ministry. However, we still have a long way to go from these initial steps to any visible results. Our printed publication *Bulletin Dei Verbum* shall - more clearly as before - foster the exchange of ideas and experiences within the Federation. Planning to implement measures that would accomplish this goal has started.

No amount of media exchanges can, however, replace personal contacts. The revival of meetings of subregional and regional coordinators worldwide (next time in Africa 2004) has already been mentioned. I am convinced that, alongside its work meetings at local and regional levels, the CBF needs such global moments precisely in this time of increased global engagements. They contribute to the intensification of a worldwide network and to the strengthening of "corporate identity". Meetings at the regional level on the other hand are enabling a more vibrant network and the concrete work on topics in a more concrete context. We are looking here for 'natural' opportunities that offer themselves, such as, for example, making more intensive use of subregional workshops or annual meetings for networking in the given region. Examples of this are, among others, the meeting of the regional coordinators for Europe and the Middle East in October 2003 on the threshold of the annual meeting of the subregion of Southern and Western Europe or a planned session of the coordinators of the region of Asia/Oceania in the framework of a workshop for South Asia in December 2003. The workshop for the entire region of Asia/Oceania, planned for October 2004, which will be focused, in terms of contents, on the topic for the 2005 International Congress,

will also contribute to the intensification of the regional networks. Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to mention the annual meetings organized by the Latin American subregion (FEBIC LAC). On the basis of the structures this subregion has given itself, the occasion of these meetings regularly bring together all of the zonal coordinators and are thus becoming a model for exchange and communication at the sub/regional levels.

### **Fundamentalism**

Besides the priorities and recommendations it lays out, the Final Statement of the Sixth Plenary Assembly contains other important concerns that were not explicitly taken up in the priority list, but that run like a leitmotif through the document. One such theme is the topic of fundamentalism. The term "fundamentalist" occurs five times in the Final Statement, among other things in connection with fundamentalist religious and ethnic forces, with an eye to fundamentalist mentality within the Church, and frequently in connection with the fundamentalist interpretation of Holy Scripture. The workshop of the South Asian subregion in December 2003 mentioned above, for example, will be devoted to this theme, under the title "Biblical Apostolate in the Context of Religious Fundamentalism". The Congress for the 40th anniversary of the *Dei Verbum* will also take on this hot topic - likewise in an ecumenical and interreligious perspective.

So much for this first survey of the terrain that we have resolved to build on during the period 2002-2008. Some challenges have already been tackled, much remains to be done. We should also be aware of the fact that many of our activities will remain invisible. Towering edifices can be glimpsed at a distance, but where things are being done underground, where the foundations are being laid, this is the kind of work that often escapes the eye of the observer. This is especially true of our Federation, whose work takes place primarily at the level of foundations and whose superstructure is very slender indeed. But this should not discourage us - on the contrary. For a construction to be solid and enduring, it must have a good foundation. May this be a strong incentive and encouragement for our further efforts to implement the recommendations of the Sixth Plenary Assembly.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)





**PRIORITIES  
2002 - 2008**

## **Priorities of the Sub/Regions 2002 - 2008**

During the Sixth Plenary Assembly the representatives of the regions and subregions were asked to write a short paper indicating the priorities of their work for the coming six years. The various contributions were then reproduced as they were submitted by the coordinators. No attempt was made to impose a uniform format and length on the texts.

The coordinators of biblical pastoral ministry from the African and Madagascan region met during the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the CBF in Lebanon from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2002 and together outlined the following priorities for the region:

**Africa and  
Madagascar**

1. To promote biblical pastoral ministry by appointing regional, national and diocesan coordinators.
2. To encourage the formation of agents for biblical pastoral ministry.
3. To make BICAM a real source of inspiration for all the biblical pastoral ministry promoters on the continent.
4. To foster collaboration amongst ourselves and be more coordinated and committed to the task as we intensify our efforts at ensuring that the Word of God becomes central in all spheres of life.
5. To make the Bible the source, center, and inspiration of evangelization, catechesis, spirituality, and pastoral ministry by using all available traditional and modern methods to place the Word of God into the hands, minds and hearts of our people.
6. To encourage the translation and production of Bibles into local languages at affordable prices in collaboration with the United Bible Societies. Also, to provide study guides, commentaries and other teaching and learning materials, such as posters, audio and video cassettes etc, to enable people to know, understand, appreciate and live the Word of God in a liberated manner, especially in the context of families and small Christian communities.

Objective: To promote the biblical animation of the pastoral ministry in the whole continent, so that the Word of God may become a vital source of pastoral and spiritual life for the whole of the Church's evangelizing activity.

**Latin-America  
and the  
Caribbean**

### **Lines of Action**

1. To insure that the Word of God animates the whole of pastoral activity.
2. To sensitize the leaders and agents of the pastoral ministry to the need and importance of the biblical animation of pastoral ministry.
3. To provide high quality formation for persons who will assume the responsibility of the biblical animation of pastoral ministry.
4. To insure that the Word of God becomes a source of life and of hope for the excluded.
5. To strengthen the cooperation and intercommunication of the members of the FEBIC-LAC, especially by utilizing the zonal structures and the modern electronic media.
6. To promote ecumenical and interreligious dialogue based on the Word of God.
7. To promote an increased practice of a lectio divina that emerges from life and is for life.





### Activities

1. To pursue and deepen the relationship between the DECAT-CELAM (Departamento de Catequesis - Conjeso Episcopal Latinoamericano) and the FEBIC-LAC.
2. To bring to the attention of the bishops the proposals and activities of the CBF.
3. To ask the bishops to appoint a diocesan committee responsible for the biblical animation of the pastoral ministry.
4. To promote the realization of Bible Months, national Bible Weeks, or the like.
5. To acquire spaces in the communications media of the Church for promoting the biblical animation of pastoral ministry.
6. To encourage an ongoing biblical formation of seminarians and religious in initial formation to prepare them for a biblical animation of the pastoral ministry.
7. To deepen the biblical animation of the ministry through the organizing of congresses, courses, meetings, retreats and other activities.
8. To publicize the reading experiences and the biblical formation of specific groups (the youth, base leaders, the handicapped).
9. In the subregion and zones, to implement the meetings scheduled for 2002-2008.
10. To divide up among the zones the objectives, lines of action and programmed activities.

### South Asia

1. To strengthen our Catholics in their commitment to Christian faith through the biblical apostolate.
2. To impart in the minds of the people the spirit of tolerance and unity.
3. To foster the house-top biblical ministry through meetings of the basic Christian communities.

### Southeast Asia

1. To hold a regional meeting tentatively in 2004 in Bandung, Indonesia (4th Asian Workshop).
2. To propose that a program on biblical pastoral ministry be introduced into the seminary curriculum (where it does not exist yet).
3. To determine and propose the structural back-up necessary to link the Bishops' Conferences with CBF.
4. To familiarize ourselves with the contents of the sacred books of the other religions in Asia (e.g. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism etc.), in view of interreligious dialogue.
5. To get to know one another's problems in carrying out the biblical apostolate and to determine and devise ways of helping one another.
6. To continue with our manifold efforts in the field of the biblical apostolate (publication of a Catholic version of the Bible in Burmese and Thai, Bible formation for the laity, preparation and publication of easily understandable materials etc.).

### Northeast Asia

Recommit ourselves in the biblical pastoral ministry in three main areas:

- Awareness building
- Formation
- Networking and collaboration

#### 1. Awareness building

- Continue to intensify promotion of greater awareness of the importance at different levels of the Church.

#### 2. Formation

- Development and execution of biblical formation programmes for the laity; make available different biblical materials, e.g. guidelines of Bible Enthronement Ceremony; different



Bible sharing methods; foster inculturated reading and praying of the Bible.

- Facing the challenge of religious pluralism - the Biblical Committee of Korea will make efforts to help the Korean faithful to strengthen their Christian identity and belief; members of the subregion will see to the possibility of collaborating with the World Council of Churches to overcome violence and lack of religious freedom.
- Make use of electronic media - SOLPH (Sister of Our Lady of Perpetual Help) to continue to intensify its cyber bible apostolate; continue to develop a website for sharing news in the biblical pastoral ministry for the Greater China region and overseas Chinese communities.

### 3. Networking and Collaboration

- UCCBA (United Chinese Catholic Biblical Association) to continue to extend its membership network of Chinese communities worldwide
- Maintain close communication and collaboration with other Asian subregions

#### *Upcoming Meetings*

- 7<sup>th</sup> UCCBA Meeting – 2003 in Kuching, East Malaysia
- 4<sup>th</sup> Asian Workshop – 2004 in Bandung, Indonesia
- 3<sup>rd</sup> North East Asia Meeting - 2005

1. Establishment of a website for the subregion of Oceania which will deal with the biblical pastoral ministry and provide information for members and non-members in the subregion.
2. A workshop for the subregion, but especially for those involved in biblical pastoral ministry, to be held in Papua and New Guinea.
3. Establishment of links with those involved in the biblical pastoral ministry in the subregion of Oceania, especially with those linked to Bishops' Conferences.

**Oceania**

At Beirut our subregion made the following decisions:

1. Each organization/member is to publish the Final Statement in its own publications and get it out to the wider public.
2. We agree to meet in Rome in October 2003 to take stock of our activities and to discuss the extent to which we have taken into account the resolutions adopted at Beirut. We place on the agenda of this meeting:
  - Our work with the bishops. How to sensitize them to the biblical pastoral ministry.
  - The role of our organizations in a biblical reflection on violence. What commitments have we assumed in this regard?
  - The preparation for the Congress on the fortieth anniversary of Dei Verbum in 2005.
3. We resolve to meet every year in October to share our experiences.
4. We resolve to collaborate actively with the General Secretariat and the other subregions by inviting the coordinators to our meetings.

**Southern and  
Western Europe**

### 1. The Field of Biblical Science

Continuation of the Colloquium Biblicum, which is held in Vienna every two years. From 50 to 70 biblical scholars take part in this Biblical Science Convention, the majority of which come from Central and Southeastern Europe. The direction of the event, which lasts for at least three days, is traditionally assumed by the President of the Scientific Council of the Austrian Catholic Biblical Association (Prof. Gottfried Vanoni, svd, is the current president).

**Central Europe**



## **2. Bible Translations – The Bible in various new translations and revisions**

### **2.1 New Translations (foreign languages)**

The project "New Testament for Roma/Sinti in Hungary and bordering countries", a translation of the New Testament into Hungarian and Romanes, should benefit the members of the populations of Roma/Sinti in Hungary, in Slovakia, Romania and in the Wojwodina. Above all they should learn to better understand their "own language" – Romanes. In late 2002 or early 2003 a complete edition of the Bible in Romanes should be published, with the promised support of Bishop Dr. Krätzl.

### **2.2 Revisions/new translations**

At the annual convention of the labor union of assistants to the Biblical Science Institutes in Austria it was decided in September 2001 to critically reevaluate and review existing Bible translations in light of a general transformation in the language. When necessary this would mean introducing new translations, or working on new translations (errors should be compiled and improvements worked out. Example: the German Einheitsübersetzung). The 4/2002 issue of "Bibel und Liturgie" is especially devoted to this theme.

## **3. Political/national level**

With the theme "Role of biblical work in an expanding EU", the region intends to make a contribution to the upcoming EU-expansion, i.e. to the integration into the EU of a number of Central European countries. Under this rubric we will consider our common roots and reflect upon the role of the Bible in an expanding EU and in a globalized world.

A symposium could be held during some future Directors' Conference or subregional meeting on "The Bible as a common foundation".

## **4. Ecumenical Emphasis**

The common initiative "Year of the Bible 2003" of the Austrian Catholic Bible Association and the Austrian Bible Society also has the support and cooperation of the Ecumenical Council of Austrian churches. Having originated in Germany, this initiative has been taken up by Austria, Switzerland, Luxemburg, France and Montenegro. Collaboration takes place in the spirit of the "Charta Oecumenica".

As an example of an ecumenical effort, a three-year Bible initiative is to take place in Vienna. This "Year of the Bible 2003", initiated under the formality of ecumenical cooperation, could also serve as an impetus for churches of other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

## **Rome**

### **1. The CBF subregion "sui generis" of Rome**

Geographically, it is both the smallest and the most extensive of the CBF subregions: orbis in urbe! Of the five often mentioned areas of biblical apostolate, Rome stands for

- ☐ Networking
- ☐ Formation
- ☐ Theological reflection
- ☐ Creation of awareness

### **2. Priorities resulting from this situation**

- ☐ Special efforts should be made to acquaint the international communities of Rome with the Federation ...
- ☐ International institutions already involved in one way or another in biblical apostolate should be invited to become members.





- ❑ Bishops of CBF member organizations, on the occasion of their visits to Rome, should be invited to talk to the students from their countries on the biblical apostolate back home.
- ❑ The Internet should be better used, as agreed upon, and energetically promoted for gathering information and making it available..

## 1. In Lebanon

## Middle East

### 1.1 Biblical days (*Les journées biblique*):

This is a congress held by Lebanese biblical scholars every two years at the Université Antonine. It will be held toward the end of the year 2003 (instead of in 2004), to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the conciliar decree Dei Verbum.

### 1.2 Audio-visual programs

- ❑ Four-year program for the Internet in the Arabic language, entitled: "Évangile sans frontières" (Gospel without borders). The materials for the second year are currently being prepared, namely: commentaries on the Pentateuch, the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles (a series of 45 programs, of 37 minutes each). The first year was devoted to introductions to the Holy Scriptures.
- ❑ Biblical programs in the Arabic language, on the radio "Voix de la Charité" (voice of charity).
- ❑ Biblical programs in the Arabic language, on the television channel "Télé Lumière".

### 1.3 Biblical instruction

- ❑ The members of the Lebanese Biblical Committee are engaged in the teaching of the Holy Scriptures at the Pontifical Faculty of Theology (Université Saint-Esprit, Kaslik, Lebanon), at the Institut Saint Paul (Harissa, Lebanon), at the Université Antonine (Dekwaneh, Lebanon), at the Université de la Sagesse (Beirut), at the Séminaire de Karm Saddeh (Lebanon north). This task will remain the priority par excellence of the Lebanese biblical scholars.
- ❑ These scholars are likewise responsible for ongoing instruction in the centers of religious formation, which number 32 in Lebanon.

### 1.4 Biblical courses

- ❑ Certain members of the Lebanese Biblical Committee are organizing intensive Bible courses in Lebanon.
- ❑ They are taking part in the animation of the annual Bible courses, which are organized in Syria by the Syrian Biblical Committee.
- ❑ Some of them will participate in the Biblical Congress, which will be held in Egypt some time next year.
- ❑ Others will also take part in the mini-congress on the Bible, which will be held in Iraq this year or next year.
- ❑ New construction sites are scheduled to be opened in Kuwait and in the Arab Emirates, in view of propagating the knowledge of the Bible.

### 1.5 Publications

- ❑ The Biblical Bulletin in the Arabic language will continue to be published by the Lebanese Biblical Committee.
- ❑ The Lebanese Biblical Committee will pursue its biblical publications in the Arabic language, bearing on the OT and the NT.
- ❑ The Review Biblia is already in its 17th issue. It is the fruit of efforts deployed by the members of the Lebanese Biblical Committee in particular, and of the financial coverage assured by the Université Saint-Esprit (Kaslik, Lebanon), where the review is published.



## 2. In Egypt

A biblical congress is to be organized some time during the year 2003.

## 3. In Iraq

- A mini-congress on the Bible will be organized during the year 2003 or 2004.
- The Journal Biblia, 55 issues, which appeared in Arabic in Lebanon, has been photocopied to serve as a point of reference for the students of the centers of religious formation. The Review Biblia, which has replaced this Journal, will likewise be photocopied, for lack of financial means!
- The Dossiers de la Bible are still in process of being translated into Arabic.

## 4. In Syria

Every year, the Syrian Biblical Committee organizes a biblical course toward the end of the month of January in six or seven Syrian towns. More and more efforts are made each year to improve the organization and quality of these courses.

## 5. In Palestine

Given the disastrous situation in the Holy Land/Palestine, biblical activities will be resumed when calm has returned to the region.

## 6. In the Middle-East

The 9<sup>th</sup> Biblical Congress will take place in Lebanon in the year 2005.





## The New President of the Federation

### Vincenzo Paglia, Bishop of Terni-Narni-Amelia, Italy

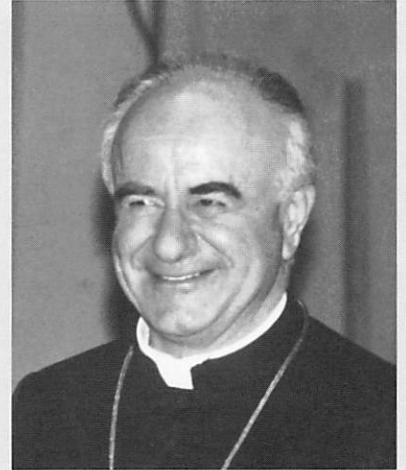
*With the Sixth Plenary Assembly, Bishop Vincenzo Paglia assumed his office as new President of the Catholic Biblical Federation. The term of office is initially six years; it can be extended. The President has chairmanship over the Federation. His tasks include that of providing inspiration and leadership for the Federation, and that of representing it with the Holy See.*

#### Profile

- Born: 1944 in Boville Ernica (Italy)
- Ordained as Priest: 1970
- Ordained as Bishop: April 2, 2000 in the Lateran Basilica, Rome
- Nomination as President of the CBF by the Executive Committee and confirmation through the Holy See, August 2002
- Official taking over of office as CBF President on September 3, 2002 (Plenary Assembly in Lebanon)

#### Academic studies and degrees

- Pontifical Roman Minor and Major Seminary (Pontifical Lateran University, Rome)
- Licenciata in Philosophy (Pontifical Lateran University, Rome)
- Licenciata in Theology (Pontifical Lateran University, Rome)
- Master's degree in Pedagogy (University of Urbino, Italy)



#### Ministry

- Since the early 1970s Bishop Paglia has been involved with the Community of Sant' Egidio, being one of its co-founders. For many years he was the spiritual and ecclesiastical assistant of the community and is often referred to as the "anima" of Sant' Egidio.
- 1973 nomination as rector of the church of Sant' Egidio which had become the center of the S. Egidio Community.
- 1981 parish priest at Santa Maria in Trastevere and prefect of the Third Prefecture in Rome.
- International commitment (for S. Egidio and the Holy See): Among Bishop Paglia's international commitments his work for Albania deserves special mention. He was the first priest to enter the country after the free elections in March 1991. He has obtained the re-opening of the Seminary, the restitution of the Cathedral, and he has paved the way for the relations between Albania and the Holy See. In 1999 Bishop Paglia negotiated with Rugova and Milosevic during the war in Kosovo and acted as "special ambassador" several times.

#### Publications

Bishop Paglia regularly publishes articles in widespread Italian magazines. His academic and publishing activities concern esp. the fields of social history and biblical spirituality. Among his social studies those on prisoners and on poverty deserve special mention:

- La "pietà dei carcerati" (The "piety of the imprisoned"), Rome 1980
- La storia dei poveri in occidente (History of the poor in the West), Milan 1994

He is also the author of numerous publications in the field of biblical spirituality and pastoral ministry. Among those are:

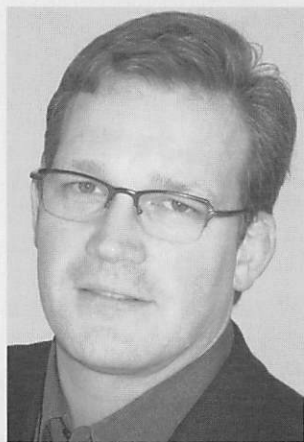
- Città secolare e Vangelo (The secular city and the Gospel), Rome 1988
- Il Vangelo ogni giorno (The Gospel every day), Milan 1997
- Lettera ad un amico che non crede (Letter to a non-believing friend), Milan 1998
- All'alba del nuovo millennio (At the dawn of the new millennium), Milan 1999
- Il Vangelo di Luca (The Gospel of Luke), Rome 2000
- Duc in altum, Rome 2001
- La parola di Dio ogni giorno (The Word of God every day), Terni 2001
- Il Vangelo di Marco (The Gospel of Mark), Milan 2002





## NEW OFFICIALS

# The General Secretary in Interview



*In December 2002 the Executive Committee of the CBF elected Alexander M. Schweitzer to the office of General Secretary of the Catholic Biblical Federation. Schweitzer is a theologian, with particular expertise in mission theology, and has been working for the CBF since 1997. Till 2001 he was deputy General Secretary and from December 2001 he had been Acting General Secretary. To the readers of the BDV he has long been known as an editor and author.*

In the following we reproduce an interview between the editor of *Bibel und Kirche*, a publication of the Catholic Biblical Association (Katholisches Bibelwerk) in Germany and Alexander M. Schweitzer.

**BiKi:** *The Catholic Biblical Federation with its presence in all parts of the world is a "global player". What are the chief concerns of the CBF in the context of current world events?*

**Schweitzer:** The first thing that comes to my mind here are the challenges of globalization. Besides the numerous positive aspects, there are also problematic consequences of globalization. These include the fragmentation of life through the diversity of places and affiliations, the dominance of certain societal and cultural systems over others and the fact that globalization creates outsiders. The difficulties in dialogue between cultures and religions that now exist in ever closer proximity to each other can also not be overlooked. The Bible can help us in all these areas: through its witness for unity in diversity, through its parables of responsible action vis-à-vis the small and the weak, through its attitude of dialogue and respect, where one also retains an awareness of one's own values, through its message of love. To give the Bible its due place in all these areas is a major concern of the CBF.

The second thing that comes to mind is the phenomenon of fundamentalism. We should not automatically think of Islam here - even though a theological legitimization of fundamentalist tendencies may appear more natural in Islam than in Christianity because of its traditional conviction of the verbal inspiration of the Koran. We have every reason to attend to our own affairs. One need only think of the use of religious categories and sentiments in connection with the debate over the war in Iraq. Without going more deeply into the situation, it is certainly regrettable that a fundamentalist use of the Bible does indeed serve many war advocates as a support for their position. This is a sad confirmation of the urgency of the CBF's efforts to counteract a fundamentalist use of the Bible in the Final Statement of its Sixth Plenary Assembly in Lebanon. It is also a confirmation of its expressed recommendation to the member organizations of the CBF to collaborate with the World Council of Churches on the "decade for the overcoming of violence".

**BiKi:** *You mentioned the dialogue of religions. Is the CBF also engaged in this effort?*

**Schweitzer:** The dialogue among religions takes on a crucial significance against the background of current world events. And in my opinion Holy Scripture offers a good, indeed the best foundation for this dialogue. With Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini I would like to recall how important familiarity with the Bible is for interreligious and intercultural dialogue. The whole of Holy Scripture is imbued with this dialogue, for it tells the story of the People of God who time and time again came into contact with new cultures and thought worlds, which it partly absorbed and partly influenced. The attitudes of respect and rootedness in one's own faith are indispensable - biblical - presuppositions for this dialogue. By its presence in 126 countries of the world, the CBF is in active contact with most of the world's cultural and religious realities and is challenged by them. This experience is another reason why the Federation has such a special role to play in this area of dialogue.



*BiKi: The CBF is an ecclesiastical, a Catholic organization. What are its specific tasks within the Catholic Church?*

**Schweitzer:** The central concern of the CBF is, of course, the biblical pastoral ministry. We understand this ministry not as a special department of pastoral activity but as the biblical foundation, the biblical animation of the entire pastoral ministry. The Second Vatican Council brought this conviction, that the Bible has a central role to play in the faith and life of Christians, to a breakthrough and one of the consequences of this was the founding of the Catholic Biblical Federation. In the conciliar constitution *Dei Verbum*, which could be viewed as the Magna Carta of the CBF, this even comes to expression in the statement: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (DV 25).



For this reason the primary concern of the CBF is to enable a simple and at the same time well-founded access to Holy Scripture, and one that is also context-related and life-relevant. With an eye to the faithful the CBF makes a special effort to achieve a reading adapted to the cultural, social, and personal context of those concerned. In this effort the various hermeneutical approaches to the Bible take on an important significance. With a view to the leaders and teachers - or, if you so wish, the hierarchy - one of its prime objectives is to bridge the gulf that exists between the scientific-academic interpretation of the Bible and a biblical reading that is more practical and life-related. On the whole, the CBF considers it an important one of its tasks to sensitize church leaders to the central role of the Bible in the life of the Church.

*BiKi: In what ways and with what means does the CBF seek to reach these goals?*

**Schweitzer:** Among other things, by sensitizing its own ranks to the themes in question, by consciousness-building and - I hope the term is not too negatively charged - by lobbying efforts within the Church, and above all through the support and completion of suitable projects. The means to accomplish these goals are publications, events and meetings at various levels, collaboration with partner organizations, in general the utilization of the capacities of our worldwide network. The principle of subsidiarity plays an important role in our work and in our structures. Above all, however, the CBF accomplishes its tasks through the concrete efforts of its member institutions at a grass-roots level. They are actively engaged in the areas of translation, publication and distribution of Bibles and of materials related to the biblical pastoral ministry, in research and teaching, in the training and ongoing formation of lay people and clerics and in the field of evangelization.

*BiKi: Is there a particular wish that you cherish for the CBF?*

**Schweitzer:** Quite simply put: my wish would be that we succeed in helping to make the Bible more and more accessible to people so that from it they will draw nourishment for their faith and for their lives. The biblical message is one that is essentially related to life. Only when it enters into a genuine dialogue with one's own experiences, one's own questions can it become Word of God: a source of life in the small, personal sector and a blessing for all peoples in the grand arena of the world.

*BiKi: Thanks for the interview.*

The questions were asked by Dr. Bettina Eltrop. ■



## NEW OFFICIALS

# Executive Committee

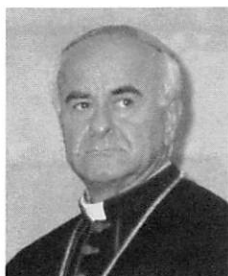
On September 9, 2002, the Plenary Assembly elected a new Executive Committee. It is comprised of four Full Members as representatives of the Full Members of the four regions of Africa, America, Asia/Oceania and Europe/Middle East. The committee also has two Associate Members who represent the Associate Members of the CBF, independent of their regional affiliation. These members of the EC are elected for six years. In addition to those named, three ex-officio members likewise belong to the EC: the President, a representative of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and the Chairman of the Administrative Board.

The EC is the highest organ of the Federation between Plenary Assemblies. Its obligations include those of implementing the decisions of the Plenary Assemblies and nominating the officers of the CBF.

### Ex-officio Members

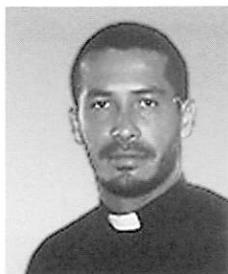
#### *President of the Federation*

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#### *Chairman of the Administrative Board*

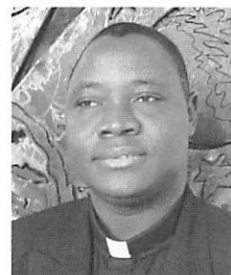
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### Full Member Representatives

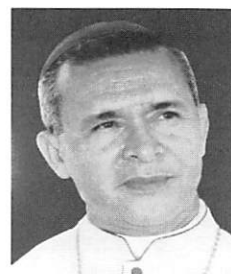
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**Associate Member Representative**

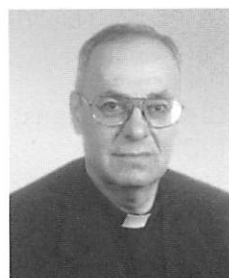
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## NEW OFFICIALS

# Sub/Regional Coordinators

A new term of office began also for the sub/regional coordinators, who were nominated by the Executive Committee on the recommendation of the General Secretary after consultation with members in the sub/region. This is a three-year term of office; re-nomination is possible.

The function of the sub/regional coordinators is to promote and coordinate, with the assistance of the General Secretary, the biblical-pastoral ministry of the sub/region. They collaborate with the Executive Committee member(s) and the members of their sub/region. They provide an annual report to the Executive Committee and attend meetings of sub/regional coordinators.

### Regional Coordinator of Africa and Madagascar

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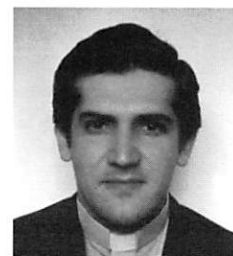
### IMBISA Coordinator

Fr Ignatius Chidavaenzi  
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### Subregional Coordinator of North America

vacant

### Subregional Coordinator of South Asia

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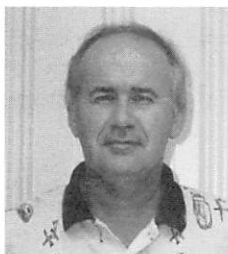
### **Subregional Coordinator of Southern and Western Europe**

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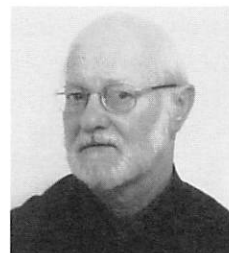
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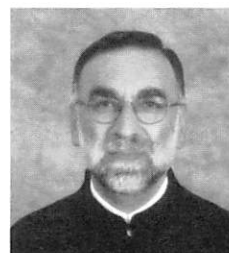
### **Subregional Coordinator of Central Europe**

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### **Subregional Coordinator of the Middle East**

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The Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) is a world-wide association of Catholic organizations committed to the ministry of the Word of God. At the present time, the CBF membership includes 90 full members and 228 associate members coming from a total of 126 countries.

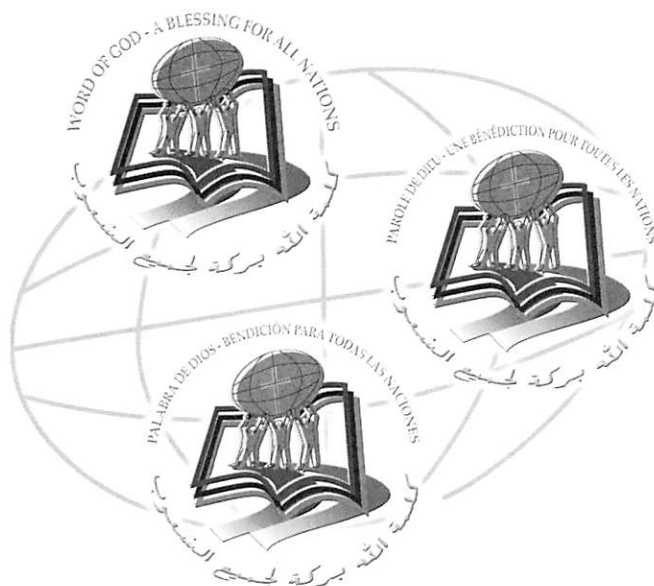
The activities of these organizations include the preparation of Catholic and interconfessional Bible translations, the propagation of Bibles and in general the promotion of a deeper understanding of Holy Scripture.

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

In particular, the CBF works towards 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.

At the beginning of the third millennium Holy Scripture can be viewed as the great textbook of humanity. Especially in times like this the reading of the Bible not only helps the Christian community to grow in faith and love, but it can and should also offer to the whole world those words of brotherhood and of human wisdom that it so desperately needs. This is the great challenge that the Catholic Biblical Federation sets for itself.

**Vincenzo Paglia, Bishop of Terni-Narni-Amelia, Italy, President of the CBF**



Important documents and interesting contributions on the PA  
can be found on the CBF website under

**[www.c-b-f.org](http://www.c-b-f.org)**