

## **Message of the Catholic Biblical Federation to the Synod of Bishops on “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith”**

### *1. The Catholic Biblical Federation and its Commitment to Evangelization*

The Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) has been reflecting on the question of “New Evangelization” at least since its Fourth Plenary Assembly held in Bogotá, Colombia in 1990, now more than 20 years ago. In response to Pope John Paul II’s call for a new evangelization, the CBF assembly focused its discussion on “The Bible in the New Evangelization”. Indeed, in line with the Federation’s reference text, the Vatican II Constitution on Revelation “*Dei Verbum*”, the assembly delegates were convinced that “the biblical apostolate is an important aspect of the New Evangelization since ‘All the preaching of the Church, like the Christian religion itself, must be nourished and directed by the Holy Scriptures’ (DV 21)” (Bogotá Final Statement, § 4,2). This intuition has been confirmed and reinforced during the following years of the CBF’s commitment to “biblical apostolate”, to “biblical pastoral ministry” and to “the biblical animation of all pastoral life of the Church”, an expression which appeared in CBF publications as early as 1993 and which has been adopted in Pope Benedict XVI’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (VD 73). It is in this context that the CBF would like to share its experience, its reflection and its concerns with the Synod Fathers on the not only important role but the essential role of the reading of Scripture within the global dynamics both of “evangelization” and of “new evangelization”.

### *2. Evangelization as a Journey in Dialogue between the Scriptures and the Vicissitudes of Human Life*

We are extremely grateful for the clarification that the *Instrumentum laboris* provides for the various understandings of the terms “evangelization” and “new evangelization” and the analysis of the multi-faceted reasons for the renewal of the efforts for the transmission of the Christian faith. The CBF has experienced its work of “evangelization” over the years as a sharing of the “Good News” of God’s liberating and healing Word with our brothers and sisters in today’s world. This Word expresses itself in the dialogue between the Scriptures and the narratives of life’s journey that we heed in our groups. It has been our experience that evangelization is itself a journey which is never completed: it requires attentive listening both to the Scriptures and to the concrete, often tortuous stories of concrete men and women, with their hopes and

deceptions, experience of success and of failure, moments of sadness and of joy ... It is in this journeying together and in the sharing of the substance of our lives with each other that we can discover in the sharing of the Word the healing and consoling presence of the Lord among us ... and that is indeed “Good News”! This journey, accompanied by the presence of the Lord, as in the narrative of the disciples of Emmaus, leads us to strengthen the bonds of faith, hope and solidarity which unite us; it requires respectful patience and endurance, an open ear and a humble heart filled with mercy and understanding.

The Gospels themselves give us many examples of the presence of Jesus with the men and women of his day, as he shared with them the Good News of the coming of God’s Kingdom in the midst of their lives. His compassion with the sick and the possessed, with those whom the civil and religious societies marginalized, his way of speaking with them and teaching those who listened to him, his message of consolation and his call for conversion ... are the permanent guides for our own participation in the ministry of proclaiming the Good News and opening the Kingdom to all men and women of good will. The narratives of the encounters between Jesus and the men, women and children of his day provide us with stimulating stories that might help us give concrete form to the personal encounters of men, women and children of our time with the risen Lord. His care for those sharing in his ministry is particularly significant: he sends them two by two, he is attentive to their hunger and provides them with a place for resting and sharing the joys and difficulties of their mission, he questions their preconceived ideas and convictions, he calls the disciples themselves to be transformed by the Good News which they announce ...

The letters of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles furnish a source of both theological reflection on and narratives of the proclamation of the *kerygma* in the Jewish, Greek and Roman society of the Mediterranean world. It is of utmost interest to note how the interaction between the evangelizer and the culturally varied audiences manifest both the fundamental stability of the *kerygma* and the development of the forms of expression of the faith and of the life of the communities.

### *3. Evangelization and the Encounter with Jesus Christ imply an in depth contact with the Scriptures*

Saint Jerome put it quite succinctly: “Ignorantia Scripturae ignorantia Christi”: we cannot know Jesus Christ without knowing the Scriptures. It was in this optic that Dei Verbum set the clear option of making the Scriptures directly accessible to all the faithful, while insisting both on the importance of understanding the Scriptures as they were meant to be understood by their authors and the recognition that they are to be a source of nourishment for the faithful. In a similar vein, Dei Verbum speaks of the Scriptures as the “soul” of theology. Logically, then, if one of the most important goals of (new) evangelization is the personal encounter with Jesus Christ, this implies necessarily the regular contact and growing familiarity with the Scriptures. This contact must transcend a fragmentary and oftentimes “instrumentalized” reference to the Scriptures, moving on to the repeated reading “from the beginning to the end” of biblical writings and then progressively to the full “canonical” reading of the entire Bible.

We know Jesus through the four canonical Gospels: four differently inculturated approaches leading to the encounter with the Risen Lord and to the hearing of the message of God’s love for humanity that he proclaims. Jesus has his human and religious origin in the Jewish people whose culture was formed primarily by the Jewish Scriptures

(our Old Testament). His message was heard by and shared among men and women whose story of discipleship we find attested in the New Testament writings as well. All of these Scriptures find their center, their focus and their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ and the Son of God, according to the Christian tradition.

Our experience within the work of the CBF has recognized the wide reaching truth of St. Jerome's intuition. And we are convinced that all efforts of evangelization must make this direct contact with the Scriptures possible and that people like Philip in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 8 must be ready, willing and able to accompany those whose search for meaning in their lives passes through the reading and understanding of the Scriptures.

#### *4. The Journey of Life and of Faith within the Scriptures*

Even though the Scriptures comprise a multitude of literary forms, the predominant form is that of the narrative of the life journey which individuals, groups of persons and even an entire people undertake, in dialogue with God's Word. One needs only to call to mind the Old Testament narratives of Abraham and his family, of Jacob and his family, of the people of Israel journeying from Canaan to Egypt and then from Egyptian slavery through the desert and then on to the land of the promise ... or again the narrative of this same people, journeying from the Holy City Jerusalem, after its destruction by the Babylonian armies, into exile, and then after their liberation, their return to the challenge of rebuilding city, temple and country in difficult circumstances. These and many other Old Testament narratives are characterized by everything which makes life a burden and a joy, by the failures and success of human enterprise, by great deeds of righteousness and by miserable unfaithfulness and sin, by the violence and injustice which so often mark the tragedy of human life as well as by human love and commitment for the poor and the weak ... these human journeys through life are transformed into journeys which engender faith through the divine word which suddenly and without warning irrupts into human history. Men and women perceive this Word as a sort of "compass" that shows them the way to new pastures, that provides orientation in times of disarray, that opens the breach to a community in which persons may live in mutual respect ... This Word is perceived as an interrogation and as a call to conversion as well as a signpost pointing to the liberation from dead ends, but also as consolation and encouragement addressed to those at the end of their means and wits. The New Testament as well is profoundly marked by journeys of discipleship, not only in individual episodes of the Gospels or the Acts, but also in each Gospel or in Luke-Acts, taken as a whole. Paul's ministry is presented in the form of missionary journeys, accompanied by the epistolary pastoral care and at the same time the development of his "theology".

The regular calling to mind of these "narratives" of human journeys and the signs of God's presence within them is the object not only of the biblical narratives themselves but also of certain psalms or other texts which in one way or another reformulate the journey of individuals or of a people with God across the years. Progressively, this repetition and meditation on one's past creates a place in the memory of the faithful, a "reference" narrative, with which a person and a community can dialogue in evaluating and guiding ones personal journey through life. In this way, the Scriptures themselves teach us essential catechetical methods: here, the importance of developing a personal knowledge and consciousness of the Biblical narratives as life and faith journeys.

### *5. Life's Journey with the Word as a "mirror" and as a "compass"*

One of the great challenges of pastoral care today is helping people to become conscious of their own "story", of their own journey through life, assisting them in keeping alive their memory of the journey that they have made individually, as a family or as a community. The globalized society robs individuals, groups and peoples of their "memory"; it creates "common" needs that may be satisfied by common "products". The process of revivifying ones memory, ones consciousness of ones culture and story, is essential for an evangelization that is not content with the creation of "socialized" Christian Catholics but that seeks to transmit faith which truly takes root within persons and their culture.

The engendering of faith presupposes that the life journey of individual persons is taken seriously and treated with great respect and discretion. The narrative of human life can look to the Scriptural narrative as to a mirror, helping to view ones life with a certain distance. The Scriptures can question certain decisions that a person has made on his life's journey. They can provide a compass for showing the direction, even though each person must seek the concrete way that his journey follows. They can help a person recognize, accept and transcend personal moments of traumatic experience and even failure, by placing them within the vast story of the journey of God with his people across the ages.

In this context, a double discernment is necessary, both of human life and of the biblical message. This intuition warns us against a naïve and simplistic relation between life and Scripture in which some seek in the Scriptures the immediate response to questions that arise in human life. Sometimes, it is more than sufficient that the Scriptures help in identifying the essential questions ... The dialogue between life and Scripture requires great sensitivity, humility and patience – all qualities necessary for giving birth both to human beings and to faith. Clearly, it is only with the help of the Spirit who is the source of inspiration of Scripture and who teaches us discernment, humility and patience that this dialogue is possible.

### *6. Faith formation goes "hand in hand" with the Reading of the Scriptures*

Recent studies of Luke's Gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles have revealed to us the particular catechetical journey upon which Jesus' disciples, both men and women, embark with the master. They must learn, step by step, to listen – to the Word of God, whether in Jesus' teaching or in the Scriptures, and to the human voices which interpolate them–, they must learn the meaning of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus and the implications for their own lives and commitments, they must learn to participate in the mission of healing and announcing the Gospel of Peace, they must experience conversion in their own lives, they must learn to pray and to share their possessions with the less fortunate and to live in solidarity with the members of the faith community and beyond, they must learn that listening to the word and service (diakonia) belong together: that hearing the word leads to service and that service which is not grounded in the hearing of the Word leads to dispersion and worrisome activity ... The last stage of this formation journey is marked by the opening of the disciples' intelligence to the understanding of the Scriptures and their meaning not only for their faith but also for their lives. With the accomplishment of their formation and the gift of the Spirit in the Pentecost scene in the Acts, the disciples are then ready to assume ultimately the mission of "evangelization", of sharing the Good News of the

coming of God's Kingdom and the gift of conversion for the forgiveness of sins with peoples of all nations in the accomplishment of God's promise to Abraham.

It is our conviction in the CBF that evangelization and the transmission of Christian faith goes "hand in hand" with the reading of the Scriptures. It is through frequent contact with the Scriptures that we learn the "language" of faith. Biblical language is evocative, making rich use of symbols that invite the reader to search for the divine reality and its orientation (Torah) for human life that surpass not only each image but all images which we may use in attempting to speak of God. This evocative, symbolic language is multi-faceted and invites the believer to enter progressively into the depth and richness of the faith relationship with a believing community and ultimately with God. Biblical language is also provocative, in that it invites the reader or hearer of the Word to enter into the story personally and actively, to take position and to open oneself to conversion.

Biblical language is first and foremost narrative, recounting the story of the relationship between the people and God. The repetition of this "story" both in the basic narrative and in summary forms is characteristic of biblical faith formation. To this extent, the believer is invited repeatedly to understand his or her own personal life journey within the context of the collective journey of God's people. The progressive development of the consciousness of belonging to a family or a group, with its particular identity, with its history, its language and its values, is fundamental to the dynamics of evangelization. In a society in which individuality and individualism are, on the one hand, proclaimed as the ultimate liberation with regard to cultural, ethnic, national and religious roots, and, on the other hand, sacrificed to globalized marketing strategies, the transmission of faith and evangelization is faced with far-reaching challenges. In any event, the efforts of sharing the Gospel must not neglect making the long and patient journey with concrete men and women with their particular life stories and bringing these persons into dialogue with the Jewish-Christian Scriptures. Indeed, our experience over the years in the CBF has been that shared Scripture reading can lead progressively to the building up of the community of Christians, of the body of Christ itself.

At one time or another during this dialogue, the expression of faith may also take the form of creedal affirmation and commitment. The Christian creedal formulations, certainly the expression of the *depositum fidei*, receive new vibrancy when they can be perceived as the crystallization of the Church's faith, the fruit of the community's commitment in the life of the world and constituent of the community's identity and cohesion.

### *7. The Evangelization of the Evangelizers*

Clearly, those who participate actively in the efforts of evangelization can only be witnesses of the God's Word when they themselves have experienced profoundly the Good News of Salvation in their own lives. Otherwise, they are likely to remain mere "functionaries". Witnesses of God's love for humanity in Jesus Christ must be in regular contact with the Scriptures, in their depth and in their breadth. This contact leads to familiarity and even to love of the biblical text that reveals God's Word to us, when we heed it in prayer and respond to it with commitment. But these witnesses have also to develop this sensitivity and respect of the human beings whom they encounter and with whom they are called to journey together. This double attentiveness and respect challenges us to examine critically, in particular, our way of reading Scripture.

The sixth CBF Plenary Assembly, held in Lebanon in 2002, invited the CBF delegates to reflect upon their “use” of the Scriptures, notably in keeping with the Abrahamic call to become a “blessing for all Nations”. In dialogue with the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document on “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (1993), it recognized options intent on setting free the transforming power of the Word, options which the Scriptures themselves teach us:

- 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 the 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).
- 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).
- 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).
- 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).
- 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).
- 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**.

- 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 (Lectio divina)** ... This form of prayer challenges, gives orientation to and forms our existence.<sup>1</sup>

One might say that the CBF has recognized the necessity of evangelizing our own way of reading the Scriptures that has so often been subjected to fragmentary interpretation and articulated in such a way that the biblical texts are used as a pretext to support our own theological, moral, social or other purposes.

#### 8. "*Biblica animatio totius actionis pastoralis*"

Pope Benedict XVI expressed a fundamental desire at the very beginning of his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*:

"I wish to point out certain fundamental approaches to a rediscovery of God's word in the life of the Church as a wellspring of constant renewal. At the same time I express my hope that the word will be ever more fully at the heart of every ecclesial activity" (VD § 1).

The Holy Father returns to this fundamental intuition later in the same document:

"the Synod called for a particular pastoral commitment to emphasizing the centrality of the word of God in the Church's life, and recommended a greater 'biblical apostolate', not alongside other forms of pastoral work, but as *a means of letting the Bible inspire all pastoral work*" (VD 73).

The Latin expression "*Biblica animatio totius actionis pastoralis*" is difficult to translate into non-Latin languages in which it loses some of its original force. The symbolism of the biblical and fundamentally human language can help us to better understand what is meant. Scripture is the leaven that permeates the flour and transforms it into living dough, capable of providing nourishment for human beings. Scripture is the salt that mingles with aliments, giving them taste and conserving them for human consumption. Scripture is, to a certain extent the sap that gives life to entire plants, transforming the inanimate wood into life and fruit bearing branches. *Dei Verbum* speaks of the Scriptures as the soul (anima) of theology (DV 24). In philosophical and theological language, the soul is the principle of life. It gives life and dynamism to the body, from within the organism. In this way, "*biblica animatio*" is not only one sector of the pastoral activity of the Church nor is it merely an inspiring model for pastoral activity, but it is that divine force present in God's Word which breathes life into the entire Church, in all of its life and mission.

The implications of this intuition are far-reaching. All pastoral planning and activities should be illuminated and guided by a deep scriptural reflection and discernment. All ministers and members of the faithful should be formed, through a regular, in depth and prayerful contact with the Scriptures. This Word – the Scriptural Word of God – when sown into receptive earth shall produce rich fruit, even though the obstacles are not negligible.

- In this light, the CBF considers that it is of utmost importance that the Synod of Bishops on "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith" also reflect upon the place of the reading of Scripture in its efforts in favor of (new) evangelization and the transmission of faith, and this in direct line with the conclusions of the Synod of Bishops on "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church" and Pope Benedict XVI's Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*.

- We recognize in the Scriptures not only the Lord's command to announce the Good News to all mankind, but also numerous models of "evangelization" which lead to the

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<sup>1</sup> "The Word of God: A Blessing for all Nations: Final Statement of the Sixth Plenary Assembly", *Bulletin Dei Verbum* [English Edition] N° 64/65 (2002, 3-4), p. 9-16.

personal encounter with the Risen Lord and to the healing and conversion which the hearing of the message of God's love awakens within us.

- We think that the direct contact between the faithful and the Scriptures is one of the primary forms of evangelization and merits the commitment of the entire Christian community. This contact should be allowed to grow into a respectful dialogue between the Scriptures and the real life situation of the readers, in which the Scriptures can play the role both of mirror and of compass.

- The formation of "ministers of the Word" possessing a deep understanding of the Scriptures and capable of journeying respectfully with men and women, youth and children is essential.

- Adequate forms of and material for Bible sharing within families should become a priority of our reflection, development and implementation in our Christian communities.

- The contact with the Scripture can take multiple forms and should respect the cultural forms and individual capacities of the various members of the human family. Reflection should be undertaken concerning the use of modern communications without neglecting the simple forms of human expression, as has been experienced for example in "bibliodrama".

- The traditional catechetical materials should deepen their Scriptural reference (not only in a fragmentary reference, but in a dynamic way in keeping with the narratives with which the Bible provides us).

- The elaboration of an anthology of basic biblical texts, accompanied by simple and motivating commentaries, might be of help to various age groups and cultural settings. But here again, the editorial, exegetical and catechetical options need to be discussed in detail, so that the reading of individual passages leads progressively to the reading of essential biblical books in their entirety and to the reading of the Bible as a whole.

- Sufficient reflection should be devoted to the role of the Scriptures and the dialogue with human life in liturgical homilies and other forms of exhortation and instruction, as well as to the necessary formation in this regard.

- The forms and quality of the proclamation of the Word deserve both serious reflection and well planned formation programs.

- We humbly suggest that reflection on the reading of Scripture in the life of the Church in all of its dimensions merits the statute of a "locus theologicus" in the articulation of theological reflection and research and thereby plead in this regard for the creation of courses and research circles devoted to "the Reading of Scripture in the life of the Church" within the theological curricula in our Faculties and Institutes.

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These are just a few of the concrete propositions upon which the Catholic Biblical Federation would like to insist and which it commits itself to further in its work across the world. In this regard, the CBF is extremely grateful for Pope Benedict's *Verbum Domini* that has quite broadly indicated the fields of reflection and of pastoral planning in this regard. Indeed, the Holy Father has given us the "compass" for our work as a Federation in its task of opening the treasures of God's Word to all our brothers and sisters.

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Dear Bishops present at the Synod! Please accept these reflections as a sign of the

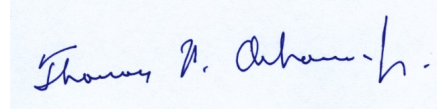


prayer and support that the Catholic Biblical Federation humbly offers to you during your deliberations. We are certainly aware of the complexity of the topics that you are discussing and of their vital importance for the life of the Church. If we share with you our experience and the reflections that we have formulated on the basis of our ministry of sharing God's Word over the past four decades, then it is a sign of our continuing commitment to the mission with which the Federation was entrusted by Pope Paul VI, together with Cardinals Bea and Willebrands, in the aftermath of the Council and in line with the orientations provided by chapter 6 of *Dei Verbum* and which Pope Benedict has reinforced in *Verbum Domini* following up on the previous Bishops Synod in 2008.

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*The Solemnity of the Assumption*

*August 15, 2012*