

The Final Statement of the Malta Plenary Assembly

In April 1978, 76 delegates from 44 countries participating in the Second Plenary Assembly stressed in their Final Statement the necessity of solid formation in the biblical field, the condition for an authentic biblical spirituality.

The Second Plenary Assembly of the World Catholic Federation for the Biblical Apostolate, gathered at Malta from April 11th to 19th, 1978, takes this opportunity to offer its services to all those who, by a spiritual gift of the Lord, have a specific duty of spreading the Word of God as conveyed by the Holy Scripture, recognizing that it is the purpose of the Federation to help foster and harmonize the biblical apostolate throughout the world by promoting the study and understanding of the Bible, by encouraging interconfessional and international co-operation in this work.

Part I: General Recommendations

1. Biblical Apostolate

The members of the WCFBA have been encouraged as they have assessed the development of the biblical apostolate during the six years since the first Plenary Assembly in Vienna. During eight days the 76 participants representing 44 countries have realized that only through a deeply rooted biblical spirituality can Christians play their specific role in the world and contribute towards the building up of a new society based on Christian vision and values.

They therefore recommend that every bishop set apart a competent person in each diocese to animate, coordinate and promote the biblical apostolate and that steps be taken to coordinate this work at the national level.

2. Liturgy

The participants have experienced in a variety of forms, due to their international representation, the richness of a liturgical life based on the Word, finding in the liturgy a source of light and strength. The Assembly recommends that bishops' conferences and biblical associations ensure that all leaders of liturgical and para-liturgical assemblies be trained in the proclamation of the Scriptures, so that all to whom they minister may be equipped to play their role as "ministers of the Word" (Luke 1:3).

3. Seminaries

The Assembly gave special attention to the pastoral-biblical formation of seminarians, conscious that their Scripture course could too easily remain on an academic level.

The Assembly therefore recommends that the formation given to seminarians should seek to provide a deep biblically-centered faith experience and that their biblical studies should be complemented by such in-service training as allows the pastoral application of what is learnt, particularly in the different forms of communicating the Gospel message.

4. The Training of Catechists

The Assembly considers it of great importance that the catechists, who play such a vital role as leaders and animators of the Christian communities, should have a sound and adequate knowledge of the Bible. This will enable them to discover God's active presence in their lives and history, to interpret for their communities the designs of the Lord in the light of God's Word and to use the Bible as a source of their prayer life. This aim should be kept in mind in all biblical teaching during and after their training.

5. Bible Sharing Groups

The sharing by participants during the Assembly told of the emergence on all the continents of many spontaneous groups chiefly among the laity, e.g. Bible sharing, neo-catechumenate and charismatic groups, basic communities, Christian family movements, etc. We recognize in this a sign of the times and the work of the Spirit.

The Assembly recommends that bishops' conferences encourage the formation of such groups and invite existing groups to include the prayerful study of the Bible in their programs. Bishops' conferences and biblical

associations should provide such groups with all necessary help and guidance about the Bible so that their Christian life may be firmly based on a sound knowledge of the Word of God.

6. Catechesis

The Federation in the light of its reflection on the Bible and catechesis joins with the hierarchies of the world and the recent Synod of Bishops in their concern for a sound biblical catechesis to form all sections of the Church in the faith. The Word of God as contained in the Bible should have its rightful place in all catechetical sessions and in all forms of faith-education to give meaning to and shed light on the life of the people.

The Assembly therefore recommends that all biblical associations establish close cooperation with the catechetical agencies in the training of priests, catechists and teachers of religion.

7. Exegesis

One of the major challenges in the biblical field of the twentieth century considered by the Assembly is to make exegesis relevant to spirituality and to the pastoral ministry of the Word. For a Christian the scientific study of the Bible and his spiritual growth should be closely related. This interaction as well as the power of communicating it should be fostered in the formation of all ministers of the Word so that in their teaching and personal lives they are able to manifest the relevance of the Bible to real life.

The Assembly therefore recommends that courses in the art of communication be included in the training of all priests and teachers so that their teaching of the Bible is seen to be relevant to the lives of those to whom they speak.

8. Ecumenism

Ecumenism has been the Lord's gift to Christians of the twentieth century as they seek through the grace of Christ to realize their unity in Him (John 17:23). The Plenary Assembly feels that the Federation can play a most vital role in promoting dialogue and co-operation with other Christian Churches and with the United Bible Societies.

The Assembly recommends that translation of the Bible, wherever possible, shall be interconfessional. Close co-operation should exist with the United Bible Societies in the production and distribution of the Scriptures, in arranging Bible Sundays, Bible Weeks, Bible Exhibitions, etc. Wherever possible biblical education, training and research should also be done on an interconfessional level.

9. Other Religions

The ever-widening membership and participation in the WCFBA of member countries of diverse religious heritages has enriched the Federation.

The peoples of Asia and Africa and other parts of the world have rich religious traditions enshrined in their sacred writings and sustained by a living tradition. In these areas the Gospel often appears to be identified with a particular culture foreign to the people's mentality and expression. This contradictory situation calls for a living encounter with these religions and with their sacred writings.

The Assembly recommends that the cultures and religious traditions of all peoples be respected both in the initial presentation of the Gospel and in allowing for the authentic development of their own form of Christian life and worship.

10. The "Unchurched"

The Assembly is deeply concerned about the growing numbers of men, women and young people who, while still thinking of themselves vaguely as Christians and showing Christian qualities in their lives, have given up any serious commitment to the Church. Among these are found many authentic seekers after truth, some of whom are turning for help to eastern ways of prayer and meditation and to other world religions for the experience of God they have so far failed to find in Christianity. The Assembly recognizes that these present us with a challenge to display in our lives the fruits of the Spirit and the witness of a living community nourished by the Word of God that they may come to see in Christ the One whom they seek, and thus contribute to the renewal of society.

11. Unbelief

The Assembly is conscious that Christians of all denominations are a minority in the world today. It recognizes that it has the responsibility to witness to the saving truth in Christ to those who do not believe and that this task is an urgent one, made more difficult because of the division among the Churches and by our failure to allow Christ to achieve his work of redemption in us.

The Assembly recommends that we Christians should all seek to present Christ with such insight and empathy that these people find in Him the meaning of their life and their orientation and hope for the future.

12. Justice and Human Rights

The biblical apostolate should emphasize the special challenge of the Scriptures to a world marked by division and oppression. It recommends that bishops' conferences continually set before their people the need to respect the human dignity of all people everywhere. The rights of individuals and minorities must be safeguarded; freedom of conscience must be guaranteed, and all should have equal treatment before the law.

13. International Co-operation

In a world characterized by the emergence of many nations together with ever growing international co-operation, the WCFBA wishes to bring its humble contribution by gathering Christians from all parts of the world in a common effort to spread the Good News of salvation. The Assembly therefore recommends that bishops' conferences and biblical associations develop close forms of cooperation with similar bodies in adjacent countries in promoting Bible work, that regional meetings be held wherever possible, and that special meetings be arranged in each region before the next Plenary Assembly to send recommendations to those planning it.

14. The Arts, Audio-Visual Language and Mass Media

Nowadays the arts, and in particular audio visual language, have become a new means of communication and even a current language in the mass media, and this on an international level. Christians would be guilty of concealing what has been revealed to all mankind if they were to neglect these modern ways of expression in which the Word of God can take form. The Assembly therefore recommends that projects concerning the use of audio-visual language and mass media be encouraged and that information about these be circulated by the Federation.

15. Illiteracy

For those not able to read the Bible the Assembly recommends the development of other means of communicating the Living Word of God through the media of song and dance and by audio-visual expression so that the biblical message is not restricted just to those able to read the printed word.

The Assembly also recommends that in those countries where there is a high rate of illiteracy the Churches take the initiative in training literacy teachers and in providing suitable materials for "new readers".

Part II: Specific Recommendations to Federation Members and to the Coordinating Center

While we make these recommendations to all who are involved in and responsible for the biblical apostolate at various levels, we members of the Federation single out the following tasks as our priorities of action for the next six years on national and international levels.

16. National Level

- Coordination of the biblical apostolate at the national level.
- Formation of biblical associations where they do not yet exist.
- Biblical training centers to be started.
- Interconfessional cooperation in all possible areas.
- Completion of translation and commentary projects.
- Creation of basic Christian communities and the promotion of their biblical formation.
- Encouraging Bible sharing groups.
- Celebration of Bible Sunday / Bible Week.
- Extensive use of audio-visual language and mass media in the biblical apostolate.
- Sending reports of various forms of the apostolate to the WCFBA office and to members within each region and continent.

17. Continental Level

- Regular exchange of information and experiences.
- Sharing of resource persons.
- Working towards the establishment of pastoral biblical institutes in Africa and in Asia.
- Organizing workshops for those engaged in the biblical apostolate at biannual or annual intervals.
- Co-operation with existing professional biblical associations.
- Continuance and expansion of the existing "Africa Service".

18. Regional Cooperation

- Cooperation between adjoining countries.
- Sharing of audio-visual materials.

19. Office of the Federation

- To help organize seminars/workshops on the biblical apostolate.
- To contact countries which have not become members.
- To see that the bulletin of the WCFBA reaches all those who are involved in biblical apostolate: seminaries, catechetical centers, etc.

20. Executive Committee

- To establish liaison with other bodies such as the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

Conclusion

The participants of the Plenary Assembly, after having studied and experienced biblical spirituality during their meeting in Malta, dare to make the preceding recommendations to the Church. Furthermore, the Federation looks to the future with a spirit of hope engendered during this Assembly and proposes to carry out its work in keeping with the exhortation of St. Paul: "So we preach Christ to everyone. With all possible wisdom we warn and teach them in order to bring each one into God's presence as a mature individual in union with Christ. To get this done (we) toil and struggle, using the mighty strength which Christ supplies and which is at work in (us)" (Colossians 1:28-29).