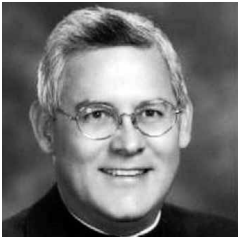




# From a Seedling to a Mature Plant

## The Post-Conciliar Path Taken by the Pastoral Biblical Movement in Latin America

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### 1. Precedents

Latin America's awakening from the biblical slumber of the years and centuries that preceded the Council can be considered as the breaking through of a seedling that has finally germinated. It has now grown into a plant and a tree, giving ample shade and producing much fruit.

Its precedent was the Catholic biblical movement at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>, spurred on by three great magisterium documents: Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920), and Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943).

This great stride forward by the Catholic Church cannot be seen apart from the daring scientific studies of the Bible carried out by exegetes and theologians of mainline Reformation Churches in Europe, the Christological current of their investigations, and their pastoral efforts, linked to the Gospels by their famous problem of the historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith. All of this led up to a Christological centralization of Christian life, which served, along with many other factors, as a platform for the event of the Council.

Thanks to this Christological vein and its influence on the framework of the Council, clear reference to the Word of God both in the Church and in pastoral appears with *Dei Verbum*. As John Paul II later commented, this was a "much neglected" area.

Cardinal Ratzinger, commenting 1967 upon *Dei Verbum* in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, highlighted the importance of the pre-conciliar biblical movements, understood as organizations that helped the faithful to have access to Sacred Scripture, through texts, guidelines for reading, conferences, congresses, biblical circles. This fact, which defines what biblical pastoral work is all about, was already a reality on the eve of Vatican II.

### 2. Inspiring post-conciliar trends

The determinant influence of *Dei Verbum* in the biblical apostolate of our continent has not been so much in terms of method as in its inspiring content. It has continued to advance and progressively configure the movement, rooting itself in these three principle ideas:

- The power of the Word of God, contained, almost totally but not exclusively in the Holy Scriptures. Here we find transmitted not only information, but a message filled with efficacy and power, and still more, a person, the Saviour: "the Word of God is living and effective" (Heb 4,12). Here lies the root for Church's vigor and its capacity to bring about the Kingdom, transforming people and their circumstances in a salvific way.
- The relationship between words and deeds in revelation: intrinsic, interactive and interdependent. This dynamic has sensitized the Church to events around it, in time and space; it has taught her to listen to voices in their cultural and historical context. It has opened her to interpreting the signs of the times and in this way to be in tune with humanity, offering answers of immanent and transcendent meaning. And most of all it has helped her to find the Lord's face, as Incarnate Word.
- The Bible as a book for the entire people of God: "Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful" (*Dei Verbum* 22). It belongs to the bishops, to the exegetes, to the theologians, but not only to these, but also, and frequently forgotten, to the faithful, to the laity, to the poor, to the Indians, to women, etc. Only the entire Church, hierarchically and ministerially organized, can bring about an ever fuller, deeper and defining understanding of the revealed content. The theological root of this right and possibility is seen when the people of God take on the character of bearers of this revelation: prophets (Nm 11, 29; Jl 3, 1.2).

### 3. Milestones along this path

The Council generated the last forty years of biblical awakening in Latin America. The rapid and dynamic application of this document was not equaled on any



other continent. For biblical pastoral work, *Dei Verbum* is regarded as the constitutive point of departure because it gave life, spirit, soul, fire, content and moorings to a pastoral movement still in the process of configuration.

Equally, one cannot underestimate the importance of *Evangeli Nuntiandi* as an explicit call to the central role of the Bible in evangelization, and the life-giving context that it gave to the Church, undoubtedly closer to the historic and salvific parameters inspired in Sacred Scripture. For the same reasons it is necessary to recognize the determining character of Medellín, Puebla and Santo Domingo. The pastoral and evangelizing character of these Latin American Episcopal Conferences have more far-reaching consequences as ecclesial events than for the biblical content of their documents.

a) **Medellín**, in 1968, gave a breath of fresh air to the Bible and its importance. By applying the Council teaching, it tried to understand the historic moment of the Latin American people, looking at their face with its features, especially its pain, but also its hope. This Conference affirmed the power of the Word, which calls together and promotes communities (6.9). For this reason, it recommended that experts be prepared in the area of Sacred Scripture (9.11), that priests be trained to hear and live the Word in their personal conversion, study and prayer (13.10), that the pastoral affirm this aspect of power (6.13, 14.14), that catechesis transmit it faithfully (8.6), that it permeate the popular devotions (6.12) and be the foundation for communities (6.13). This Second Conference produced an ecclesial process of great vitality, marked by its creativity, imagination, investigation, study, the chief role of the laity, and its sense of belonging to the Church, ...which oxygenated the growth of that biblical seedling in the evangelization process<sup>1</sup>.

b) **Puebla**, in 1979, related the Bible to evangelization<sup>2</sup>. In this time period the Latin American Church, through the biblical apostolate, had become familiar with references to the Word of God. It echoed an expression of Leo XII about Sacred Scripture as the soul of theology (*Providentissimus Deus* 58), declaring that Scripture is "the soul of evangelization" (372), and, echoing the Council, it is "the source for catechesis (981; 1001).

As a result, it recommended the diffusion of the Word of God through the biblical apostolate (1001). The document, contrary to a policy of their General Secretariat which mentions but two institutions, CELAM and the Holy See, now also makes reference to the Catholic Biblical Federation and its pastoral biblical program.

By articulating the pastoral options by which the Church would move forward under the guidance of

the Spirit, it insisted that its foundational attitudes would lie in listening to, growing in, celebrating and proclaiming the Word of God, and in living witness to it by denouncing situations of sin, hoping to bring about one's own conversion and to help build the new society (1305). It took a great stride forward of enormous proportions, in insisting not so much on Bible interpretation, but rather on interpreting life in light of the Bible.

c) **Santo Domingo**, in 1992, gave full breath to the Bible's Christology and expression. The Fourth General Conference of the Latin American bishops responded to the explicit desire of its participants for the formulation of the final document: "that it should be Christocentric in its content and biblical in its expression"<sup>3</sup>.

During the preparation period, they had explicitly consulted communities about the presence of the Scriptures in their life; this opened up a panorama which was already hinted at in the dialogues and conclusions. The working draft highlighted the following lights and shadows: the experience of encountering the Scriptures, the centrality of the Word for the Church, study, biblical reflections and prayers, love for the poor and simple in the Bible, translation into Indian languages, popular editions, availability of biblical methods and materials, biblical pastoral; but also, a lack of biblical formation, homilies not based on the Bible, tendency toward fundamentalism and literalism, Catholics becoming "Protestants" because of a pastoral that does not mention the Bible, and the lack of Bibles at a price affordable for the poor.

The conviction that the new evangelization will only "have renovating power in the degree that it is faithful to the Word of God" (27) was expressed within a biblical framework with the logo, "Jesus Christ, yesterday, today and always" (Heb 13:8), marked the document and the Church quote<sup>4</sup>.

Besides the logo, Santo Domingo introduced two biblical texts, both from Luke, whose placement made them paradigmatic: the Emmaus incident 24:13-35, which lent form and structure to the bishops' message to the Latin American and Caribbean peoples<sup>5</sup>; and the synagogue scene, 4:16-22, which supports the preferential option of the Latin American episcopate<sup>6</sup>.

These three biblical quotes have made possible the definition of the new evangelization in Latin America. It is characterized by three axes:

- reference to the Word of God,
- lead role of the laity, and
- promotion of Base Communities.



Pastoral experience continues to show us that, on the one hand, these two latter receive their vitality and sustenance from the former; and on the other, the new evangelization will be a reality and at the same time an explicit announcement of Jesus Christ only to the degree in which it is anchored in the Word of God, is open to the hour of the laity (the poor) and guarantees the future of the Church by the formation of communities.



Scripture references inspire all of Santo Domingo opening the Christological pole to the elements of the tripod upon which John Paul II had set up Puebla. The biblical background of Santo Domingo is also measured in the enlightenment, the challenges and the pastoral guidelines, totally inspired in the revealed data, although they do not appear either implicitly or explicitly as biblical citations. Suffice it to mention that which is related to the poor, women, youth, ecology, family and human rights.

The Fifth Conference, programmed for 2007, will take as its direction a definitely biblical thematic: discipleship. One foresees a touchstone for the relationship between Bible and Church in Latin America. If the bishops orient their reflection around the theme of discipleship in Luke, they will take a more definite direction toward the centrality of the Bible in the Church and the biblical orientation of all pastoral. How? By taking as the point of departure his typically kerygmatic presentation of the Saviour, one should insist, as Luke does, in the reaction of the believer, that is to say, in discipleship, through the three fundamental postures of faith, of conversion and of baptism; and the five attitudes of following Jesus, personal witness, spirituality, prayer, poverty, community life<sup>7</sup>.

d) Comparable to the transcendence achieved by *Dei Verbum* in Latin America is the document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church", promulgated by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1993, save one difference: while the conciliar Constitution unleashed the biblical movement in Latin America, IBC confirmed, with a balancing degree of modera-

tion, some intuitions about the path of the Latin American biblical movement. In this regard it will suffice to mention the following reflections<sup>8</sup>:

- **Interdisciplinary approach** in the interpretation of the Bible, relying on the help of sociology, anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis.
- The value of the **reader's context**, which complements an "objectifying" interpretation, centered on what the text said situated in its original context. Related to contextualization, the document offers two valuable reflections about a liberationist and a feminist reading.
- **A liberationist reading**: looking at liberation theology, recognized as a "complex phenomenon, which cannot be arbitrarily simplified," it regards positively the attention given to the economic, social and political circumstances in Latin America and the two great ecclesial events, the Council and Medellín, and their response to people's needs and their attention to the premise of God's presence in history to save us and God's love for the poor.
- **A feminist reading**: after noting "it gives great satisfaction to see the number of women exegetes who are contributing to the interpretation of the Scriptures, offering new and insightful points of view, bringing forth aspects which had long been forgotten" (III,B.3), it recognizes that the God of the Bible is fatherly, but also maternal in love and tenderness.
- **A fundamentalist reading** was totally rejected, because it has as a presupposition the rejection of the historical character of biblical revelation, making it incapable of taking seriously the truth of the Incarnation. Such a reading gives divine authority to a religious-political-social ideology which to a great degree is contrary to the Gospel; for its numerous deviations about inspiration and inerrancy, being innocent of Gospel and Church tradition, offering simplistic solutions to complex problems, and promising false and illusory security.
- **The Inculturation of the biblical message**: this is about the effort that attempts to root the message for all places and in all soils, conscious of the fact that there is really not a total diversity between the message and culture and that every culture is a carrier, in its own way, of the universal values that come from God (Cfr. IV,B).
- **The method of lectio divina**: should be encouraged being that it is an ancient practice of the Church that sowed much fruit for holiness and led to a better knowledge of God, of his plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. It recognizes that there are numerous attempts to revitalize this method and its contribution to a communal Bible reading.



- *The ecumenical movement*: of particular importance because the majority of the problems faced are related to the interpretation of biblical texts. It takes into account that dialogue has demonstrated that a variety of interpretations, all enriching to Church life, are possible.

#### 4. The steps on the path

We can gauge these steps, although not exclusively, in terms of what we called the “pastoral biblical gatherings.” These gatherings were points both of arrival and departure, fraternal gatherings, to share faith and communion, to examine the horizon. They were celebrated on the national, zonal<sup>9</sup> or continental level, the latter being sponsored by the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF/FEBIC), CELAM, and the local episcopal conferences of the places where we met. Intertwined with these and of more notable influence was the Fourth Plenary Assembly of CBF/FEBIC held in Bogotá.

I, Bogotá, Colombia, 1985

II, Mendes, Brasil, 1989

*IV Plenary Assembly of CBF/FEBIC, Bogotá, Colombia, 1990*

III, Quito, Ecuador, 1993

IV, Los Teques, Venezuela, 1999.

To these five continental gatherings, we add, because of their importance, two zonal gatherings, one in the Southern Zone and the other, of the Bolivarian countries, and in the interval in between, we had a gathering from all of America of the experts in pastoral biblical work:

VI (Cono Sur), Santiago, Chile, 2001

Meeting of experts, Quito, Ecuador, 2002

II (Países Bolivarianos), Quito, Ecuador, 2004.

These moments, along with many other facts and factors<sup>10</sup>, form a three-stage frame for this small history:

- a) Between 1965 and 1985: contact with the biblical text.
- b) Between 1985 and 1993: biblical prophecy and formation for ministry.
- c) Between 1993 and 2005: centrality of the Bible in the Church and formation for Bible reading.

These steps have given us a rich fabric. They were brought about through pastoral biblical planning, the creation of commissions and the foundation of centers and groups. Important also was the lead role of the laity, religious and numerous other pastoral agents; the relationship between episcopal conferences and promoters, the centers and biblical groups, the

methods for reading the Bible, especially the use of *lectio divina* over the last few years, the use of social communication media, interest in ecological problems, the wide distribution of “economical and big print” Bibles. But the shadows were also present: biblical pastoral ministry considered as the appendix to catechetics, clericalism in both priests and laity, fundamentalist interpretations<sup>11</sup>. The “life context” path of the Bible in Latin America has been undeniably the Ecclesial Base Communities: these have permitted the Word of God “to nest again,” or they have grown out of this reference. These have become the thread that links through shared experience, geographically separate churches, and have contributed to spreading to other continents “the Latin American reading of the Bible.”

#### 5. An interpretive synthesis of this path

Let us take a look now at the global vision coming from Latin American panorama, honing in on a few key points:

##### 5.1. Tendencias

- There is a hunger for the Word of God (cf. Am 8:11), which has spread itself across the entire geography of Latin America, particularly in more marginated areas, generating hope and a fruitful encounter with the text.
- Translations of the biblical text, a worldwide phenomenon which has multiplied like never before in the history of the Church, defined in Latin America in three different rhythms:
  - liturgical, through the use of the vernacular language in liturgical celebrations (*Sacrosantum Concilium* 54);
  - interconfessional, through the expressed suggestion of the Council (*Dei Verbum* 22) and the “*Guiding Principles / Guidelines for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible*” (1968/1987), conjointly published by the Holy See and the United Bible Societies and accepted by CELAM;
  - missionary, through the ability of the Bible to enter into the most impregnable spheres.
- The interpretation of the text in the context of everyday life, through emphasis on a hermeneutical understanding before an exegetical understanding, identifying “faithfulness to the message” with “faithfulness to humanity,” supported by accentuating concepts such as “theology in its context” and the “inculturation” of the Gospel<sup>12</sup>.

##### 5.2. Difficulties

- Continued conditions of poverty and illiteracy that marginate and precondition millions of brothers and



sisters, directly contrary to their dignity and their participation in the creative work that the very Scriptures proclaim.

- The divorce between exegesis and the interecclesial community, between exegesis and dogma, between exegesis and pastoral. Specialists who work from books, desks and classrooms, but who fear meeting the pastoral, for fear of losing the scientific rigor of their studies. This difficulty makes for a Bible presentation devoid of any pastoral, ecclesial, catechetical meaning; the Bible becomes a catechism of dead truths, lived out by no one, creating vacuous homilies, filled with the celebrant's words, but bereft of the Word, and in structured pastorals that do not promote Church, community or evangelization.
- Fundamentalism as found both among sects and Catholics, that makes for a reading that foments passivity, legitimizes situations which are against life, justifies invasions or subhuman dominations, legitimizes practices and doctrines which are anti-gospel.

### 5.3. Results

- A biblical anthropology characterized by the integrity of the human person, the unity of body and soul, matter and spirit, intelligence and emotion, within a historical context and the web of "interpersonal" relationships with God, our brothers and sisters and nature.
- An ecclesiology characterized by communion and participation, ministries, plurality and unity, all of which are seen as inspired in the saving community of the Trinity.
- A moral theology characterized by social and communal referents, conscious of the individual's responsibility; a theology which affects structures and laws and their relation to human dignity.
- A "Latin American reading" of the Bible, which is wide-ranging and inspiring, rather than exclusive: it is already spreading to other continents. It gallops forward, paced by these two convictions: people are the subjects of this reading, and the Bible is the book of life! This has produced three characteristics:
  - its relation to life: contextual;
  - its relation to people: communal;
  - its own hermeneutics: current.

### 5.4. Needs

- For the translation of the Bible text into the many spoken languages on the continent in which it is still not known, and for an *en masse* literacy program for large sectors of the population.
- For a scientific and academic preparation for the pastoral agents, spiritual and pastoral formation for

the exegetes, biblical formation for priests, and spiritual formation for laity to insure a faithful reading of the Bible (*Dei Verbum* 23), and to avoid the problem of fundamentalism. This implies a pedagogy that provides easy access not only to the text, but also to the message, overcoming, through hermeneutics, the distance between exegesis and pastoral, and facilitating the intercultural and interdisciplinary reading of the text.

- For integration and dialogue between the magisterium and the people of God, between professors of Sacred Scripture and Bible group animators, appreciating both the "sensus fidei" and the "sensus fidelium," and a reading of the Bible understood as "locus theologicus".
- At this point it is more urgent than ever to petition the Holy See to convoke a Synod about the place of "Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church."



### 5.5. Challenges

- The relation between word and communication, between interiorization and technology. Confronted by a technology of unprecedented progress, but also filled with risk of manipulation, it becomes necessary to redeem that interior space where the Word can be heard. We are talking about that depth of compelling communication in which we share not only ideas, but also experiences, visions of being and of life, and the convictions of our faith.
- Relations between plurality and unity. Faced with the variety of biblical material and the objective value of the differing methods to engage it, as well as anthropological and spiritual needs, the need arises to guarantee dynamics that avoid misstatements or divisive interpretations, and which safeguard the overall unity by reference to Jesus Christ and by the affirmation of biblical values.
- Relations between Catholicism and ecumenism. By taking as a starting point non-confessional material, but material that is original and co-extensive through



unity in a common commitment to the dignity of the human person and witness in service to the world.

- Relation between the local and the universal: done in such a way that it affirms the diversity in the contextual surrounding, without introducing divisions, thanks to the contribution of what is truly human, bringing about the truth of God's Word: "the treasure and wealth of the nations will be brought there..." for the glory of God (Rev 21:24,26).
- Fulfilment of three complementary but non-substitutable areas:
  - wide publication of the Bible text through translations, production and distribution;
  - facilitate contact with the Bible for the laity along with resources for a proper reading (commentaries);
  - centrality of the life of the Church, concretely in its pastoral dimension, so that she might truly be "the spouse of the Word" (*Dei Verbum* 23).
- The formation of priests<sup>13</sup>.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Motta Lima da Cruz Therezinha / Inês Broshuis, O apostolado bíblico nos documentos de Medellín, Puebla e os preparatórios de Santo Domingo, seguindo as recomendações da *Dei Verbum*, in: *La Palabra Hoy* 63 (1992) 3-8.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. Mora R. Jaime Alfonso, La pastoral bíblica: núcleo de la nueva evangelización y fuente vitalizadora de la pastoral de conjunto, Cúcuta 1994; La Biblia modelo de acción para la nueva evangelización, Cúcuta 1994.
- <sup>3</sup> De Gasperin G. Mario, La Palabra de Dios en el documento de Santo Domingo, in: *La Palabra Hoy* 67 (1993) 5-6: 6.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. Naranjo S. Gabriel, Estudio exegético del texto bíblico: "Jesucristo ayer, hoy y siempre" (Hb 13, 8), in: Grandes temas de Santo Domingo; reflexiones desde el CELAM, Bogotá (CELAM) 1994, 89-103.
- <sup>5</sup> This is not the first time that the biblical text has been considered an apt instrument to express the content and the implications of the new evangelization. It was the reference point in the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the CBF/FEBIC held in Bogotá, June, 27 to July 6, 1990.
- <sup>6</sup> In spite of the concluding prayer, the bishops affirm right there that the "only option is Christ" and in the synthesis, the poor are the only element that appears as a "preferential option."
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Fitzmyer Joseph A., *El Evangelio según San Lucas*, Madrid 1986, I.396-435.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Galindo Florencio, Visión global del documento de la Pontificia Comisión Bíblica "La Interpretación de la Biblia en la Iglesia", in: *La Palabra Hoy* 80/81 (1996) 89-99.

<sup>9</sup> Up to the present, four have taken place in Mexico, one in the Caribbean, five in Central America, two in the Bolivarian Countries, and six in the Southern Zone.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Weisensee Jesús Antonio, La FEBIC-LAC a los 35 años de la FEBIC, en sus 30 años de existencia, in: *La Palabra Hoy* 112 (2004) 5-30.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. III Encuentro de Pastoral Bíblica de América Latina y el Caribe, especialmente "Nuestro Caminar Bíblico desde la Asamblea de Bogotá" y "Declaración Final", in: *La Palabra Hoy* 71/72 (1994) 6-25; 119-130.

<sup>12</sup> It is worthwhile to point out that this tendency has had great success in Brazil, with the support and the enthusiasm of its exegetes and communities. There they talk about "the reading of Holy Scripture in light of life, and of life in light of Holy Scripture."

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Naranjo Gabriel, La formación para la lectura de las Escrituras y para el ministerio de la Palabra, in: *La Palabra Hoy* 83 (1997) 10-27.