



## “Ignorance of Scripture Is Ignorance of Christ” – Know, Love, Live and Proclaim the Word of God Pastoral Letter for the Year of the Bible in Africa

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*Besides being the worldwide “Year of the Eucharist”, the year 2005 is also being celebrated on the African continent and the surrounding Islands as the “Year of the Bible”. For this reason the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) has published a pastoral letter from which we are quoting some excerpts. In this letter, also the significance of Dei Verbum and the implementation of the conciliar text in Africa and Madagascar in the last forty years is discussed.*

### Introduction

1. Right from the beginning of the Church there has always been a hunger “for hearing the Word of the Lord” (Amos 8:11). Today, like in times past, more and more Christians are reading, listening to, reflecting on, sharing and studying the Word of God. This is a sign of a deep search for God, and the Bible is one of the places to learn about Him and His plan for humankind. The yearning for redemption and a world of peace, unity and justice, etc will be greatly enhanced by the knowledge of God and an encounter with Him in, and through the Bible. Ignorance of Scripture is, therefore, ignorance of God’s plan of salvation, accomplished by Christ, His Incarnate Word.

I write to encourage you to continue deepening your knowledge of God through diligent and daily reading of, and reflection on God’s self revelation in Holy Scripture. This is the primary goal of the Year of the Bible in Africa and the surrounding Islands, which was declared by SECAM in February 2004 to be observed from January to December 2005 at all levels of the Family of God on the continent and the Islands (i.e. parish, diocesan, national and continental).

### Sacred Scripture in the life of the Church

2. The Church...“has always venerated divine Scriptures as she venerated the body of the Lord” (*Dei Verbum* 21). Right from earliest times, as the canon of the Bible started, one may talk about two complementary attitudes of the Church to the Bible.

On the one hand, it was recognized as an essential reference point for the life of the Church, whether officially in the liturgy and the dogmatic documents or the private writings of the Fathers of the Church and theologians. Many of the Fathers wrote mainly commentaries on Scripture. On the other hand, the Bible was handled as a book of the Church; it was, and is still to be read within the Church, which fixed its limits and its authentic interpretation.

(...)

10. This year, 2005, marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Dei Verbum* and the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Ecclesia in Africa*. These two anniversaries, coupled with the Year of the Eucharist, afford us a unique opportunity to reflect, firstly, on the impact of Sacred Scripture on our lives as Christians in Africa and the surrounding Islands, and secondly on ways to make the Word of God accessible to Christians on the continent and the Islands in languages they can understand.

### The situation in contemporary Africa and the surrounding Islands

11. Contemporary Africa is plagued by wars, ethnic conflicts, corruption, injustice and other vices; even in countries with predominantly Christian citizens. You will recall the appeal we made to you in 2001 for peace and reconciliation through a pastoral letter on “Christ our Peace”. It must be admitted that lots of positive efforts have been made, since then, by several individuals and groups in different parts of the continent towards peace and reconciliation, and we are deeply grateful to all those involved in this positive development. Nevertheless, much still needs to be done to end the clashes everywhere on the continent. We are optimistic and convinced that you will not relent in your efforts towards har-



monious co-existence, so that people of different cultural backgrounds and social status in Africa and the surrounding Islands will live together in peace, unity and mutual respect.

Let us always bear in mind that the current intra- or inter-ethnic wars and conflicts in Africa contradict our cherished values of extended family, communality, solidarity and corporate personality.

It is our conviction that the recurrent problems in Africa and the surrounding Islands cannot be solved merely by a change of one government or political party to the other but by a genuine change of heart on the part of the leaders and the citizenry.

12. Another worrying situation in contemporary Africa and the surrounding Islands is that religion has become a source of constant friction, bitter rivalry, conflicts, violence and (in some cases), bloody clashes. This widespread phenomenon arises from a fundamentalist approach to religion.

In some Christian circles, fundamentalists maintain that the Bible is inspired by God and thus each word in the Scriptures is without error; so they take every word in the Bible at its face value and reject any attempt to apply human skills and scholarship to analyze a biblical text. This leads to the literary interpretation of the Bible.

13. Christian fundamentalists also tend to adopt a magical view of the Bible i.e. an attempt to make God conform to human problems by the performance of certain ecstatic acts or incantations. Christians should be aware that the biblical text is not magic; neither is it an answer to every need nor a source of infallible guidance or knowledge. Rather it is a divine gift that is interpersonal in nature and which can never be turned into a thing. In the Bible we listen to God not to ourselves.

As it was pointed out by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, the fundamentalist approach to the Bible may be "attractive to people who look to the Bible for ready answers to the problems of life". But it is dangerous because "it can deceive the people, offering them interpretations that are pious but illusory, instead of telling them that the Bible does not necessarily contain an immediate answer to every problem. Without saying as much in so many words, fundamentalism actually invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide, for it unwillingly confuses the divine substance of the biblical message with what is in fact its human limitation." (*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* I.F)

14. The fundamentalist trend, notwithstanding, we encourage readers of the Bible to seek an encounter with God through the Scriptures while relying on the power of His Word to create the right changes in both

individuals and communities in Africa and the surrounding Islands (cf. 2 Tim 3:1-17), no matter how long it may take. We are also certain that the correct interpretation of the Bible as well as interreligious dialogue shall be of tremendous assistance in solving the problem.

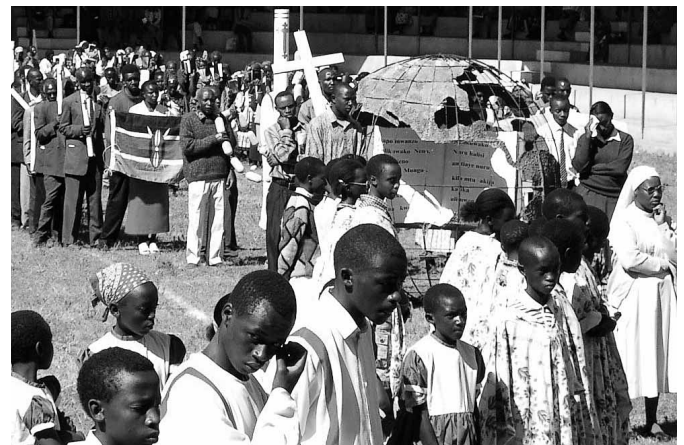
15. BICAM, in collaboration with other animators of biblical apostolate, must continue to provide reading/study guides, short commentaries etc. to enhance a deeper understanding of the biblical message and to avoid its fundamentalist interpretation.

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### Witnessing to Christ, the incarnate Word

24. The daily reading and sharing of God's Word must pave the way for a profound personal conviction enabling all of us to bear witness to it in daily life. We should not just be contemplators on, or listeners to, or readers of the Bible but, more importantly, imitators of Christ and actors on the Word of God.

(...)



25. Special attention must be paid during this period to the most challenging and difficult parts of the Bible which make us rather uncomfortable. Here we are talking about the command of Christ to love one's enemies (Matt 5:44; Lk 6:27-28), to forgive those who offend us (Matt 5:23-24; 6:14-15; 18:21-22; Mk 11:25) or to carry one's cross daily and follow after him (Lk 9:23) etc. We are aware that many of you are experiencing all kinds of hardships but, as said above, have courage and do not give up hope, the Lord shares your pain and accompanies you in your suffering.

### The incarnation of the Word of God in African life and culture

26. The growing interest in the Bible among Christians on the continent and its Islands calls for intensified



efforts towards the incarnation of the Bible message in African life and culture. The translation of the Bible in indigenous languages is a major step in the direction of achieving this task. For this reason, the Catholic Church in Africa and the surrounding Islands shall continue to work together with United Bible Societies (UBS) in Africa, other individuals and groups on projects that enhance a deeper understanding of God's Word.

We appeal to all biblical scholars in Africa and the surrounding Islands to contribute to translation projects in their respective languages, and to embark on an African Commentary on the Bible, all aimed at making the Word of God known, loved, preserved in the hearts of all Christians on the continent and the Islands.

27. Another step required for the incarnation of the Bible message is to communicate the Word of God in indigenous thought patterns, categories and images. A commendable attempt has been made in this direction by the introductory remarks and notes in the African Bible.

28. BICAM shall intensify its efforts towards the training of animators of biblical apostolate who will become facilitators of Bible study/sharing groups in their respective places in indigenous languages; this will assist in the communication of the Bible in categories readily understandable to the people.

29. We call upon all those involved in the promotion of God's Word on the continent and the Islands (ecclesiastical institutions, departments of biblical studies or biblical scholars within or outside academic communities, other individuals and organizations) to liaise and collaborate with BICAM in its task of facilitating for the Christians in Africa and the surrounding Islands access to the treasures of the Bible.



### Year of the Bible and Year of the Eucharist

30. The Year of the Bible in Africa and the surrounding Islands coincides with the Year of the Eucharist, and the

question may be asked whether the call of the Holy Father does not supercede that of SECAM. Of course it does, but both the Year of the Bible and the Year of the Eucharist can be co-jointly celebrated, and indeed, do not contradict but rather complement each other. While the focus of the former is on the Word of God, that of the latter is on the Incarnate Word (Jn 1:14) received in the Eucharist.

It is common knowledge that "at every Mass, the liturgy of the Word of God precedes the liturgy of the Eucharist in the unity of two tables, the table of the Word and the table of the Bread" (Mane Nobiscum Domine 12). Accordingly, the focus of both celebrations is on the person of Christ who is not only the full revelation of God but the sole source through which the Church draws nourishment.

Moreover, the Holy Father has made it clear in his pastoral letter, Mane Nobiscum Domine that the Year of the Eucharist "will in no way interfere with the pastoral programmes of the individual Churches. Rather, it can shed light upon those programmes, anchoring them, so to speak, in the mystery which nourishes the spiritual life of the faithful and the initiatives of each local Church. I am not asking the individual Churches to alter their pastoral programmes, but to emphasize the Eucharistic dimension which is part of the whole Christian life" (Mane Nobiscum Domine 5).

(...)

### Conclusion

41. From all this, it can be summed up that the goal of the Year of the Bible is to encourage a deeper knowledge of God's Word and His love for humankind. Like the prophet Isaiah, we believe that when Christians "will be full of knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea, no hurt, no harm will be done" (Is 11:9) to one another and no hateful feelings, wars, conflicts, divisions, corruption and other vices will be experienced in Africa and the surrounding Islands any more.

We therefore encourage Christians everywhere on the continent and the Islands to intensify their interest in the daily reading and sharing of the Word of God, leading to its deeper understanding and to a spirituality based on the Bible. The more we read or study and share the Scriptures with other people, the more we become aware of God's love for each one and the implications of Christ's death on the Cross for us.

(...)

43. Those among you who experience starvation and hunger should not lose hope; continue to trust in the



Lord who has said, "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full" (Jn 10:10). Even when He delays in answering your prayers for daily bodily nourishment, do not forget that He fulfils our deepest longings and will never abandon His own which you all are.



even the most advanced ones could not replace the gentle action of the Spirit. Even the most thorough preparation of the evangelizer has no effect without the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit the most convincing dialectic has no power over the human heart" (Ecclesia in Africa 77).

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54. In the dual celebration of the Year of the Bible and that of the Eucharist at parish, diocesan, national and continental levels, we recommend that the activities of the last day include a Eucharistic procession, interspersed with the reading of selected biblical texts at designated stop/stations, culminating with Mass and a homily based on the Bible and the Eucharist.

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44. Similarly, those who have lost hope in a healthy living should also remember that Jesus makes our broken lives whole and makes it possible for us to share in God's life as well. He has come to make us fully human and free, more truly what we are made to be, so too he has called us to a new life, so that we might share divine life with him. His sacrifice on the Cross has freed humankind from the slavery of sin; it is thus the decisive and central event of human salvation.

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46. To all who are menaced on all sides by outbreaks of hatred and violence, we join the Holy Father, John Paul II, in sending you a message of "the hope of life rooted in the Paschal Mystery. It was precisely when, humanly speaking, Jesus' life seemed doomed to failure that he instituted the Eucharist, the pledge of eternal glory, in order to perpetuate in time and space his victory over death. That is why at a time when the African continent is in some ways in a critical situation the special Assembly for Africa wished to be the Synod of Resurrection, the Synod of Hope: Christ our Hope is alive; we shall live. Africa is not destined for death, but for life" (Ecclesia in Africa 57).

(...)

50. Let us remind all those called to proclaim the Gospel that, as the Holy Father, John Paul II, says, they should "seek to act with total docility to the Spirit, who today, just as at the beginning of the Church, acts in every evangelizer who allows himself to be possessed and led by him. Techniques of evangelization are good, but