
CBF Newsletter

*Catholic Biblical Federation
December 2003*



Dear Friends of the Catholic Biblical Federation,

I habitually use this forum to tell you about impressions and experiences I have been able to collect in the course of the many trips I take. Often these are heartening experiences. To see how Christian life is flowering and the many ways in which the Bible becomes nourishment for the lives of human beings is an inspiration for one's own faith, provides incentive for the work we do. Sometimes, however, one encounters difficulties and among these belongs religious fundamentalism.

In November 2003 my work brought me to Africa, India and Sri Lanka. In the course of the exchange of experiences that took place in Nairobi between representatives of fifteen African countries one particular topic kept coming up: the danger posed by religious fundamentalism. Currents of Christian and Islamic fundamentalism are pursuing their mission aggressively in many countries of Africa. Shortly after the meeting in Africa, our South Asian subregion in Chennai, India, held a workshop on the theme of religious fundamentalism. Central to the discussion were the challenges this poses to biblical pastoral ministry. Finally, in Sri Lanka, which is where I am writing you from, members of non-Buddhist religions encounter many difficulties. State-sponsored Buddhism makes a de facto claim of exclusivity. The situation is aggravated by the influence of fundamentalist Evangelical groups.

Fundamentalist tendencies exist in all religions, and it is not our intention here to point the finger at others. We Christians have every reason to look in the mirror. Religious fundamentalism of any color tolerates no alternative opinion, knows no diversity, disregards free will. Fundamentalism is as intolerant of questions and doubts as it is of genuine dialogue. Because it offers simplistic solutions it is ultimately unable to respond to the most important questions of life. Fundamentalism has no place for the small and the weak.

These days we Christians are once again preparing for Christmas. Christmas – a counter-program to any form of fundamentalism. At Christmas we encounter God in a manger, in a child, in our neighbor. Christmas shows us at a single glance the God whom people of different times and cultures in the Bible attest: no distant idol we must pay homage to, no heavenly figure that must be pacified, but a God of dialogue, a God who responds, a God who loves human beings. And loves them so much that He himself becomes man. The human and weak, the doubt, the question, diversity and the unique individual, death and life: all of this is taken up in God, in his logic of love. This is the simple – but not simplistic – answer that Christmas, that the witness of the Bible, that our Christian faith gives to the fundamental questions of life. A true contrast-program to any form of fundamentalism!

As the Catholic Biblical Federation – and I explicitly include you as an important member of the CBF family – we bear a special responsibility to insure that the Bible is not misused as a tool for the support of fundamentalist ideas, but that it bears witness from the God who comes to us in the manger of Bethlehem, and that it thus becomes a source of life, and God's word for us. This responsibility reaches beyond the borders of our Church.

Dear friends of the Catholic Biblical Federation, at the end of the year I feel the need to thank you all for your interest, for your prayers and for your support. Knowing that we have this support has helped us to overcome many difficulties.

We would be grateful to you also for staying in touch with us in the coming year.

With best wishes for a blessed Christmas season,



*Alexander M. Schweitzer
General Secretary*



Translating the Bible into Life's Context

Different conditions rule in the different countries around the globe and people all over live in different political and social conditions. The Bible, however, is the joining link between Christians everywhere. Bringing the biblical message to bear in as many lives and circumstances as possible – and thereby improving these circumstances – that is the task to which the members of the Federation, each in their own way, have committed themselves. It must not be forgotten here that the proclamation of the biblical message must be regarded as inseparable from the practice, for biblical pastoral ministry means more than “merely” the translation of the text into various individual languages. The Bible should be of aid to its readers in helping them come to grips with and combat their daily adversities and anxieties just as much as accompanying them in their moments of joy and happiness. In other words: translating the message of the Gospels into the language of daily life – and not only into official languages – is the prime goal of biblical pastoral ministry. Please find below some information on several projects and various activities from 2003 showing you how many of our members are endeavoured to fulfil this task.

Biblical Pastoral Workshop in Mozambique

Mozambique is slowly emerging from its many years of suffering. The Christians of this country need much support in their efforts

to make the Word of God the centre of their lives. The first important step towards this goal was a Biblical Pastoral Workshop which took place in June in Maputo.

There are quite a few obstacles that were going to hinder the efforts in promoting the biblical pastoral ministry, such as the shortage of personnel and material resources, the great distances that complicate work in biblical pastoral ministry and the lack of coordinators at the diocesan and national levels. As a result of the work groups and plenary discussions the participants submitted a Final Statement and developed a plan for concrete measures to be taken to improve the present situation. During the meeting it became quite perceptible that the Bible as well as the biblical pastoral ministry picks up speed steadily, not least thanks to a growing number of motivated Christians.



New Bible Centre Mumbai Inaugurated

Finally, the Bible Centre of the Catholic Bible Institute Mumbai found a new home. On the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25th, 2003, the Centre was inaugurated by Cardinal Ivan Dias, Archbishop of Bombay, by celebrating Mass in its new premises in Bandra, Mumbai. This Institute was started in 1979 in a Jesuit House at Versova, but lost its premises in 1985. Since then, it eked out a provisional existence by renting rooms in various retreat houses. The Centre contains an air-conditioned classroom for 25 students, a chapel, a library and a computer room, and will be used for some of the programmes offered by the Institute.



Besides evening sessions, one-day seminars, weekend retreats for lectors, and a once-a-month certificate course (lasting 10 months) on biblical themes, the main programmes offered are a two-month residential course covering every book of the Bible. The courses are mainly in English but also in Konkani and Hindi. The latest residential course drew 16 students. In August well-earned certificates were distributed to the participants for successful completion of the course. Six hours of class, six days a week for eight weeks and final exams make the certificate "well-earned" indeed!

Basic Bible Seminar in Bandung, Indonesia

The offer of a Basic Bible Seminar at the St. Borromeo Hospital in Bandung, Indonesia, has encountered an overwhelming reception. The impulse came from a participant in a Bible Course regularly offered by the AMBC (Angela Merici Biblical Center) and within a very short time over a hundred and fifty doctors, nurses and other hospital workers had signed up to take the course. What united them all was the desire to acquire greater familiarity with the Bible and to

receive answers to their open spiritual questions. Because of the unexpectedly high number of applicants the decision was made to offer the seminar twice. But the three days of common learning, prayer, and mutual exchanges were only the beginning. Since that time many of the participants have been meeting in regularly scheduled smaller Bible circles to listen together to the Word of God and allow it to have an affect on their lives, not least as lived in their ordinary workday.

First National Bible Congress in Venezuela

The first National Bible Congress of Venezuela took place in Caracas in March, 2003, the immediate reason being the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the Bible School of SOBICAIN, the international Catholic Bible Society of Venezuela. The theme of the meeting was "Our Task as God's Children for a Biblical Pastoral Ministry which renews Christian Life". The 72 participants worked at themes important for the Church of Venezuela. Among other things they reflected on the analysis of the present religious and social situation of the country as well as on questions dealing with the native Afro-American and Creole cultures and religions, intercultural exchange, feministic theology and the role of women in Venezuela. The question of the meaning of the Bible and different methods of Bible-reading were also dealt with.

Fifth Biblical Pastoral Meeting for Central America in Costa Rica

The 5th Biblical Pastoral Workshop for Central America took place in February, 2003 in La Garita, Alajuela, Costa Rica. The workshop was entitled "The Word of God – Source of Peace and Solidarity in Central America".



A main introductory lecture was given by Fr. Pablo Richard. With the help of the two beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount on the clean of heart and the peacemakers (Matt 5:8ff), he spoke on the theme "One who listens to the Word, creates peace and solidarity". The meeting offered rich opportunity for mutual exchanges regarding experiences in the work of biblical pastoral ministry in the different countries of Central America. A concluding clarification summarizes the most important results of the meeting and at the same time discusses some prospects for future work.

Meeting of the United Chinese Catholic Biblical Association

Participants at the Seventh Meeting of the United Chinese Catholic Biblical Association (UCCBA), held from September 6 to 12, 2003 in Kuching, eastern Malaysia, resolved to promote the culture of life, serving as living witnesses of the Gospel. Under the theme of "Word and Eucharist – Source of Life", the meeting gathered 71 delegates from Hong Kong, China, Macau, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, USA and Australia.



Archbishop Ha, a biblical scholar, highlighted in his keynote address that the Word of God is the source of life because it has the power to bring into reality that which it expresses. We see this life giving power in creation, in history and in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh. The truth of Jesus Christ as the Word of God made flesh is made explicit in the prologue of the Gospel of John (Jn 1:1-18).

Delegates from the respective area groups drew up plans to promote biblical pastoral ministry, committing to make the Bible more firmly a central feature in building Christian

communities: Hong Kong is developing the ministry in cyberspace; Singapore plans to organize a Bible Sunday and prepare activities in relation to next year's 48th International Eucharistic Congress; Brunei decided to form a Bible-reading group and hold a workshop. Brunei and the United States were attending a UCCBA meeting for the first time; Father Paul Pei, who attended from Liaoning diocese in northeastern China, plans to open a Bible Center to share resources and experiences. Although China is not yet a UCCBA member, it is hoped that Fr. Paul's association could "sow the seed" in China and help implement workable plans to spread the Word of Life there.

70 Years of the Katholisches Bibelwerk in Germany

The Katholisches Bibelwerk (Catholic Biblical Association) celebrated its 70th anniversary with a Bible Festival in Regensburg. The Bible itself was, of course, the focal point of the celebrations. The various contributions for that day emphasized the fact that the Bible is not Holy Scripture only for Christians. The Tübingen professor, Karl-Josef Kuschel, spoke on the biblical tradition of Abraham, which could form a common basis for dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims. After many years of working with the Book of books, the Director of the Bibelwerk, Dr. Franz-Josef Ort Kemper, remarked that for him the Bible is still "as exciting today as ever".

It was a small circle of lay persons and priests who founded the Katholisches Bibelwerk in 1933. During the Third Reich it was forbidden. The work, however, was carried on in secret. In the meantime the Bibelwerk has become such an important part of the life of the Church in Germany that its absence would be unthinkable. The Bibelwerk is attempting to train as many (full-time and part-time) collaborators in the parishes for Bible work as possible. Numerous courses on methods of Bible work have taken place in the last years and they continue to enjoy great demand. The collaborators of the Katholisches Bibelwerk are always on the road in the German dioceses to introduce people to the message of the Bible and to help them enjoy reading it. From a small beginning 70 years ago a flourishing Bible movement has come into existence.