

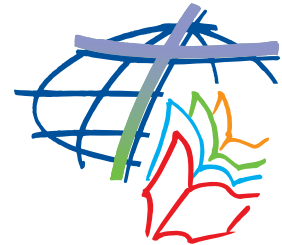
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# CBF Newsletter

Catholic Biblical Federation

December 2005

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*Dear Friends of the Catholic Biblical Federation,*

*“The assiduous reading of Holy Scripture accompanied by prayer realizes that intimate colloquy where, by reading, we listen to God who speaks and, in prayer, we respond to Him with confident openness of heart (cf. DV 25). This practice, if effectively promoted, will bring to the Church – of this I am convinced – a new spiritual spring.” These are the words of Pope Benedict XVI, speaking of lectio divina, in the address he gave to the participants at the congress “Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church” last September.*



*For the assiduous reading of God's Word we have a wonderful model in our faith tradition: Mary. In many annunciation scenes, she is represented as a reader (“Maria legens”). The segment of an altar painting here reproduced, by Antonello da Messina (1430–1479, Altar of Cassiano) goes a step further: Mary holds in her lap the child and the book: the written Word of God and the Word of God made flesh. Mary, with hand open in welcome – the child interpreting the Sacred Scripture. A profoundly Christmas motif, at least at second glance: God's dialogue with humanity reaches its high point in the fact that he becomes man in the child of Bethlehem. The reading, hearing, praying of Sacred Scripture, the intimate dialogue between God and man finds its fullest expression – here iconographically portrayed – in his becoming flesh.*

*“And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us” (Jn 1:14) – this concise formula that expresses the Christmas mystery is also a concise formula for biblical pastoral ministry. The Word of God in Sacred Scripture will become a life-giving Word of God only when it becomes incarnated in human lives; in the child of Bethlehem God smiles at us, cries with us, takes us by the hand in a very concrete way. In the last analysis, it is in this Christmas dimension of our Christian-human existence that the diversity and the orientation to*

*praxis and to real life so characteristic of the engagement of the CBF members is rooted. Thus it is appropriate that with this letter for the last time this year we give you a little look into this diversity, this time with three short contributions from Asia, Latin America and Africa.*

*At the end of an eventful year I feel the need to thank you from the heart for your interest in the CBF. We know that support in prayer as well as in material ways, as we have experienced them through you, dear friends of the CBF, once again this past year, cannot be taken for granted. With your help, we would like to strive next year too to do our part to ensure, at the various levels of the Church, that the Word of God will play the central role that belongs to it in pastoral ministry, theology, liturgy, education and spiritual life.*

*In the name of all CBF members I thank each of you from the heart for your loyalty and wish you a coming year once again filled with experiences that reveal how the Word of God takes flesh and dwells among us.*

*With Christmas greetings from the General Secretariat,*

Alexander M. Schweitzer  
CBF General Secretary

## Causing the Faith to Take Root in the Only Christian Country of Asia

Politically speaking, the Philippines have pursued the road to democratization since the end of the Marcos regime; economically, however, the country faces as many problems today as ever. About 35% of the over 80 million inhabitants live under the poverty line. From the point of view of religion the Philippines – with the exception of East Timor – is the only Christian country of Asia; 83% of the population belong to the Catholic Church.



*In Saint Benedict Institute eighty-four young people are currently living together in community*

This impressive number should not obscure the enormous challenges that confront the Church in the Philippines. Besides the social problems, the main issue is that of the rootedness of the faith. Instruction in the faith in the parishes and religious instruction in the schools depends above all on the catechists; the quality of the lessons stands and falls with the quality of their training and with their personal aptitude.

For more than forty years now the community of Benedictine Sisters has been running a catechetical training center, the *Saint Benedict Institute*, in the city of Vigan in northern Luzon. Young women and men, age 16–20, are there trained to be catechists. The two-year program qualifies them to teach in the parishes; after the four-year program they acquire a degree that qualifies them to teach religion in Church as well as in state schools.

The entire program is biblically grounded and geared toward biblical pastoral ministry. The course of studies provides a thorough preoccupation with the Bible: from introductory presentations on the Old and New Testament, through courses on the Gospels and the Pauline letters, to a study of various hermeneutical methods (readings from the perspective of a woman, from the perspective of the poor, etc.). Besides the course of studies the young women and men meet once a week in small groups for Bible-sharing, thereby practicing a form of group work which will be central to their later catechetical work in the basic ecclesial communities. While still in training the budding catechists offer Bible circles for young and old in the neighbouring towns, and the obligatory four-week parish practicum at the end of the second training year offers the opportunity to put to use the learned, biblically grounded catechesis and biblical pastoral models such as Bible-sharing, *lectio divina* etc. in a concrete community setting.

The training in *Saint Benedict Institute* follows a holistic concept. Besides the training in the theological, pastoral and general educational disciplines a central concern is that of personality development and formation. That the course is one in which young women and men live together in community during the formation period proves beneficial for this purpose.

The budding catechists – two-thirds of whom are women – come primarily from Luzon, the main island of the Philippines in the north, but also from other parts of the country. The majority of them stem from very poor families. At the moment, eighty-four young women and men live in the Institute; 35 are in the first year, 32 in the second year, and 17 students are preparing themselves in the third and fourth years for their final exam which will be recognized by the State. For the coming year there are already 95 applications. It is encouraging to see how many young men and women are choosing this personal path and thereby contributing to insure a deeper rootedness of the Christian-biblical faith in the society. ■

## Reading the Bible from the Perspective of Colombian Women

Civil war, drugs, violence – these are the headwords that occur to us most often when we think of Colombia. For more than 50 years now the country has been visited by a bloody civil war; the money for this war comes primarily from the drug trade. The phenomenon of violent land eviction, of which thousands of Colombians, women and men, have been the victims in the last years is often connected with

these drug wars. The situation of women is thereby especially difficult, for it is usually women and children who suffer most from the consequences of violence. But fathers, too, are often taken in by the military and the police and called to action far away from their families. Numerous families have been driven from their homeland and their country. Many are forced to seek work in the slums of the large cities.

However, there are also positive developments. In Colombia many social organizations and movements – above all church groups, especially in the basic communities – engage themselves tirelessly in efforts to improve the situation for the disadvantaged. They are committed to establishing a community where no longer civil war and violence but rather dialogue and mutual respect are supreme, where there is no longer poverty and the oppression of the many by the few, but where everyone is allowed to live free.

One of these movements is CEDEBI (*Colectivo ecumenico de biblistas*), an ecumenical union of Latin American biblical scholars, women and men, which since its founding in 1992 has been active in the realm of Bible work and is especially committed in the realm of work on behalf of women and family. The vision which CEDEBI has helped to develop is that of a society in which gender-belonging is no longer a reason for disadvantage and poverty.



*CEDEBI-members at the lectura popular*

The means for this work is the Bible. Central to the work of CEDEBI is the so-called *lectura popular*, a type of Bible-reading and sharing that is life-related and oriented to the realities of the society. It sees the biblical text not so much as stories from the past, but rather as traditions that carry in themselves a lively, relevant and life-transforming power. To bring the Bible into dialogue with the daily life of its readers – this is the goal of the work of the CEDEBI members.



*During an ecumenical Bible week in Bogotá*

This work with the Bible aims at strengthening the self-consciousness and autonomy of women, men and children, so that they will be able to fashion their own lives with personal responsibility and self-determination.

Of particular interest is also the question of a biblically grounded self-understanding of the sexes and that of the relationship between men and women. Through courses, workshops, seminars, lectures and other activities in the basic communities, Bible courses, women's groups, etc. the Bible is treated also from the point of view of its statements on the dignity and the relationship between women and men. Communication between the various basic communities in the country is promoted and contact with other disadvantaged societal groups, such as, for example, the indigenous peoples and the African-American population is sought. CEDEBI attends to the needs of already existing local groups, for example in Medellín, Bogotá and Cali; besides these new groups are always being built, so among others in Bucaramanga, Barranquilla or Pasto. Transregional meetings and courses see to it that the groups establish contact with one another and in this way solidarity and mutual assistance can be felt. The committed engagement of CEDEBI thus contributes to the creation, step by step, of a more just society in Colombia. ■

## Living as an African Christian in a Pluralistic Society

*With the advancing phenomenon of globalization, the question of pluralism has increasingly become a topic. Differences of lifestyle, cultures, religions and sects, and the fact that they all must coexist side by side are facts that belong to the reality of present-day Africa. How can one deal with this situation in a positive way as a Christian? How does one behave toward non-Christians neighbours or work colleagues? The Divine Word Missionary, Father Emmanuel Kofi Fianu, has seen himself confronted with these and other questions for a long time now, among other things in his capacity as teacher at the annual Dei Verbum courses in Ghana, Zimbabwe and in the DR Congo. He recently wrote down for us a more extended version of his thoughts on this topic. We document a few excerpts of these. The full text we will happily send to you by post.*

“In the not too distant past, religious affiliations were of a rather well-defined nature. Some countries were known as Christian countries, others were known as Islamic countries. The reality of our contemporary society is the coexistence of different religions in the same place. In our present world, we find different religions not only in the same country but also in the same town and in the same family. It is not uncommon today to enter a family home on a Sunday and see each one going his or her own way for worship – the father is going to the Catholic Church, the wife is on her way to the Church of Christ of later days, the daughter is going to Bethel Methodist Church, the son is going to the Musama Disco Kristo Church and one of the in-laws is on his way to the Central Gospel Church. This may sound exaggerated but it is a reality in some Ghanaian families already. We may speculate that there could be confusion in such a family because of their religious diversity. Supposing we discover that this family lives in harmony, we may ask ourselves the secret to such success.

We may have heard already from other circles that the best and most effective way to proclaim the Word of God is by our way of life. People would remark on what we do and would be attracted to us. One of those things that attracts attention is good relationships. Imagine an encounter with a Muslim or a Traditional African believer. What is primary here is not whose religion is the true one or which one holds primary place. The first thing we should work for is the recognition of each other, which leads to a good relationship. If I have a good relationship with my non-Christian neighbour, we can talk about a number of things. We may not have to talk about Allah or God but as we learn to work together, to keep our environment clean, to promote health services, education and development in our area, we learn to know more about one another. This builds up confidence and it would be the ground on which we could stand to know more about the religious beliefs of the other person.

Good relationships generate dialogue. It is the first principle to any meaningful coexistence between any two people. When two people can talk together, they get to know each other's thoughts and they learn more about one another. Dialogue enhances good relationships and builds up confidence. Dialogue takes place in an atmosphere of openness. Openness makes it possible for us to listen to the other and also hope the other will listen to us. As we are enlightened by the other, we also hope to enlighten him or her. Openness therefore must be reciprocal.

There are various ways of bringing God's Word to others. We know that the Word must first take root in ourselves before we can share it with others. What we have acquired should give us the confidence to share with people of other denominations or other religions. Our goal should be to share our faith and make Christ known through our witness. It is not a fight, it is not a debate at the end of which there must be winners and losers.



*Good relations promote dialogue – participants at a meeting for biblical coordinators*

In dialogue, we must also be prepared to learn more about the doctrine of the other person. I cannot dialogue with someone when I am ignorant of his religion. My knowledge of his religion would help me appreciate what he is living and if I think I should help him understand my religion, I would know where to start. We should not fall into the bad habit of learning about the religion of the other person only to find faults with it and to brandish that as a weapon against him or her. Such an attitude only breeds fundamentalism.

I think the first and most appropriate attitude to handling the Word of God in a pluralistic society is personal attitude or disposition. When we work adequately on ourselves and approach issues in the right manner, we may be sowing the seeds which will develop into good relationships and mutual understanding. We would then discover that our differences are not really cause for antagonism and hatred. We would discover the appropriate way to express our religious and denominational differences without tearing one another apart, without being apologetic and fundamentalist.” ■