

## BIBLE AND CHRISTIAN UNITY REFLECTIONS FROM A ROMAN CATHOLIC POINT OF VIEW

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### The Ideal: Bible, Source of Unity

It is a common assumption among ecumenists, even among most Christians, that the Bible is a way *par excellence* to advance the unity of the divided Christians and Christian Churches. The history of the ecumenical movement shows that its promoters were convinced that a return to Scripture would allow divided Christians to transcend age-long controversies and to find a common biblical language in which to articulate the apostolic doctrines. This prominence of Scripture in finding a common way is mentioned regularly and explicitly in Common Statements. The *ratio* for this belief is the unique status of the Bible, which is believed to be God's Word itself, written down in human words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and hence a rule of faith for all Christians. Vatican II puts it in these terms: "All the preaching of the Church, as indeed the entire Christian religion, should be nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture. In the sacred Book the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them. And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigour, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life. Scripture verifies in the most perfect way the words: "The Word of God is living and active" (Heb. 4:12), and "is able to build you up (*oikodomèsai*) and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32; cf. 1 Th. 2:13) (*Dei Verbum*, 21)". The sacred Scriptures, as the written Word of God, have the power to build up the Church of Christ in the unity of faith, hope and love.

### The Facts: Bible, Source of Division

The history of our disunity teaches us, however, that the Bible has also been a source of controversy and division. On almost all aspects of Christian doctrine and practice, Christians have given different interpretations of the same biblical data. It suffices to recall the controversies on the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and the interpretation of the Petrine texts of the New Testament, the controversies on justification and original sin in Trent and its scriptural basis in the Pauline letters, the hesitation of Reformed Christians as to whether the Roman Catholic doctrines of the immaculate conception and the assumption of Mary are in accordance with Scripture, etc. Moreover, the polemics between Christian churches and communities in the past have been at the origin of unilateral or biased interpretations of biblical texts, which are so to speak fixed in the collective memory of the faithful. Maybe the fact that the Bible has also been a source of division and controversy should not surprise us so much, because Scripture itself teaches us that God's Word is vulnerable, open to different, sometimes contradictory interpretations. According to John's Gospel, Jesus' words called for opposite reactions: some, like the Samaritan woman, concluded from those words that Jesus must be a prophet, the Son of God, the Saviour of the world; others concluded that Jesus was a blasphemer of the one God, who challenged the essential features of Jewish religion, such as monotheism, the role of the Torah, etc. If this was the fate of Jesus Christ himself, the eternal Word made flesh, how could it be different for the written Word of God itself?

### The Biblical Canon: which Unity and which Diversity?

Moreover, the biblical canon itself poses the problem of unity and diversity. Different writings, each presenting a different era, culture or (local) church, are collected in one

book in the conviction that there is something which unites this great diversity, namely the person of Jesus Christ and his salvific mission. Unity in diversity is an essential feature of the one Bible. Unity in diversity is also an essential feature of the Church that is described in the Bible, between local churches and the Church as a universal reality<sup>1</sup>. Some biblical scholars, however, understand the diversity of the NT as a biblical foundation for the diversity and legitimacy of Christian confessions and denominations<sup>2</sup>. Hence the fundamental question arises: does the biblical canon itself allow for a denominational diversity, which makes the search for an organic unity between Christians almost an obsolete enterprise? In other words, what kind of unity in diversity is 'in accordance with Scripture' and what kind is not? Linked to this question is another one: is it true that each denomination is based on a canon within the canon, and that even Early Catholic orthodoxy, which the R.C. Church finally pretends to continue, is also based on a canon within the canon<sup>3</sup>? Or should we say that the apostolic Tradition which is transmitted in the Church of Christ finds its expression and unity in the biblical canon as a whole, so that the choice of a canon within the canon necessarily leads to a denominational reduction of the full apostolic tradition?

### The Task: Reconciliation in the Interpretation of Sacred Scriptures

We should not be surprised, then, that most of the issues which the ecumenical dialogue has to confront are related in some way to the interpretation of biblical texts and thus aim at reconciling different or even contradictory interpretations of Scripture within and among the Churches. "Some of the issues are theological: eschatology, the structure of the Church, primacy and collegiality, marriage and divorce, the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood, and so forth. Others are of a canonical and juridical nature: they concern the administration of the universal Church and of local Churches. There are others, finally, that are strictly biblical: the list of the canonical books, certain hermeneutical questions, etc." (*IBC*, IV, C, 4 = *CB*, 1976)<sup>4</sup>

What is at stake here is the question of hermeneutics of the interpretation of Scripture, more precisely the question of interplay between the aspects or actors implied and operating in the process of interpretation taking place within the Church of God, such as the Holy Spirit, the Tradition, the entire people of God, the role of authority (the magisterium, teaching office) and the role of theology (resp. exegetical scholarship). The Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* has put the finger on an essential difference between

<sup>1</sup> See PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *Unity and Diversity in the Church* (1988); ET in Dennis J. MURPHY (ed.), *The Church and the Bible. Official Documents of the Catholic Church*, Bangalore, 2000, pp. 594-626. Quoted as *CB*, and the number of the paragraphs; here, *CB*, 1454-1150.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., E. KÄSEMANN, *The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church*, in Id., *Essays on New Testament Themes*, London, 1964, p. 103: "The New Testament canon does not, as such, constitute the foundation of the unity of the church. On the contrary, as such (that is, in its accessibility to the historian) it provides the basis for the multiplicity of the confessions"; in his *Das neue Testament als Kanon* (Göttingen, 1970, p. 402), he puts the point more sharply still: the canon 'also legitimises as such more or less all sects and false teaching'.

<sup>3</sup> So J. DUNN, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, London, 1977, p. 375: "It is not too much of an oversimplification to say that (until recently) the effective NT canon for Roman Catholic ecclesiology had been Matt 16, 17-19 and the Pastoral Epistles; the canon for Protestant theology has clearly been the (earlier) letters of Paul (for many Lutherans indeed 'justification by faith' is the real canon within the canon); Eastern Orthodoxy and the mystical tradition within Western Christianity draw their principal NT inspiration from the Johannine writings; while Pentecostalism looks for its authentication to Acts. Or again, the canon for nineteenth-century Liberal Protestantism was the (so-called) historical Jesus, whereas after the first World War the focus of authority for many Christian theologians became 'the kerygma', while more recently others have sought to orient themselves in relation to the apostolic witness. Perhaps most arresting of all, we must remind ourselves that since Early Catholicism was only one strand within the NT, consequently *orthodoxy itself was based on a canon within the canon*, where the lack of charity of a Paul or a John (cf. 2 Pet 3,15f.) has been interpreted into a conformity with that single strand".

<sup>4</sup> PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1993, IV, C, 4 (quoted as *IBC*, followed by the Part and subparts).

Protestants and Roman Catholics concerning the role of the teaching office: “But when Christians separated from us affirm the divine authority of the sacred books, they think differently from us – different ones in different ways – about the relationship between the scriptures and the Church. For in the Church, according to Catholic Belief, its authentic teaching office has a special place in expounding and preaching the written Word of God” (UR, 21). In the extremely important paragraph 10 of the Constitution *Dei Verbum*, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council have described how sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture, which make up a single deposit of the Word of God, have been entrusted to the whole people of the Church, which remains faithful to it under the guidance of the living teaching office of the Church, the latter having received the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God<sup>5</sup>. This indispensable interconnection between Tradition, Scripture and the Magisterium within the living reality of the whole Church has been well expressed in the document *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993) (italics mine): “It is the *believing community* that provides a truly adequate context for interpreting *canonical texts*. In this context faith and the *Holy Spirit* enrich *exegesis*; *Church authority*, exercised as a service of the community, must see to it that this interpretation remains faithful to the great *Tradition* which has produced the texts” (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 10) (IBC, I, C, 1 = CB, 1761) .

### **Some criteria for an Authentic Ecumenical Use of Scripture**

To conclude, I would like to formulate a set of principles which might serve as hermeneutical criteria for advancing a more ecumenical interpretation of Scripture and to let Scripture fully play its role as *canon fidei* in ecumenical dialogue. They are put in the form of short theses, which are open to discussion.

1. Coming to an agreement on the list of canonical books remains an essential task of ecumenical dialogue. As long as there is no unity about the biblical canon, there can be no full unity between Christians.
2. The biblical canon does not legitimize the existence of different Christian confessions. Putting a canon within a canon cannot provide a legitimate basis for ecumenical dialogue and finally results in resignation to and acceptance of the status quo of ecclesial divisions. Each Christian Church should have the courage to examine whether it does not, de facto, consciously or unconsciously, operate with a canon within the canon and thus hinder ecumenical progress.
3. The Bible as a whole forms the ‘canon’ for the life and unity of the Church of Christ. This unity finds its expression in the diversity of cultures, languages, traditions, and local or regional churches. Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, is the centre and ultimately forms the hermeneutical key of the sacred Scriptures.

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<sup>5</sup> DV, 10: “Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church. By adhering to it the entire holy people, united to its pastors, remains always faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers (cf. Acts 2:42 Greek). So, in maintaining, practicing and professing the faith that has been handed on there should be a remarkable harmony between the bishops and the faithful. But the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith. It is clear, therefore, that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way under the action of the Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls”.

4. From a historical point of view, the Apostolic Tradition precedes Scripture. Scripture is the normative expression of Tradition. Both make up a single deposit of the Word of God. The *sola Scriptura* principle or the notion of the 'sufficiency' of Scripture<sup>6</sup> should be interpreted and/or modified in the light of this criterion.
5. A careful distinction should be made between (apostolic) Tradition and traditions. Traditions are varied expressions of the apostolic Tradition in time and space. Scripture should be used as norm and criterion to evaluate or assess traditions.
6. The separation or division among Christian Churches and/or denominations has affected their interpretation of sacred Scripture: 'polemical' or 'denominational' readings hinder these Churches from grasping the full meaning of Scripture. Even the R.C. Church is not free from this 'limitation' in reading Scripture. Churches need each other to fully discover God's will in Scripture.
7. There is still need of a consensus among Christians about the role of the teaching office in interpreting the Word of God (whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition) and in the promulgation of doctrines, drawn from this single deposit of faith, as divinely revealed.
8. The rise and spread of what may be called a 'fundamentalist' reading of the Bible in different Christian circles is seriously putting into danger the openness needed for ecumenical dialogue (cf. *IBC*, I,F = *CB*, 1809-1818).
9. The awareness that the text of Scripture can have different "senses" may be helpful to overcome discussions about the 'scriptural' character or the lack thereof in certain doctrines. Historical-critical exegesis adopted the thesis of one single meaning (the *intentio auctoris*). Modern theories of language and of philosophical hermeneutics now affirm that written texts are open to a plurality of meaning. It would be desirable to take up again the ancient wisdom concerning the different levels of meaning of biblical texts. The Pontifical Biblical Commission most usefully speaks about the literal sense, the spiritual sense, and the fuller sense (*IBC*, II, B = *CB* 1830-1848). Such approach has rich ecumenical potentialities.
10. Biblical scholarship/exegesis has made an important contribution to the advancement of the ecumenical dialogue and will remain indispensable in the future (*IBC*, Introduction, A = *BC*, 1709; *IBC*, IV, B = *BC*, 1977). In particular, a historical-critical approach can be helpful in reading biblical texts in their historical context. It also helps to avoid making historical formulations of doctrinal definitions absolute or interpreting doctrinal affirmations as historical events<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the formulation of Articles of Religion VI (Church of England): "*Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for salvation*. Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation". All Christian Confessions accept that a doctrine should ultimately be founded upon the Scriptures as the expression of God's revealed truth. That means, new doctrines cannot be received by the faithful unless it is clear that they are an expression in one way or another of the divine revelation which is contained in a normative way in the Holy Scriptures. However, there are different possibilities of thinking of the scriptural "foundation" of doctrines: (i) A doctrine can be explicitly formulated in Scriptures (e.g. the divinity of Jesus Christ). (ii) It is possible that a doctrine is not explicitly expressed in the Holy Scriptures although it is recognised as being founded in the Bible (e.g. the doctrine of Mary as *theotokos* is implicitly present in Scripture). (iii) There are doctrines which, according to some, are not against Scripture and in that sense ultimately founded in Scripture; such doctrines have grown in the course of history in different forms (popular piety, liturgical tradition, theological reflection, church teaching, etc.); they are not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, but their content is implied in and coherent with other doctrines that are attested in Scripture.

<sup>7</sup> An example may clarify what we mean by this. In its judgment on the statements of *Final Report* of ARCIC about the Petrine Office, the Roman Catholic Church judged that the description of ARCIC I did not express the fullness of the Catholic faith, which "sees in the primacy of the successors of Peter something positively intended by God and deriving from the will and institution of Jesus Christ", from whom Peter 'immediately and directly' received his primacy (DS 3055) (*Catholic Response*, 18 in C. HILL & E.J.

11. Ecumenical dialogue is best served by an ecclesial and ecumenical reading of Scripture, which seeks to integrate what is valuable from the different approaches in the past and present, in scholarly and non scholarly circles, and to consider each passage under study in the context of the New Testament as a whole, against the background of the Old, and in the light of the common Tradition<sup>8</sup>.
12. Ecumenical translations of the Bible should be encouraged, since having a common text greatly assists a common reading and understanding and so contributes towards achieving the conversion of heart and sanctity of life which, aided by the prayer for the unity of Christians, constitute the soul of the entire ecumenical movement (*IBC*, IV, B, 4 = *CB*, 1979).

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YARNOLD (eds.), *Anglicans and Roman Catholics: The Search for Unity*, London: SPCK/CTS, 1994). The *Catholic Response* alludes here to the definition of Vatican I, but does not make a distinction between the 'content' and the 'formulation' of the definition, and thus understands the second part of the definition in a strictly historical sense. The conception, however, that Peter received his primacy "immediately and directly" from Christ, is part of the historically conditioned *formulation* of Vatican I. The Fathers of the Council were not aware of the problems that arose acutely afterwards, as a consequence of a historical-critical reading of the Petrine texts. But the *meaning intended* by this formulation, that is, that the primacy goes back to Christ (a larger notion than the 'historical Jesus') and is, in that sense, positively intended by God, is certainly not excluded by the reading of ARCIC II. That the primacy is positively intended by God, was affirmed already by ARCIC I when it stated that this primacy comes forth from divine providence (*providentia divina*) (*Authority II*, 13-15). This conviction is reaffirmed by ARCIC II, when it speaks about the primacy as a "gift of God" that is needed for the unity of the universal Church, for which Christ has prayed (*Gift*, 46, 60). In that line of thought, one can say that "it is derived from the will and institution of Jesus Christ", even when one does not understand this expression in a literal-historical sense (*Authority II*, 11).

<sup>8</sup> This thesis is inspired by paragraph 7 the recent document of ARCIC, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ (Seattle Statement)*, 2005: "In the following paragraphs, our use of Scripture seeks to draw upon the whole tradition of the Church, in which rich and varied readings have been employed. In the New Testament, the Old Testament is commonly interpreted typologically: events and images are understood with specific reference to Christ. This approach is further developed by the Fathers and by medieval preachers and authors. The Reformers stressed the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture, and called for a return to the centrality of the Gospel message. Historical-critical approaches attempted to discern the meaning intended by the biblical authors, and to account for texts' origins. Each of these readings has its limitations, and may give rise to exaggerations or imbalances: typology can become extravagant, Reformation emphases reductionist, and critical methods overly historicist. More recent approaches to Scripture point to the range of possible readings of a text, notably its narrative, rhetorical and sociological dimensions. In this statement, we seek to integrate what is valuable from each of these approaches, as both correcting and contributing to our use of Scripture. Further, we recognise that no reading of a text is neutral, but each is shaped by the context and interest of its readers. Our reading has taken place within the context of our dialogue in Christ, for the sake of that communion which is his will. It is thus an ecclesial and ecumenical reading, seeking to consider each passage about Mary in the context of the New Testament as a whole, against the background of the Old, and in the light of Tradition."