

Today's World and God's Word



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Dear Readers:



The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. (GS 1)

With these programmatic words the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the

Second Vatican Council opens. What the Council states here about “the Church in the Modern World” – so the official title of the document – could be applied without reduction to the meaning of the Word of God for the world: the preaching of the Gospel can never occur in isolation from the questions, the concerns, the hopes and the joys of the people to whom God’s revelation is addressed. Understanding God’s Word and living in accordance with it can only successfully occur in the context of our world of today, against the background of the social, political and religious situation of our time. In other words: the text of the Bible always stands in relation to the concrete contexts into which it is read and preached.

This apparently obvious insight, however, has wide-ranging consequences. It requires, for one thing, that Church, believers and preachers of the Word really live in the world of today and come to terms with it, such that they will recognize, take seriously and be able to elucidate the “signs of the times.” But this whole process affects one’s view of the Word of God itself: it is not something closed off and fixed once and for all, but opens itself up anew every time it is read. Every person who hears the Word inscribes it and interprets it anew in his or her life. Word and world, word and humanity – the idea is mutual communication, relevancy, life.

“Today’s World and God’s Word” – we have taken this as the motto for this particular issue of the *Bulletin Dei Verbum*. You will find here three articles from the Dei Verbum Congress of last year that approach this topic from different perspectives. Common to all three is that they read the Bible in the life and faith horizon of our

time and in view of its cultural and social realities. Such a contextual Bible interpretation understands the Word of God and the world of today not as two isolated realms, but rather as two poles of the one Divine Revelation. World and Word stand in relation to each other. They signify mutual enrichment as well as mutual challenge.

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

This is how the Apostle Paul describes the motivation of his missionary activity in his letter to the community of Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 9:19-23). *To become all things to all men* – this means neither relativism nor chummy opportunism; still less does it imply a reckless discarding of Christian values. It means something more positive: a conscious presence to the world of today, to the concerns, the needs, the hopes of the people of our time. The preaching of the biblical message of life to the full will succeed only if it includes a serious commitment to engage with the present and with its cultural diversity. For the Word of God can enrich men and women if it meets them in their concrete life circumstances, if it speaks their language and understands their lives.

I wish you all an enriching reading, with interesting discoveries.

Claudio Etti



Opening One's Heart to the Other: Aspects of Reading the Bible in Context

Anna Fumagalli



Dr. Anna Fumagalli completed her theological studies at Tübingen, Milan and Rome, and received her doctorate in biblical theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. She belongs to the Scalabrinian Secular Missionary Women and works within the SIMI (Scalabrini International Migration Institute) in Basel, Switzerland.

The theme I was given “Reading the Bible in context – Word of God and cultures” struck me above all as an invitation to rejoice.

We must in fact acknowledge that in recent years people have become more and more aware of the fact that whatever approach we take to the text neutrality is an illusion, that a reading is always conditioned by the context of the reader and that this conditioning, if reflected upon and given its full due can bear much fruit in the interpretation of biblical texts.

Thanks to the efforts of those engaged in the field of biblical interpretation, what the Council in *Dei Verbum*, especially in paragraph 12, underscored at the level of the text's origin, at the departure level, we might say, namely, that “attention should be given ... to ... literary forms in accordance with the situation of his [the author's] own time and culture” now has an acknowledged echo at the destination level, that is at the level of the reading and interpretation of the same texts.

The theme I was assigned focuses on context in its cultural, indeed its multicultural dimension – “Word of God and Cultures” – thus touching on a reality that has enormous relevancy today. We know that this discussion is of importance for the future of our societies, in which cultures are encountering each other and clashing on a daily basis. We are aware that we are dealing with something that is a true and proper “sign of the times” (*Gaudium et Spes* 4).

In fact, expressions such as – and it is no accident that the predominant language here is English – “cultural interpretation”, “reading with, reading from this place”, “through the eyes of another” and others like them recall what now amount to numerous publications; phrases such as these give names to projects, symposia, new publication series, etc¹. In the last decades therefore the idea has begun to take hold – though not

in a homogeneous way – that the encounter of a text with its readers always takes place in a context, which conditions this encounter with its specific questions and expectations. Today we can say that from many directions people are beginning to recognize that diverse contexts lead to diverse readings of the same text, each of which must be considered partial.

So the following question is raised: how do we prevent this awareness of the partiality of one's own reading from falling into the trap of relativism? How are we to prevent the positive experience of a contextualized reading from harboring the delusion that we must renounce any search for the true meaning of a text, for a signification that is valid for all, and retreat to a meaning that is true only for me, for my group, for my culture? What are we to do?

This is the question that will guide the first part of my paper.

In the second part, I will focus instead on the second pair of concepts that gives the title to our theme, “Word of God and cultures”, hence on *cultures* and on the need to undertake a theological reflection of a fundamental character.

I. Word of God ...

Faced with the experience that my reading can only be partial, what is the path that will enable me to welcome the positive value of this *partiality*?

It seems to me that the maneuver to privilege is the following: while making ourselves attentive to the diversity of every particular (cultural) context, it is important to continually direct our attention back to the text and to always return to the fundamental question: *what is a text?* We often take this question for granted and we thus forget to draw all its consequences from it. But the implications that follow from this fact are enormously important.

What in fact is a text? Increasing recognition is given today to the fact that the literary text, in general, and the biblical text in particular, comes to meet its reader not like some finished product that is closed in on itself, but as a *communicative system* which begins *to function*



when someone begins to read: it is the reading process that activates the potentiality of meaning present in the text *for ever new communicative events*.

This applies to every text, and all the more so to the biblical text. The Bible is given to us as an *historical witness of the very revelation of God*, which reveals its fundamentally dialogical character precisely in the fact of being accessible to us *in text form*, that is in the form of a communicative system which requires the collaboration of the reader. A circumstance whose implications are extremely rich: “The consignment of the manifestation of God ... to the written form of attestation and communication implies a fundamental decision on the accessibility of that manifestation even at a distance from its production point and even for a non-contemporaneous audience” and it therefore manifests “the testimonial quality of scripture”, as well as its universal destination.² We are hardly in the initial stages in the discovery of these fundamental implications that depend on the notion of text.

It is therefore on the basis of a conception of text as communication – and in particular in the call for collaboration that the text addresses to the reader – that we discover the importance of *context*, which is not to be viewed simply as an inevitable conditioning factor – due to human limitation – or to an optional step that can be recommended in the name of a sound pastoral preoccupation – but *as an exigency of the text as such*, a natural consequence, one which corresponds, that is, to a text’s communicative nature, to its quality as *event that is realized in situation*.

And on the basis of a communicative conception of text we can easily acknowledge the positive value of the partiality of every reading. The richness of a text, in fact, is given by a potentiality of signification which opens wide the horizon to all possible readers. In this perspective, the *partiality of every reading* does not shut off into a sterile particularism, but implies a reference to the totality and opens the door to a participation that excludes no one.

Continuing in the attempt to bring to light the implications of a communicative conception of text for our theme, we should underscore a second important aspect: the text has an *intrinsic pragmatic value* of its own.

Here we receive decisive help from the thought of P. Ricoeur, among others. His theory of text, in fact, which leads beyond the dichotomy between method and truth, between explanation and comprehension, is able to illuminate the special nexus that exists between truth and the biblical text. His reflection, sustained by the post-Heideggerian notion of truth (with its critique of the conception of truth as *correspondence* and the defense

of truth as *manifestation*), reaches the point where it acknowledges in the activity of reading the two-fold aspect of *manifestation* and *transformation*: “The idea of truth, implied in the theory of the text, unites the phenomenological aspect of manifestation and the practical aspect of transformation, because the truth reveals itself only by making its recognition the form of its manifestation.”³ *Manifestation* and *transformation* are then dimensions of a single activity of reading, which at one and the same time is both aesthetic and practical, narrative and ethical – an activity that refigures, according to the terminology of P. Ricoeur, i.e. an activity that refigures the experience of the reader. Through the affirmation of the inseparability of manifestation and transformation we grasp the intrinsically pragmatic character of the event of communication that takes place in the process of reading. In other words, the pragmatic force of the text is not something added to the text in a second moment or as an optional extra.

It follows that on the basis of a communicative conception of text, the fact is brought out that every process of reading is *not only conditioned* by the context in which it takes place, but it also exposes *that context to the possibility of change or transformation*. Such then is the implication that can be drawn here for the purposes of our theme and that prevents one from viewing the variety of contexts as rigid entities that control the act of reading.

P. Ricoeur – as we know – alongside the idea of likeness, underscores the idea of *distance*, the otherness of the text as indispensable condition that allows the reading experience to be fruitful. On the basis of this observation, which is of fundamental character, we can become aware of how every distancing and in particular every *cultural distancing* – even that of the biblical texts, as well as that of every possible reading context – is not so much an obstacle to be overcome as the condition that makes possible a fruitful communication.

In an effort to translate these principles which are absolutely fundamental into that simple question that can become the point of departure for a biblical group, I would say: it is not so much a matter of asking ourselves merely: “what does the biblical text say *to me*, what does it say *to us*?”; rather, the primary question is “what does it say *about me*? *About us*?” The point is, in other words, to begin with an awareness that the text speaks about us, that we are included in the text and that we are so in two ways, that of *closeness* – which is why we feel profoundly included, profoundly understood – and that of *distance* – which makes us feel summoned to change, to become ever more that which we are according to the eternal project of God. Yes, not only called, but called by an efficacious Word, which has within itself the power to transform us.



II. ... and cultures

“Word of God and cultures”. We enter now the second part of this paper and shift our attention to the *cultures* side, without losing sight of the fact that the Word of God is a word addressed to men and women, to human persons and not to cultures as such. Similarly, it is persons who are involved in the process of reading, not cultures.

Recognizing that there is still a long way to go but also that decisive steps have already been taken – even in the sphere of biblical studies – by way of positively evaluating the diverse cultural contexts and, in particular, those most marginalized, we can ask ourselves: what is still missing? What is missing so that this pair of concepts (Word of God and cultures) can bear all of its fruit?

I believe that it is indispensable to unite the procedure of affirming the positive value of the various cultural contexts with a *fundamental theological reflection* regarding the reality of culture and of the cultures, so that we can avoid finding ourselves down the blind alley of demands for recognition, polarization, competition or – in the best of cases – of mutual tolerance and above all of instrumentalizing both the biblical text and the person.

In this regard, it seems to me that research drawing on the orthodox theological tradition and in particular on the ideas of authors such as P. Florenskij and V. Solov'ev has been particularly fruitful.

To put it in a nutshell: starting from a vision of the human person as a being that reaches its full realization precisely in the recognition of the other, there follows a vision of culture that has love, that is openness toward the other, as a fundamental value. Indeed, taken in its broadest sense, as a complex of meanings and values shared by a group for purposes of communication, a culture is born and grows precisely as an exigency of communication with the other.

It follows from this that a culture is alive precisely to the extent to which it is capable of dying, that is of renouncing its own developments for the sake of communion, for the sake of recognition of the other: “The culture event, as one that results from the truth of man, has in itself that dynamism of love that is capable of welcoming the other, of renouncing one’s own mentality, one’s own gestures, one’s own signs if these can no longer be useful for communication with the other, if they can no longer serve for the recognition of the other.”⁴ That which knows how to die out of love in fact receives a life that can no longer die. The Paschal mystery, then, is the secret of a successful culture, the key to every intercultural dialogue, including that of the reader of a biblical text.

Even my own communication, to be sure, shows traces of the context in which it was prepared: a scalabriniano, migrant context, a context in which the experience of encounter and of clashes of cultures is a daily affair. And migrations – wherever the challenge of an encounter with the other is accepted – can be the place where occasions for this paschal exercise of death/life multiply, the only dynamic that can transform intercultural dialogue into a path with promise.

And why not open the Bible at this point? The page is that of Acts 10, where Peter, in the encounter with Cornelius, is taken up with an experience that is truly new for him, a genuine challenge to his culture. Peter then begins to speak to the assembled Gentiles: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34). This is the moment – one with a wholly vertical dimension – when the true intercultural dialogue can begin.

Further reading

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(Transl.: L. Maluf) ■

¹ For the written text of this talk I deemed it appropriate to refrain from using footnotes except in the case of citations. For all other matters we refer the reader to the essential bibliography supplied below.

² P.A. Sequeri, *La struttura testimoniale delle scritture sacre: teologia del testo*, in G. Angelini (ed.), *La rivelazione attestata. La Bibbia fra testo e teologia*, Festschrift C.M. Martini, Milan 1998, 16.

³ A. Bertuletti, *Esegesi biblica e teologia sistematica*, in: G. Angelini (ed.), *La rivelazione attestata. La Bibbia fra testo e teologia*, 156.

⁴ M.I. Rupnik, *Dire l'uomo, I: Persona cultura della Pasqua*, Roma 1996, 267.



Between Incarnation and Critical Prophetism: Word of God and Cultures

Lucien Legrand, *mep*



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The connection between the Word of God and culture could be taken from the point of view of the impact of the Bible on cultures, art, literature, music, etc. In so far as India is concerned, the situation can be exemplified by a monument I visited in Chennai some time back. It was a pillared hall (a *mandabam*) dedicated to religious harmony. Each pillar was assigned to a religion of India represented by its symbols carved on the faces of the column. It was all very artistic except for the Christian pillar representing a crude crucifix, probably modelled on a cheap cross found in a neighbouring church. The discrepancy between the elegance of the various Hindu, Buddhist, Jain symbols and the coarseness of the Christian image revealed the gap still existing between the Christian message and Indian culture.

This is too obvious. But I propose to take the matter at a more fundamental level by considering culture in a deeper sense. Culture can be taken in the Western sense of "refinement of mind, taste and manners" (Oxford English Dictionary). However anthropology gives it the broader sense of "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."¹ In this sense "the fact of culture is common to all" with only variations as regards "the particular pattern of culture."²

Taken at that level, the relationship between the Word of God and culture finds its roots in the composition of the Bible itself.³ Actually the Bible is the record of the encounter of the Word of God, in words and in deeds, with a plurality of cultural settings. These can be geographical settings, Canaanite, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Persian, and Greek. They can reflect a variety of socio-anthropological conditions, from the nomad tribal structure to the Hellenistic urban system of government, passing through the rural Judean or Galilean way of life. They can take a variety of forms of interaction, emergence, osmosis, acculturation, but also

revolt and prophetic rejection. In short, there is no such a thing as a "biblical culture," a disincarnated Word of God that would have to meet world cultures.⁴ The Bible itself invites us to become part of an incarnational continuum, and to engage in an ever renewed process of on-going forms of interaction with cultures, subcultures and counter cultures. This process is to be met with at every stage of biblical apostolate, necessarily enmeshed in socio-economic-political circumstances.

Translation and culture

After it has been recorded "in many and various ways" (Heb 1:1) in the Scriptures, the first encounter of the Word of God with cultures takes place in the translation process. Translation is often taken for granted. We presume that we "have" the Bible in English, in Chinese, in Tamil, etc. Actually translation is fraught with cultural implications at every step of the process.⁵

1. Basic options

Before a translation is undertaken, basic options have to be taken:

First, the decision itself to make a translation can be a critical cultural option. Dominating cultures tend to be monopolistic and to assimilate subaltern cultures. Asian countries count important tribal groups having their own language. Should the Bible translator and the sponsoring authorities come to the rescue of those subaltern cultures, invent a script if needed, so that the Word of God may be accessible to all people in their own languages? Or, on the contrary, should they foster the integration of those groups in the national mainstream and start rather Hindi, Bengali, Vietnamese or Chinese schools? This is an important culturo-political dilemma. It entails risks. A friend of mine was expelled from an otherwise democratic country because he had embraced, maybe too militantly, the culture of a tribal ethnic group. On the other hand, we have the unfortunate story of the Patriarch of Goa who was invited in 1811 by the Calcutta Bible Society to sponsor a Bible translation in Kannada. He replied that "the Kannada speaking Christians who could read at all could read Portuguese" and the others were illiterate. Thus was an early interconfessional venture nipped in the bud by colonial overbearing exclusivism.



Equally cultural and political is the question of targeting a translation. Should the translation target the high poetical language which is often the usual religious language in Asia? On the contrary, taking into account that, in the Bible, the Word of God addresses the common folk in their ordinary circumstances, should biblical translations be popular and run the risk of triviality? Should translation do away with the delicate nuances of honorific plural to promote egalitarian democracy? Should translation opt for a solemn archaic phraseology or use modern language? King James or Good News Bible? Old Tamil translations, for instance made it a point to use as many Sanskrit words as possible, going the way of brahminical sanskritizing. In Tamil now, the trend, backed by influential political movements, is to return to the Dravidian roots of “pure Tamil”, to the extent even of falling into the opposite affected preciousness. Style is not immune from political connotations.

2. Translation process

Then comes the process of translation itself.

Language is one of the deepest roots and forms of culture. This is why it carries such a heavy emotional load. It can be a factor of union as in China where a common script unites more than a billion people belonging to different ethnic and linguistic entities. It can also be a factor of antagonism as witnessed by the violent linguistic conflicts in such plurilingual countries as India, Sri Lanka, Spain, Belgium, etc.

Such being the case, translation is an epitome of cultural and even religious interaction. Translation is interpretation. When shifting from language to language, one enters a different world vision, a different individual and social psychology, different symbolic sphere. Language carries millennia of human experience, of relation with the surrounding world and with the beyond.

Examples can be multiplied of cultural differences surfacing in the translation process. Colour symbolism differs from culture to culture. White for instance can symbolize death in the Far East. The “southern breeze” which is the sign of scorching heat in Lk 12:55 is, on the contrary a poetical symbol of cooling breeze in Southern India, in a totally different geographical setting. More significantly, the daily bread and the Eucharistic bread lose much of their symbolical significance in rice cultures. “Wine,” considered as an intoxicating drink, evokes carousing and dissolute life in puritan India. In India, the very name of the Bible has been loaded with extraneous overtones, evoking the aggressive proselytizing of the many Bible colleges and Bible peddlers. A colleague of mine, working in the Indian university set up, told me that he was very careful to speak of the “Christian Scriptures” rather than of the Bible.

Of particular significance is the translation of the name of God. This was already the case in the LXX (the Septuagint), the eldest daughter of all biblical translations. The Hebrew tetragrammaton YHWH is the name that cannot be fathomed, nor even pronounced. It evokes mystery. It is also purely Hebrew, sounding barbarian to Greek ears. The LXX translated it by *kyrios*, the *Lord*, following the rendering *adonai* used in synagogal public reading. Thus was God’s name universalised. It did not sound any longer barbarian. It referred to a clear concept of what the deity should be. YHWH could only be worshipped by Jews. The *kyrios* could win the devotion of the entire Greek speaking world. So is it with the rendering of *elohim* by *theos*. There is a certain aura of mystery in the Hebrew plural form *elohim* for Him who is the only One. For the Greek readers of the third century BC, the Greek word *theos* carried implicitly or explicitly the ontological speculations of several centuries on the nature of the deity. The loss of poetical mystery is balanced by the gain in conceptual precision. This basic problem of saying God recurs in many Asian languages. Either, as in India, there are too many gods and it is difficult to find the term applying to the only One, or, as in Eastern Asia, the culturo-religious background is averse to the very concept of a personal God and recourse is to be made to linguistic manipulations round the theme of Heaven, Spirit, etc.

It is not only a matter of concepts. Language is the expression of deeply rooted social relationships. Linguistic options can be the expression and the carrier of social changes. The significant example of the honorific plural has been already mentioned above. Hebrew did not have the honorific plural as it would have gone against covenantal egalitarianism. Though Latin languages, unlike English, have the honorific plural, we see its use waning nowadays, at least in the spoken language due to a process of democratisation. But every translator will know the problems arising when the biblical dialogues have to be translated in the context of many Asian societies which keep a strong hierarchical sense and continue to make a well nuanced use not only of honorific plural but of different forms of it. Is the “biblical culture” to be made an absolute? Should Asian languages lose their linguistic richness to ape the Western democratic forms? Is biblical translation to become a westernising or semitizing factor?

Another example can be found in the rise of feminism and the indictment of sexist language in the Scriptures. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and a number of new translations have attempted to address this issue. But it would not do to make the NRSV a “translators translation” to set the pattern for Hindi, Tamil, Tagalog or Japanese. Feminist sensitivities may take different forms in different cultures.



Translation is a risky proposition but a necessary requirement. The saying goes that the translator is a traitor: *traduttore traditore*. This is a pessimistic perception of a real risk. Translation is a journey across the vast human landscapes of the world's multiple cultures. In the process there can be loss and gain. When travelling, luggage can be lost. It can also be enriched by local acquisitions. Translation resumes the way of Abraham: "Leave the land of your people and your father's house and go to the land I shall show you." (Gen 12:1) Abraham left the rich Sumerian culture of Ur to obey the call to "go forth". Following the same call, Bible translation is the first and most important step to take the Good News to the plenitude of world cultures. Translation is no mere material carbon copy. It is the medium of creative intercultural encounter. As any creative activity it entails the risk of coming out of the original matrix to meet the world and grow along with the world. Through translation, the text enters a new life without which it would be stillborn and would remain dead letter.

Communication and culture

The communication of the Word of God is also culturally conditioned. May I illustrate this by a personal experience? When I took charge of a rural district in North Tamil Nadu, I was keen on launching a biblical catechesis. Since there was an elementary school in the village, I presumed that the youth could read and write. I distributed notebooks and pencils and, to start with, I asked the class to write on their notebooks the title of any parable of Jesus they knew. The clumsy way they handled their writing material showed me that their literacy was only nominal. Most of the girls had no schooling at all. Even boys' attendance was irregular and the drop out rate was very high. In short, my youngsters were practically illiterate. A bookish approach was meaningless. I had to shift my approach. They were fond of singing. Tamil has a rich store of biblical songs and so it was through singing that my biblical initiation continued.

This shows that biblical apostolate cannot be just a bookish affair. It has to take into account either the pre-literate or the post-literate situation. The pre-literate communication of the Word of God may have recourse to singing, playlets, dance, cartoons. The post-literate apostolate has to take into account the development of new means of communication, radio, films, CD, TV, web, etc. *Bulletin Dei Verbum*, the journal of the CBF, is a valuable forum of exchange of experiences. Ultimately, for both pre-literate and post-literate cultures, a privileged form of communication is the community sharing (cf. *lectio divina*) and the celebration of the Word. This raises again the question of the inculturation of the liturgy.

Interpretation and culture

The next stage is that of the interpretation of the Word of God. The recent document of the Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), has reviewed the rich variety of current forms of interpretation. The monopoly of the historico-critical method has come to an end. In addition to rhetorical, semiotic, sociological techniques and approaches, we have also now, a post-shoah reading of the Bible, canonical, liberationist and feminist approaches. The document does not speak of African or Asian approaches, probably because they are not yet formulated with sufficient clarity. Yet they are taking shape. In the Indian theological faculties, a number of MTh and doctoral dissertations attempt to relate biblical exegesis to the age old traditional *dhvani* method of the Hindu Scripture.⁷

Without getting lost in far flowing speculations, let us at least note that a genuine biblical scholarship is appearing in India, and presumably elsewhere outside the Western academic world. We have Greek and Hebrew dictionaries in Khasi language, concordances, synopses, Bible dictionaries in various Indian languages. Bible reviews and sets of commentaries appear in Tamil and Malayalam. Bible institutes are run in different parts of the country. In this connection it should be noted that, at least as so far as India is concerned, biblical knowledge is backed by a lively biblical movement and goes in unison with it. We can look forward to (or at least dream of?) an Asian line of biblical interpretation that would integrate the richness of Asian cultures. It would break the existing practical monopoly of Western academy on biblical scholarship and would contribute to a truly ecumenical approach to the Word of God.

Witness as interpretation

Finally we should not overlook the transmission of the Word of God through witness. Biblical words are plain ordinary words pertaining to the ordinary cultural patterns of people's lives. It is the history to which they were associated which shaped their specific biblical meaning. *Ei* applied to deities of the Canaanite Pantheon. It became a name of the biblical God by being the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the Exodus and of Sinai, the God of Jesus Christ. The words for "baptism" and "Lord's Supper" did not fall down from heaven. They were simply the words denoting washing and eating in daily life. The meaning of *agape* is perceived at the foot of the cross. The significance of language is not determined by dictionaries only. Language emerges out of the life of a people and meanings are specified by the way in which language is contextualised and lived. All the forms of communication of the divine message will remain empty words if the witness that carries them is not true, true to God and true to man.



Ultimately it is the Saint who embodies this divine and human authenticity of a life true to God and true to man. Saints are cultural events insofar as their charism responds to the confused expectations of their generation. They are transcendentalized cultural events since they project the challenge of the Word of God and give concrete human shape to the encounter between the Word of God and human cultures.

Conclusions

The Word of God is given in an indissociable association with culture, in the formation of its scriptural formulation as well as in its various forms of communication. This contextualisation is no optional side aspect of biblical apostolate. It is a basic dimension of depth. It cannot be shirked or left to a few specialised studies.

It is said of politics that the worst type of politics is that of those who claim not to go into politics. Similarly the worst type of engagement with cultures would be that of people who claim to ignore culture and to know only the Word of God in its stark purity. There is no such “purity”: the Word has become flesh. Jesus Christ is no exception. He is the ultimate expression of a law of divine involvement with the world from the origins of creation.

The interaction of the Word of God with cultures is complex. The term “inculturation” fails to express this complexity adequately. It seems to presume that culture is monolithic, which unconsciously but quite effectively, gives privileged value to dominant cultures. Now the cultural context may call for prophetic challenge to such features of oppressive dominant culture as class and caste system, racism, sexism, colonialism, etc. In cultures as in any other aspect of human existence the evangelical touchstone of authenticity is the respect of the “little ones” and of their cultures, whether they be counter-cultures, alternative or subaltern cultures. Hence the contextualisation of the Word in world cultures is structured on a double pole:

- The pole of incarnation continues the enfleshment of the Word in the God-made and Spirit-filled world. This aspect corresponds to our faith in the God of love, who, through creation, covenant and incarnation, has become partner of our human history.
- The pole of critical prophetism exposes culture to the “two-edged sword, able to discern the thoughts of the heart” (cf. Heb 4:12). This is the evangelisation of cultures implying the call to conversion. This opposite aspect corresponds to our faith in the Thrice Holy, the One who transcends all human baseness, whose “ways are not our ways”, whose “thoughts are not our thoughts” (Is 55:9).

The two poles can no more be disconnected than the two faces of the God we believe in. ■

¹ Cl. Geerts, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, 89.

² J. Bennett and M. Tumin, *Social Life*, New York 1948, 209.

³ This is what I have done in my book on *Bible and Cultures* (New York 2000) which is the outcome of a number of courses and seminars given in a variety of cultural settings in Asia and Africa.

⁴ The attempt of Cl. Tresmontant to identify a “biblical metaphysics” smacks of philosophical concordism (*Études de Métaphysique biblique*, Paris 1955; *A Study of Hebrew Thought*, New York 1960). J. Barr has done justice to too simplistic an opposition between Hebrew and Greek thought (*Old and New in Interpretation*, London 1966, 34-64).

⁵ There is an active philosophy of translation, connected with the philosophy of language. A Theology of translation is lagging behind (with the exception of C. Buzzetti, *La Parola Tradotta*, Brescia, 1973). Translators are indebted to E. Nida and the American Bible Society for their dependable application of the principles of translation to Bible.

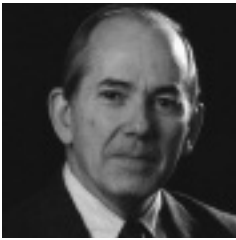
⁶ J.S.M. Hooper, *Bible Translation in India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, Bombay 1963, 96.

⁷ Applying itself to the “resonance”, the echo or suggestive power of a text, it moves without discontinuity from phonetics to grammar and to linguistic, from rhetoric to the nature of communication and of language, and finally from there to the indescribable nature of the atma or purusa. Says Bhartrhari: “The beginningless and endless Brahman is the word-principle, which is imperishable; from the same evolves the world of meaningful objects, as a splendid creation” (*Vakyapadiya* 1:1).



The World of Today and the Word of God: A Mutual Challenge

Michel Camdessus



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The world, today, the Word ... I would first like to pause for a moment on the word "today". First because this word, in the present exposé, takes us back irresistibly to the today uttered one day long ago in a synagogue of Galilee (Lk 4:21): "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing".

Today. Not a vague now, not an indeterminate duration that would dilute the urgency of the present moment, as people say when they joke of *mañana* or *boukhra*. It is the urgency of today, because great crowds of people await the Word of God. "So long as it is called 'today'", as the author of Hebrews so well put it (Hebr 3:13). Here we are, then, today, faced with this mutual challenge of the world to the Word and the Word to the world. But is it really a challenge we have here?

What I see rather, at first glance, is a transmission breakdown: at the very moment when the world – even if it denies it – desperately awaits a word, the Word, we are told, isn't getting through. Taking the analysis of the breakdown a bit further, we see here rather a crisis: that is to say, a *mélange* of risks but also of opportunities which cause us to say in our turn: "Today is the favorable time".

But how are we to grasp these opportunities, what paths are we to follow to insure that, while listening to the world's questionings, the Church will appear as a "sign of salvation"?

Breakdown, opportunities, paths: what I have to offer are a few reflections on each of these terms, in the French context of today, without, however, forgetting all I have seen both of the Church's vitality and of its problems in the course of twenty years of exchanges on all the continents of the world.

I. Paradoxical breakdown; general breakdown

The world, to all appearances, has a faith deficit. Confronted with global threats that continue to multiply,

the failure of so many of the vague desires of reform and of progress, there is also a hope deficit. And where the idol of money takes the place of every other divinity, the world has a deficit of solidarity, and, dare we say, the word, of love? The world's triple distress!

To utter a word of faith, of hope and of love is an urgency that must seize the Church at the core of her being. And in this context, the first words of the *Dei Verbum* have a powerful resonance indeed, as they evoke her mission: "to set forth authentic doctrine on divine revelation and how it is handed on, so that by hearing the message of salvation the whole world may believe, by believing it may hope, and by hoping it may love." (DV 1)

The Church has made a valiant attempt to engage. The Council and the pontificates that followed it have made a magnificent effort to respond to these expectations, by her reform itself and by an effort to adapt her language to contemporary concerns and sensitivities. We note, however, that it was precisely at the time when the work of Vatican II was being implemented that modernity intensified all of its manifestations and, with it, the questioning of the traditional channels of transmission. Society became secularized in most of the Western democracies which henceforth share a common heritage: the institutionalization of the religious, relativism, individualism and subjectivism.

The Church was dealt a severe blow. She did not succumb to the temptation of withdrawal or retreat or to illusory dreams of winning back the world. She feels the desire to show a secularized society a face that is open and cordial, and without complexes. But we should not close our eyes to the effects of the present crisis. The churches are no longer full as once they were. A very serious crisis exists in the recruitment of priests. In learned circles, people talk about "Catholic deculturation". Does God matter any more? One could doubt that he does. "Since Sartre", observes J.-C. Eslin, "the debate about God has disappeared."

It is important, then, to take a closer look. In the first place we will perceive, without seeking any consolation in the fact, that the breakdown we are discussing is not one that is limited to the Church sector; rather, what we have is a general breakdown, a world breakdown of the function of transmission in Western societies and in all



those affected by the formidable two-fold thrust of modernity and globalization. This general problem is so relevant and urgent that the *Semaines Sociales de France* decided to make it the theme of their next November session. The theme will be “The act of transmission”. To explain what is meant, we have given the event a subtitle which should state our convictions and guide the participants: “Sharing of values, promotion of freedoms”.

Taking as our starting point the crisis in education in our societies and, obviously, everything we perceive of the breakdown of transmission in the Church, we asked people who know well the state of our families, that of business firms, of non-governmental organizations, of the media, of the national and international political class. Everywhere the crisis is the same. What can we say about our anguish as parents who must confront the apparent rejection by our children of everything we believe to be most essential to transmit to them? What are we to say of the distress felt by members of non-governmental organizations when confronted with the crisis of commitment, of those in charge of the media when confronted with the tendency to sensationalism, of the political activists of Europe when confronted with its present breakdown, of world leaders when confronted with the apparent impossibility not only to advance further along the path of adapting the United Nations to what we see as the necessity of an authentic world government, but even simply to maintain the flame that was already there in the early days of the UN?

It is then a universal breakdown, for all the sectors of society and for all the countries, including in the developing countries whose cultures are in danger of becoming extinct or in the emerging countries like China¹.

So this is wakeup time for our societies, and for the Church in their midst. Let us say in brief that the Church shares a global problem of the societies in which it is incarnated; it will not overcome this problem except in partnership with them. It lives this crisis in sympathy – in the strong sense of the word – with these societies and this common trial can be the occasion of a coming together in truth. The Church knows that her proper response resides in greater fidelity, in greater openness to her own message; by submitting to it and, thus, in some way, refashioning the message itself under the guidance of the Spirit, she will find herself sent back with a more modest and transparent mien to the men and women of her time and to her chances of encountering them with greater candor in a common effort to surmount together this crisis that affects everyone.

An immense task, like the crisis itself of which we are speaking, but this is not the first breakdown the Church has had to face. Crises have marked her history, and every time she has managed to discover people in her

midst who are capable of analyzing it with lucidity and of risking the leap forward in faith toward a new world. Such an analysis of this crisis shows that, rather than a breakdown, what we have is in fact a crisis. I have gradually slid from one concept into the other, and there are good reasons for doing so. The difference is great; it suggests that at the heart of every breakdown we find a mixture of risks and opportunities, two words whose superimposed ideograms express in Chinese precisely the concept of crisis. The great hours of the Church's history have been marked by this perception of new opportunities in times of rupture and of crisis. To discern them is of course the task of our today. These opportunities are revealed already in the luminous traits I have just sketched, but some merit particular mention; they amount to genuine opportunities for Gospel proclamation.

II. Opportunities

So let us dwell for a moment on these chances and opportunities. How blessed is our time with wonderful gifts! The phenomenal renewal of biblical studies in the last century and the extraordinary work undertaken by scholars on all sides to bring the contributions of the most modern sciences to the service of deepening our knowledge of the Bible, thus making our approach to the Word of Life more intellectually sound.

Not without connection with this biblical renewal, the advances of the ecumenical movement, though they have not yet put an end to the scandal of our divisions, which destroy our credibility (you know whom I am citing here), are nevertheless giving birth to the great hope of a common witness.

The historical developments of the last century have made the Church more free than ever from the political powers which treated it with suspicion from the first – since the time of Herod the Great – and in twenty centuries have never given up the attempt to use the Church for their purposes.

All the manifestations of the work of the Spirit in the world, despite the many ravages that are also at work in it: so many new imperatives that have now come to be recognized and that are fully consonant with the ethical demands of the Gospel and of Christian social teaching:

- respect for human dignity and the rights of man
- justice and solidarity with respect to the poor
- the protection of the environment.

All these young people who we thought were hearing nothing of what we wanted to transmit to them, are they not sometimes more Christian than we ourselves, in matters such as:



- solidarity and sharing
- openness to universality, acceptance of the other?

And what are we to say of other characteristics of our times, such as the tremendous advances in communications media that enable us to bring the Scriptures everywhere. If we believe that the organization of the power and communications system of the Roman Empire was a decisive reason for the advance of Christianity at its beginnings, we cannot but recognize that the apostles of today have at their disposal a wonderful set of tools, with Internet and the accompanying proliferation of technical advances which they should learn to master so that “the Word of God may speed on and be glorified” (2 Thess 3:1) and that, as the *Dei Verbum* states, “the treasure of revelation entrusted to the Church might more and more fill the hearts of men” (DV 26)?

Finally, would it be out of place to see new opportunities in the poverty, in the very vulnerability of the Church of today? A Church that divests itself of the trappings of prestige, of its power and its wealth, becomes more vulnerable to be sure. A Church that engages – bare handed – in open discussion with all the cultures of the world likewise becomes vulnerable. But is not this vulnerability of the same nature as that whose praises are sung by Saint Paul in his dialogue with the Athenians? Does not the very vitality of the Church today find its strength in this vulnerability that is lived out in a fundamental hope? With this as our starting point, how are we to go forward from now on?

III. What paths to take going forward?

With full awareness of my total incompetence in these matters and fully aware of the fact that I have done no better than anyone else in transmitting the faith that I received, I would risk underscoring three of the tasks that are of very special pertinence, among the many that mobilize the Church today:

- a full openness to dialogue
- a renewed service of the “table of the Word”
- an even more resolute commitment of Christians to the transformation of the world and to the advent of a civilization of love.

Openness to dialogue

Before human consciences, which she wants to be free and to whose freedom she has herself contributed, the Church is no longer in a position of domination, i.e. of simple authority, but she is much closer than ever to finding ways of a union of minds and hearts. Her approach to the world is becoming more one of conversation, as Paul VI put it, a conversation through which she herself is transformed.

This is something new in the life and experience of the Church; it is something she can share with a destabilized, troubled world, a world frightened by the pressures of globalization and tempted to shrink its horizons. The Church is called to do just the opposite. For 2.000 years now the divine words “fear not” have been inviting her to commit herself to paths whose term will be dictated to her only by her faith and hope. The Church is then in full solidarity with a world that hesitates to commit itself to a bridge that would pass over the abyss of her doubts, with no clear vision of where it lands on the other side. But the world, like the Church, cannot afford to run away from the challenges of our times. In this uncertain journey the world and the Church can find each other anew, vulnerable, closer to one another, sharing a renewed enthusiasm for the future, joined together for common tasks in service of mankind.

It seems to me important, above all, that while knowing well the weaknesses and biases of today's cultures, the Church continues to pursue her dialogue with them as far as possible, because religious culture is like any other culture: in order to transmit her heritage, she must retain her youthful vigor through contact with the new ideas that are being worked out, allow herself to be challenged by them and take her place among them with the modest assurance of Jesus in the midst of the teachers in the temple, helping thereby to nourish men and women in their search for the truth. It is through such efforts of dialogue and of inculturation that the Church has insured the transmission of the deposit of faith throughout the ages. She will hold to this path.

Many opportunities can flourish in this today. But they cannot be seized except at the price of a great effort of pastoral creativity. Modernity is calling for experiences that are faith-inspired but that are less founded on institutional authority than on the authenticity of personal witness, exchange, group sharing and a greater place given to the realm of the senses. Nothing will prevent such experiences from multiplying, it seems to me. After all, the true transmission of the faith has always been based, in a fundamental sense, on witness. Witnesses are precisely what we have to produce today. All in all, what is beginning to take shape in our day is a transition from an old approach of inculcation to one of offer and the engendering² of free witnessing subjects.

One may hope then that the Church will maintain a joyous attitude of recognition, in the two senses of the term. It is important that the world encounter a Church that recognizes with fervor the new values that it proclaims, a Church that is much closer to it than it thought; a Church happy with its claim of autonomy, its love of liberty, of pluralism, with its exigencies of solidarity and of respect for creation. The world should know that the Church will never cease to promote these values even if she has found it necessary to express her



repentance for all the times in the past when she adopted contrary attitudes and her acknowledgement of all those who, sometimes in situations of conflict, have brought her to revise outdated ideas and to purify her behavior. This mutual recognition is possible. It is necessary. It is the condition of an encounter heart to heart, a cor ad cor yearned for by the heart of God.

To offer the table of the Word³

In order that we may bring to the world what we have that is better, we ourselves must still have welcomed the Word at the most profound level of our being. All Christians – and not only clerics, obviously – should be prepared to serve the table of the Word with heart and competence. Our response to the crisis of its transmission can certainly only occur if we make great progress in formation for this ministry. Much has already been done. I am tempted to say that everything remains to be done, as a matter of top priority, in the area of the serious and comprehensive training of competent initiators to the reading and sharing of the Bible. May we take the liberty to call them to the intellectual and spiritual exigency as well as to humility in sharing.

Let us give top priority to a work that will make our contemporaries not only have a vague and approximate intellectual knowledge of a story and a message, but be able to receive, through an enlightened and personal reading of the Word, the grace of an encounter with the one who comes to us through Scripture, the grace to perceive that these events of the past are part of our today, to perceive that it is the hardship we encounter today that is nailed, today, and vanquished on the cross,⁴ that the Pentecost of a Word offered to all, in all languages and all cultures, is today.

This effort, moreover, cannot be dissociated from the role the Church is more and more being called to play, it seems to me, to help people better discern the “signs of the time” and better grasp the implications of the Word in the area of social ethics. I refer to the vast field of the Church’s social teaching.

I am personally a witness of the fact that this teaching can offer an incomparable assistance to men and women confronted with political, economic and social questions, in every part of the world, in their efforts of discernment regarding the best solutions for the humanization of the world.

Demanding of her faithful that they contribute with all their ardor to the construction of a better world which, for them, is nothing other than the mysterious preparation for the Kingdom of God, the Church gives meaning to their lives and summons them, together with all men of good will, to be agents of transformation in this world, which today is apparently at the mercy of the economy and of power relationships, but which at the

depth of their beings every human being wants to see fashioned by their freedom and their hopes. Service of the Word and recreation of a hope thus come together. The Church must show herself bolder still in the service of this hope. May she teach with still greater urgency about the God who comes, may she re-focus her teaching on eschatology as a source of the creativity of Christians in the service of a future to be constructed. A re-reading of Teilhard de Chardin fifty years after his death would be in this respect more opportune than ever.

To transform the world

To share the Word received and to transform the world – I was going to say that this is one and the same thing. But I would first like to issue a warning against a hesitancy found frequently among our contemporaries when they hear talk of transforming the world. “Mad ambition, naïveté, ignorance of the complexities of life and of human sluggishness generally, of the perverse forces that are at work” people often murmur. In fact, here too the individualism in which we bask engenders skepticism, disarms engagement, multiplies the reaction: “what good is it?” And yet no, having myself some experience with the sluggishness of bureaucratic delays and other such obstacles, having suffered many defeats and failures in my life in this work, I happily welcome the message of Saint Peter at Cologne. We can all accept the eucharistic “nuclear fission” at the core of our being and can be links of this chain reaction of multiple transformations, which will engender a civilization of love. It is our perseverance in all the tasks of the humanization of the world that will give full credibility to the message we wish to transmit and will give hope to a world that has lost its appetite for this message. Let me say something that will shock the ears of the wise: faced with this task of a future to construct, which far surpasses our powers in every respect, we will find courage in that wonderful remark of Hannah Arendt: “an ability to perform miracles is among the number of the human faculties”. This saying comes from an agnostic. How much more easily can those who know that by humanizing the world they are engaged in the mysterious work of building the Kingdom adopt it as their own?

On this basis, we have only to hear, today, the eternal challenge of God through Cain to all men and women: “Where is your brother Abel?” (Gen 4:9). Every human situation, however banal, is in a way an arena of justice, of solidarity or of peace. Listening to the Word and acting to humanize the world is our very condition. Christians should be people who pitch in where help is needed – people with a clear perception of the difficulties involved and the required interventions, but who refuse to resign themselves to evil and to the conspiracy of selfish interests, supported as they are by the buoyant hope of those who know that evil has been defeated once and for all.



Where to start?

This transformation of the world is a multifaceted struggle and we have an embarrassment of riches if we attempt to list its many fronts. I would like to single out those that seem to me to be particularly urgent today. I am thinking of course of the objectives for this millennium, of partnership with Africa, of all the global disasters that require humanitarian assistance, of the contribution of a Europe enlivened by a Christian sap, of the world government, etc. For now, allow me to say that Christians understand better and better, it seems to me, that the Word received is a call to transform the world. As much as or more than any other time in history, they are in the front lines wherever the dignity and the rights of man are at stake, wherever there is need to exercise that one duty which article 1 of the universal declaration on human rights of December 1948 makes a universal norm: "in all things, act in a spirit of brotherhood", wherever the creation needs to be protected, wherever justice needs to be promoted, wherever greater solidarity is in order, wherever money needs to become a slave instead of a master. The Church encourages men and women in these areas through her social teaching. These efforts to transform the world are the very mission of the Kingdom workers; they also function as a preparation of the fertile soil that enables the effective transmission of the message in the mysterious encounter of grace and human freedom. Let us not doubt it for a moment: a world in which Christians are recognized – like the Risen One at Emmaus – in the sharing of bread will be a world in which the Risen One himself will be more easily recognized.

I must conclude. I have just evoked that immense task of the transformation of the world. The people involved in the enterprise are numerous and more of them are Christians than you would believe, or than will say so themselves. I have met them on the job everywhere, throughout this vast world. This does not suffice, however, to reassure those whose hearts are still broken with anguish before the crisis of transmission. They have their doubts regarding the efficacy of so many efforts, not so much in terms of the humanization of the world as in terms of the transmission of the Word of Life. I have two responses to their concern and this will complete my remarks. The first will be the remark made by that great religious who achieved so much in terms of the formation of men and women of my generation, Father Varillon, sj. He said: "God can divinize only what man has first humanized". Let us lay people then continue to mobilize ourselves for the tasks of humanizing the world. Of course, many among us, active on these fronts, still behave like "silent believers", who are perhaps overly circumspect in expressing the faith that inspires them and their work. This should then be one more reason for the Church to do its best to facilitate access to the "table of the Word", to help them better to know Christ. Let us have no doubt that their word will it-

self be liberated and their faith will appear for what it is, a joyous source of life and vitality, and not a burden of do's and don'ts. The Spirit will do the rest.

(Transl.: L. Maluf) ■

¹ I would highly recommend for reference on this topic the excellent essay by Benoît Vermander, sj *Les mandariniens de la rivière Huai: Le réveil religieux de la Chine*, Paris 2002.

² One might refer here to the article of J. M. Donegani: *Inculturation et engendrement du croire*, in: *Une nouvelle chance pour l'Évangile*, eds. Philippe Bacq and Christoph Theobald, Bruxelles 2004.

³ For the drafting of this section I have drawn on the collective work *Une nouvelle chance pour l'Évangile* (see footnote 2).

⁴ See J. L. Chrétien, *Conférence de Carême – Notre-Dame de Paris* 2005, 139.



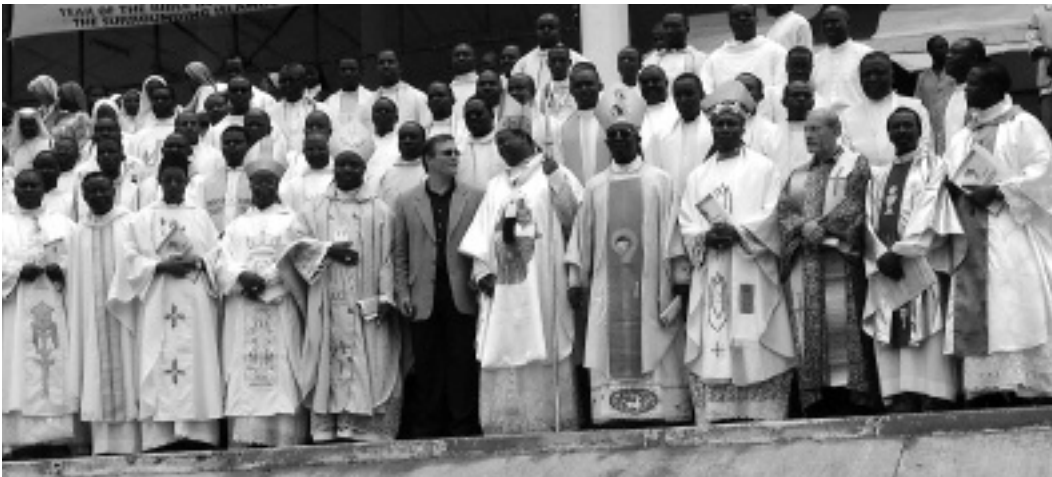
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AFRICA

Nigeria: Continental Celebration for the Year of the Bible in the African Region

SECAM, the Symposium of the Bishops' Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, proclaimed the year 2005 a Year of the Bible in Africa and the surrounding islands. According to the President of SECAM, Archbishop John Onaiyekan, the two jubilees that served as the occasion – the 40th anniversary of *Dei Verbum* and the 10th of *Ecclesia in Africa* – and ultimately also the Year of the Eucharist offered “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.” (You will find excerpts from the pastoral letter of Archbishop Onaiyekan on the opening of the Bible Year in *BDV* 74/75).

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An estimated three thousand persons did not hesitate to undertake long and tedious journeys during the rainy season in order to attend the three-day celebration that took place from July 15 to 17, 2005 in Abuja, Nigeria. Eucharistic celebrations, Bible circles, thematic discussion, Bible-quiz events and numerous personal encounters were the thematic and practical steps they took to respond more deeply to the biblical pastoral concern of *Dei Verbum* that the Word of God should be the guiding principle of our faith and the soul of theology. Alongside the largest participant groups from the various provinces of Nigeria came numerous participants from the surrounding countries of West Africa and from the entire black continent as well. The organizers remarked how gratifying it was that a significant number of priests also responded to the invitation, thus revealing their interest in the concerns of the Bible Year.

In the perimeter of the celebrations the biblical pastoral coordinators of the countries of Africa and Madagascar met to exchange experiences and to discuss topics such as collaboration in the network of the region, the contribution of Africa to the congress in Rome and questions relative to the next Plenary Assembly of the CBF which is scheduled to take place in Africa. ■



AMERICAS

Ecuador: Interconfessional Bible Meeting of the Latin American and Caribbean Subregion (FEBIC LAC)

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During the last meeting of the zone of the Bolivarian countries which took place in September 2004 in Quito, Ecuador, the CBF together with CELAM, the Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Latin America and the Caribbean, decided to include a Latin American meeting on the occasion of the jubilee of *Dei Verbum*. In the planning period that followed, an interconfessional meeting developed with participation of the Bible Societies, which brought together representatives of numerous Christian confessions from May 30 to June 2, 2005 in Bogota, Colombia.

Central themes of *Dei Verbum*, such for example as the question of the relationship of Sacred Scripture and Tradition and the concern for a biblical inspiration and animation of all sectors of pastoral ministry gained some further clarity through interconfessional perspectives. Besides the mix of different points of view and different traditions that inspired lively exchanges a good number of commonalities were also established – to the surprise of many. We should highlight here the work-unit on the theme of fundamentalism. The presence of various confessions and traditions, including those of the evangelical communities, and of course the concrete Latin American context triggered particularly stimulating discussions.

The interconfessional Bible meeting was marked by a noteworthy spirit of openness and dialogue, which found expression also in the fact that in the final document of the meeting the three organizers (CBF, CELAM and UBS) declare their express determination to further regular collaboration in Bible work in an interconfessional perspective. A publication of the congress papers was proposed by CELAM; individual contributions and the final document of the meeting can also be obtained through the General Secretariat of the CBF. ■

ASIA – OCEANIA

Philippines: Fourth Biblical Pastoral Congress of the Asia-Oceania Region

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After a ten-year break a biblical pastoral congress for the entire region of Asia and Oceania took place once again on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of *Dei Verbum*. This time span should not, however, obscure the vibrant life of the region; because of the vastness of the area, the linguistic and cultural diversity and the political-social differences, most of the activities take place in the framework of the four subregions. Since 1985 a total of 22 congresses, symposiums and meetings at this level have been working on topics related to biblical pastoral ministry.

The Fourth Biblical Pastoral Congress for the whole of Asia and Oceania bore the title "God's Word: Living Hope and Lasting Peace". It was co-organized by the FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, FABC) and the CBF and it took place from February 14 to 18, 2005 in Tagaytay, in the Philippines. Among the approximately 180 participants were ten bishops, numerous priests and religious and a large number of lay people – a configuration that well reflected the biblical pastoral reality in Asia and Oceania. The lectures and discussions centered on themes connected with *Dei Verbum* and were inspired and marked by the Asiatic context. The question of the interpretation of Sacred Scripture in the light of an Asian hermeneutic, for example, was treated extensively; the preoccupation with Asian concepts of revelation enriched and deepened the reflection on the Christian tradition of revelation. Works accomplished in the framework of FABC were very helpful in this regard. Numerous events dealt with the present socio-



economic, political-cultural and religious situation in the countries of Asia and Oceania and the resultant challenges to Bible work. Interreligious discussions, in which representatives of various religions exchanged ideas on theological, social and moral issues, could also not be lacking in the continent of religions and wisdom traditions. The media interest in this congress turned out to be significant as well.

The documents of the congress have since been published in book form (174 pages) by the Episcopal Commission for the Biblical Apostolate (ECBA) of the Philippine Bishops' Conference. This can be ordered directly from ECBA. Please refer to www.c-b-f.org for a detailed report on the congress by Estrella del Mar

Following the congress a three-day meeting of the Southeast Asian subregion took place. This provided the opportunity for participants to exchange ideas and plan new initiatives regarding reports, information flow, publications, national meetings, etc. – in short: for “networking” in their subregion. Among other things an electronic newsletter saw the light of day and the decision was made to hold annual national meetings in countries with numerous members, such as the Philippines and Indonesia (see following report).

Philippines: Fourth CBF-SEA Subregional Workshop

For the Southeast Asian subregion the Asia-Oceania Biblical Congress (AOBC) in Tagaytay held from February 19 to 21, 2005 was a golden opportunity to have its fourth workshop as a follow-up at the same venue. All the SEA member countries were represented except Malaysia. Delegates came from Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. CBF General Secretary, Alexander M. Schweitzer, was also present.



Different from the previous workshops where there were inputs on various topics, this was a “workshop” in the real sense of the word. Following up the AOBC's theme, “God's Word: Living Hope and Lasting Peace”, the participants aimed at “Responding to the Challenges of Peace in the Modern Day World”. The skillful facilitator, Msgr. Pete Gatigan of the Southeast Asia Interdisciplinary Development Institute (SAIDI), familiarized those present with

the “organization planning system”. The participants worked in small groups and compared their findings in the plenary sessions. In conclusion they came up with a “workshop output” containing the SEA Vision and Mission Statement, goals, objectives and recommendations and thus felt better equipped to face challenges in the biblical pastoral ministry in their individual regions and to improve cooperation within the CBF subregion.

Fr. Doms Ramos, svd, and Estrella del Mar proved to be very effective secretaries. They served as a constant reminder of these wonderful days among brothers and sisters and the participants' pledge to develop an effective network of communication and collaboration among themselves.

This shall be considered as realized if:

- the use of the website of the Catholic Biblical Federation is maximized (cf. also www.c-b-f.org);
- a mailing list is made available to all members;

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- regular meetings are held at national level;
- a team to help the SEA coordinator is formed;
- meetings via internet are done among members; and
- a newsletter is published and distributed to all members.

After a soul-searching analysis of their organization, the participants came to the conclusion that one area which has to be worked on concerns the multiplicity of roles and responsibilities of the CBF-SEA. Since this affects the effectivity of biblical pastoral ministry, the participants resolved to prioritize biblical pastoral ministry over other responsibilities and to seek creative ways and means for collaborative support of priests, bishops and religious superiors.

More information pertaining to the Fourth CBF-SEA subregional workshop can be found at www.c-b-f.org.

(Report: Sr. M. Emmanuel Gunanto, osu) ■

EUROPE – MIDDLE EAST

Lebanon: Ninth Biblical Congress on “The Historical Jesus”

The Middle East subregion of the Catholic Biblical Federation held its Ninth Biblical Congress in Lebanon, at Our Lady of the Well convent (5 km north of Beirut), from January 23 to 28, 2005. The subject chosen for the congress was: “The Historical Jesus”. Present were delegations from Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, the Holy Land and Palestine, besides representatives from Lebanon. Fr. Ayoub Chahwan, coordinator for the Middle East subregion of the Catholic Biblical Federation, organized the congress, assisted by the ex-coordinator, Fr. Paul Feghali, and other benevolent persons. The General Secretary of the Catholic Biblical Federation was represented by Mr. Claudio Ettl, who was also one of the speakers of the congress. Exceptional efforts were made in order to help certain members to participate, despite all the political and administrative obstacles in their respective countries which threatened their coming.

The congress was solemnly opened by Msgr. Youssef Kallas, Greek-Catholic Metropolitan of Beirut and Jbeil, president of the Theological and Biblical Commission of the Catholic Patriarchs’ and Bishops’ Assembly in Lebanon. The congress emblem was the following: “Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Herod’s time”. Fr. Jacques Schlosser, professor from the Strasbourg Faculty of Theology, was invited to give a daily lecture about contemporary historical research on the most important problems about Jesus.

The morning prayer, as well as the Mass concluding each day, was prepared, in turn, by several participants of the congress, according to their various liturgical rites. In this way, there were celebrations according to the following liturgies: Coptic, Byzantine, Syriac, Maronite and Latin, the last in the Arabic translation used in Sudan. These moments of prayer were useful in order to strengthen the communion proceeding from the common meditation of God’s Word and to accomplish it through the Eucharistic sacrifice; in the same spirit, the members of the conference participated, on January 25, in the evangelical evening service at the Near East School of Theology (NEST), in Beirut. On January 26, at the Jesuit Fathers’ monastery in Bekfaya, Fr. Samir Bechara, sj, invited all the members who participated in the conference to celebrate Mass and to share in a friendly meal.

The congress which is held every second year is an event in itself, not only from the biblical and scientific point of view, but also, and especially, as an occasion for meeting and seeing one another again. All the members of the Middle East subregion can offer each

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other reciprocal help and moral support, and can exchange not only biblical ideas and projects, but also biblical publications from each country. One wishes that the vitality and enthusiasm distinguishing the Federation's life in the Middle East, as well as the courageous efforts of members belonging to those countries which, these days, are suffering very much from their political situation, such as Iraq and the Holy Land, bear more abundant fruits in the future.

(Report: Fr. Ayoub Chahwan) ■

Newsflash

Africa

- **Fr. Moïse Adeniran Adekambi** of Benin, till recently deputy director of BICAM (Biblical Centre for Africa and Madagascar) has been appointed its new director (see report on the new coordinators in this issue).
- **Archbishop Cornelius Fontem Esua**, member of the CBF Executive Committee from 1990 to 2002, till recently coadjutor archbishop of the archdiocese of Bamenda, Cameroon has been appointed Archbishop of Bamenda following the resignation of Archbishop Paul Verdzehov for reasons of age.
- **Fr. Daniel Kamara** of Sierra Leone has been appointed biblical apostolate coordinator for the AECAWA region (Association of Episcopal Conferences of Anglophone West Africa).
- **Fr. Francisco Fernandez, svd**, is successor to Fr. Pinto as director of Verbum Bible, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. Fr. Pinto has returned to his home province in Portugal.

Asia – Oceania

- **Fr. Vincentius Sensi Potokota**, former director of the Pastoral Center of the Archdiocese of Ende, Indonesia, CBF associate member since 1995, was ordained bishop in the newly established diocese of Maumere, Flores, Indonesia.
- **Bishop Joseph Zen, sdb**, bishop of Hong Kong, has been elevated to the College of Cardinals by Pope Benedict XVI. The Catholic diocese of Hong Kong has been a full member of the CBF since 1980.

Americas

- The Holy Father has appointed **Fr. Bernardo Bastres Florence, sdb**, provincial superior of the Salesians in Chile, as bishop of Punta Arenas, Chile. The diocese of Punta Arenas has been an associate member of the CBF since 1980.

Europe – Middle East

- **Fr. Joseph Stricher**, whose ailing health prevented him for some time from continuing as CBF coordinator for the subregion of Southern and Western Europe has recovered and meanwhile taken over as coordinator from Fr. Gérard Billon again.
- **Editorial Verbo Divino** Estella, Spain, CBF associate member since 1977, celebrated its 50th anniversary in May 2006.
- The **Centre Informatique & Bible**, Maredsous, Belgium, CBF associate member since its foundation, celebrated its 25th anniversary in October 2005.
- **Bishop emeritus Antonios Naguib** of Minya, Egypt has been elected the new Patriarch of Alexandria of the Coptic Catholic Church. His Beatitude Naguib was the first CBF subregional coordinator for the Middle East and initiated both the First and Second Middle East Biblical Congresses in Cyprus in 1985 resp. 1988. ■



CBF's New Coordinators

Vacant coordinator posts in the subregions of Latin America and the Caribbean, Oceania, Central Europe and Rome have meanwhile been filled, the new coordinators having been approved and accepted by the CBF Executive Committee. Africa and Madagascar now also have a new coordinator, the previous deputy director of BICAM, and all the other CBF coordinators will be continuing in their positions in the CBF sub/regions.

We are giving you a short introduction to the new CBF officials as follows:

Region Africa and Madagascar

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Fr. Moïse Adeniran Adekambi (born 1957) is a priest from Benin. He studied theology and philosophy in Benin and specialized in Sacred Scriptures at the Biblicum in Rome. After his graduation he served as formator for lay people and priests in his home country and worked for a biblical radio program at a national radio station. In 2002 he took over the position as deputy director of the Catholic Biblical Center for Africa and Madagascar (BICAM) and became its director in 2005.

Subregion Latin America and Caribbean

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Fr. Gabriel Naranjo Salazar, cm, (born 1950), a Vincentian priest, specialized in biblical theology at the Pontifical University Javeriana of Bogotá, Colombia and in Sacred Scripture at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, the École Biblique, Jerusalem, and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. For years he has been involved in intercultural exegesis (Evangelium et Cultura) and in the Catholic Biblical Federation, as he was also CBF zonal coordinator for the Bolivarian countries of Latin America. Fr. Naranjo is professor of exegesis in the Vincentian Theologate and in other institutes such as CELAM's Instituto Teológico-Pastoral.

Subregion Oceania

Fr. Valentine Gryk, svd
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 Catholic Church
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 Papua New Guinea





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Fax: +675-542 16 35
E-mail: wgryk@daltron.com.pg

Fr. Valentine Gryk, svd, (born 1957), a Divine Word missionary, was ordained to the priesthood in 1984. He has been living in Papua New Guinea for 21 years and is the present director of the Pastoral Center in Goroka. Fr. Gryk is also the biblical apostolate coordinator for the SVD province and for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. He has wide experience in both pastoral and administrative fields having served as bush missionary and as District Superior of the SVDs, to mention only one of his many offices.

Subregion Central Europe

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Fr. Anton Tyrol (born 1960) holds a doctorate in theology and a licenciate in biblical theology and was ordained priest in 1984. He is presently professor for biblical theology at the Catholic University of Ružomberok and teaches at the Theological Institute RKTF of the Catholic University of in Spišska Kapitula. For several years now he has been the director of the Catholic Biblical Association of Slovakia (Katolícke Biblické Dielo).

Subregion Rome

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Fr. Corrado Pastore, sdb, (born 1948) entered the Salesian noviciate in Venezuela in 1965 and undertook philosophical and theological studies (1968-1976) and specialised in Bible studies (1976-1979) in Rome. He holds a licenciate from the Pontifical Biblical Institute. From 1979 to 2004 Fr. Pastore taught Bible in various institutes in Venezuela and since 2004 he has been teaching at the Università Pontificia Salesiana in Rome. Fr. Pastore is a member of the Associazione Biblica Salesiana and from 1989 till 2005 was the Latin-American coordinator of same. Since 2005 he is its Executive Secretary.

The CBF prays for God's blessing on these new coordinators and is looking forward to fruitful collaboration with them. ■



Growing in Love through God's Word

On the Occasion of Bishop Ablondi's 80th Birthday

Bishop Alberto Ablondi served as president of the Catholic Biblical Federation from 1984 to 1996 and for long years after still accompanied the Federation in fatherly spirit and through deep ties of friendship. Bishop Ablondi celebrated his 80th birthday in December 2004, but age was no reason for him not to participate actively in the International Dei Verbum Congress held in Rome in 2005. During the congress he encouraged the CBF members – not least by his own example – to continue and indeed to fortify their efforts in spreading the Word of God. We take this occasion as an opportunity to honour Bishop Ablondi herewith and to proffer our thanks to him.



Msgr. Alberto Ablondi was born in Milano, Italy, in 1924 and ordained priest in Ventimiglia in 1947. He was appointed auxiliary bishop of the diocese of Livorno in 1966 and presided as bishop over this same diocese from 1970 to 2000.

Bishop Ablondi showed untiring commitment and interest in a wide scope of biblical pastoral activities and in diverse ecumenical matters, both documented by his positions on the boards of various institutes and organizations involved in these fields. Thus, too, he was a member of the board of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (now: Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity) during his period of office as CBF president from 1984 to 1996, and from 1988 to 1996 he served as vice-president of the United Bible Societies Europe and Middle East region. Bishop Ablondi also actively participated in the consultations leading to the new revised edition in 1987 of the *Guidelines for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible*, a joint effort of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the United Bible Societies. Apart from these manifold tasks, Bishop Ablondi was very committed to the spreading of *lectio divina*, the introduction of Bible Sundays and Bible Weeks and to steering public awareness towards the central role which Sacred Scripture should play in the lives of the faithful.



Bishop Ablondi (on left) at the Dei Verbum Congress in Rome

During his CBF presidency he attended without fail all of the meetings of the CBF Executive Committee, the Federation's international ruling board. He inspired the participants at three CBF Plenary Assemblies with his charismatic personality and his passionate interest in biblical pastoral affairs. Even years after he had given up his office as CBF president he still attended from the first day to the last the International Dei Verbum Congress jointly organized by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Catholic Biblical Federation, held in Rome in 2005. During this congress Bishop Ablondi enriched many of the discussions with his arousing and knowledgeable contributions.

In his oration on the occasion of Bishop Ablondi's 80th birthday, former CBF General Secretary, Fr. Ludger Feldkämper, svd, honoured Bishop Ablondi by saying:

President Ablondi inspired and guided ... not as somebody with the airs of an authority figure, but by his presence and personality, warmhearted and eloquent. He never imposed himself or his ideas on the group. A characteristic element of his style was to give to others maximum support and encouragement to do their part. ... Meeting people with respect, warmth, attention, and, yes, affection he illustrated and lived how the Word should be approached in both Scripture and in life. He lived and illustrated the ideal of a minister of the Word as expressed in a prayer that allegedly comes from the Oriental Church:



becoming a visible Word of God. Bishop Ablondi witnessed to the fact that any encounter with the Word, by its very nature, has a personal and a communal dimension. It is not meant only, nor even primarily, for the mind but for the heart, for the entire person. It aims at friendship and community: "I have called you friends because I have revealed to you everything I have received from my Father" (Jn 15:14). "What we have seen and heard, we announce also to you that you are in communion with us. And our communion is with the Father and the Son." (1 Jn 1:3).

Those words of Fr. Feldkämper can only be emphasized, and an excerpt from Bishop Ablondi's farewell greeting as CBF president to the participants of the CBF Plenary Assembly in Hong Kong surely only goes to underline them:

Nothing is more important than timing for God's as well as for the human word ... time necessary to allow the Word in all the different forms of meditating, studying and thinking. Finally, we need time to move from comprehension to conversion. At this point, the Word becomes incarnate, becoming history and getting in our life with different suggestions. Thus, the Word becomes the soul of our activity, is the interpreter of the signs of time ... for me as a Christian, as a priest and as a bishop, the life of the Federation in particular has been a ulterior motive of growth of love for the Word, a growth of the Word itself, and a growth of love through the Word.

The Catholic Biblical Federation owes great gratitude to Bishop Ablondi. We wish him the gift of God's grace, and that his spiritual vigour, his charisma and his warmheartedness may accompany him, and us, for many years to come. ■



New Members

In January 2006 the Federation welcomed three new associate members from the Latin American subregion:

Centro Bíblico para América Latina (CEBIPAL)

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Website: www.celam.org/cebipal

Contact person: Fr. Fidel Oñoro, cjm

CEBIPAL's objective is to promote biblical studies and biblical animation of pastoral ministry through investigation, formation and the offering of creative pastoral methods. The organization is divided into an "Exegesis Department" which is working on the 10-year Bible translation project *Biblia de la Iglesia en América* (BIA) and which organizes congresses for Latin American Bible studies as well as the production and distribution of biblical formation material at an exegetical level and a "Hermeneutics Department" which is dedicated to the promotion of biblical pastoral ministry and biblical spirituality through various courses, meetings and symposiums.

PAN-American (PANAM) Zone of the Divine Word Missionaries

c/o Zonal Coordinator for the Biblical Apostolate
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E-mail: thughes@netpar.com.br

Contact person: Fr. Thomas Hughes, svd

The PANAM Zone of the SVD is made up of 17 provinces or regions in 18 countries some of which are associate members of the CBF, while others are not. The PANAM Zone felt the necessity of affiliating the zone as such, in order to achieve greater integration of all the provinces/regions with the CBF. The biblical work of the PANAM Zone includes important biblical centres (São Paulo, Quito, Buenos Aires), biblical ministry teams in association with lay people and religious; biblical ministry in conjunction with dioceses, religious congregations, parishes and social movements.

Equipo de Coordinación de Lectura Pastoral de la Biblia

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Contact person: Fr. José Mizzotti

The Equipo de Coordinación de Lectura Pastoral de la Biblia is a religious non-profit association working at national level in Peru. It promotes the pastoral reading of the Bible through adequate biblical formation and is in regular collaboration with the Episcopal Commission for Catechesis, Biblical Pastoral Ministry and Indigenous Ministry as far as the animation and the accompaniment of various courses and workshops are concerned. Its main activities are the strengthening of the national and various regional teams, the organization of courses for biblical animators in Lima and the provinces, the organization of national meetings for pastoral Bible-reading and the edition of 14 books of the collection *La Buena Noticia a los Pobres* and other biblical leaflets.

Publication: *Perú-Biblia*, a quarterly bulletin ■



Karibuni Afrika!

Welcome to Africa and welcome to CBF's Seventh Plenary Assembly

During the International Dei Verbum Congress in September 2005, the CBF Executive Committee held a short meeting to discuss the most suitable venue for the next CBF Plenary Assembly, due to be convened in 2008. Many reasons speak in favour of Africa: The previous PAs took place in Vienna (1972), Malta (1978), Bangalore (1984), Bogotà (1990), Hong Kong (1996) and Beirut (2002) and hence Africa is the only CBF region left where the members have not yet gathered for a PA. Furthermore, during its last PA in Lebanon, the CBF defined a regional "Africa priority" for the six-year term 2002-2008 where the Federation was to focus special attention on that particular continent. And last but not least, we have received several requests from Africa itself to hold the next Plenary Assembly there.

During a meeting in Kenya in 2003, the biblical pastoral coordinators for Africa and Madagascar suggested as possible Plenary Assembly venues four African countries which the CBF General Secretary duly visited in 2004. The possibility of interaction and encounters between PA participants and the local church is one of the main criteria when choosing a Plenary Assembly venue. Equally important is the relationship between the chosen theme and the particular venue.

As a result of their discussions the Executive Committee decided on Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Hence the next CBF Plenary Assembly on world-wide scale will take place in a country which in spite of mighty efforts to fight poverty can be found near the bottom end of the economic ladder, a country – like so many other African countries – suffering from the HIV scourge. Unlike many of its neighbouring countries, however, Tanzania has succeeded in overcoming conflicts among the many clans and the form of government promotes and benefits Christian Muslim relationships. Like many others though, the country of Tanzania is also confronted with the challenges of fundamentalism. Tanzania is renowned for its joie de vivre, its charming and endearing people, for its radiant ethno-cultural diversity and the many delights offered by nature. It is a country where the Church is embedded in a wealth of Christian groups, movements and Small Christian Communities, endeavouring to keep God's Word at the core of the lives of the faithful, with the vigorous support of the Tanzanian Bishops' Conference.

Thus the CBF's Seventh Plenary Assembly will surely offer a profound and enriching experience for CBF members from around the globe participating at the venue "Port of Peace" (Dar es Salaam) and – we hope – also for the host country itself.

You will be receiving more detailed information on the Plenary Assembly in the course of this year. Karibuni Afrika – Welcome to Africa! ■

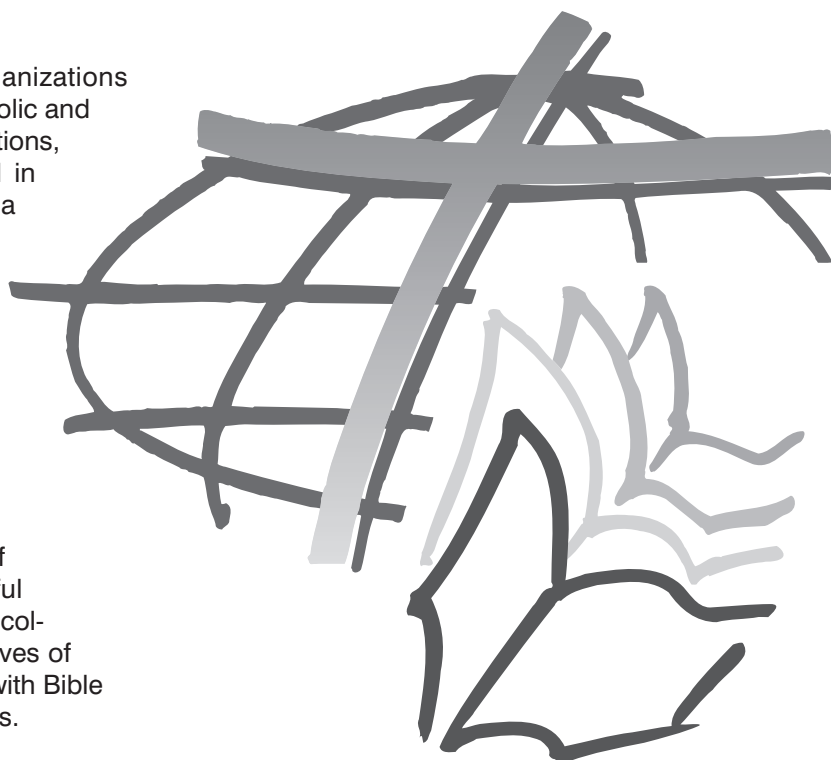
Special thanks go to the following persons for their photos:

Estrella del Mar (p. 20), Ludger Feldkämper, svd (p. 24 top), Valentin Gryk, svd (p. 22 bottom); all other photos: CBF archives.

The Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) is a world-wide association of Catholic organizations committed to the ministry of the Word of God. At the present time, the CBF membership includes 92 full members and 232 associate members coming from a total of 127 countries.

The activities of these organizations include the preparation of Catholic and interconfessional Bible translations, the propagation of Bibles and in general the promotion of a deeper understanding of Holy Scripture.

The CBF promotes the biblical pastoral activities of these organizations, provides a forum for the world-wide sharing of experiences in this field, searches for new ways of bringing the joy of God's Word to the faithful throughout the world. It seeks collaboration with the representatives of biblical scholarship as well as with Bible Societies of various confessions.



In particular, the CBF works towards the promotion of the reading of the Bible within the context of concrete life situations and the training of ministers of the Word in this direction.

At the beginning of the third millennium Holy Scripture can be viewed as the great textbook of humanity. Especially in times like this the reading of the Bible not only helps the Christian community to grow in faith and love, but it can and should also offer to the whole world those words of brotherhood and of human wisdom that it so desperately needs. This is the great challenge that the Catholic Biblical Federation sets for itself.

Vincenzo Paglia, Bishop of Terni-Narni-Amelia, Italy, President of the CBF