

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF THE WORD OF GOD IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH THE BIBLICAL ANIMATION OF PASTORAL MINISTRY

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The title that was assigned to me as a description of my topic is complex. It consists of two parts (role of the Word in the Church and biblical animation of pastoral ministry) whose connection, though given as evident, is not so easy to spell out with scientific rigor.

This fact could be brought to light by re-formulating the title in terms of a series of question, such as, for example: What is the role of the Word of God in the Church? Why is this place described as central (and why is this not an obstacle to other central realities, particularly that of Christ himself)? What is the relationship between this centrality of the Word and the place of Scripture in the Church? How are we to go about the task of animating with Scripture the daily lives of the faithful in their dedication to the Kingdom of God? And again: what is the relationship of all of this with Revelation, a concept that supplies the title for the document whose fortieth anniversary we are celebrating?

It should be obvious that I cannot delve deeply into every one of these questions, which were already present to the speakers who preceded me. But I have placed them here at the beginning so as to highlight the complexity and the vastness of the topic. I will limit myself to underscoring a few practical aspects relating especially to the biblical animation of pastoral ministry. Obviously, the basic reference text for this treatment is the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* of Vatican Council II. This Constitution has already been presented in its theological aspects by Cardinal Kasper and in as to its reception throughout the last forty years by Bishop Onayekan. I will limit myself therefore to highlighting the following points:

1. I should like to begin with a personal recollection and with a testimonial of the recently deceased beloved Pope John Paul II.
2. What were the open questions at the time of the *Dei Verbum*?
3. How were they confronted by the Council?
4. What can be said of the presence of Scripture in the life of the Church at the time of the Council?
5. What contribution was made by the *Dei Verbum* to the presence of Scripture in the Church?
6. What are the consequences for the biblical animation of pastoral practice, especially with regard to the *lectio divina* of the faithful?

1. PERSONAL RECOLLECTION AND TESTIMONIAL OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

I am happy to begin my talk with a recollection of the dear deceased Pope John Paul II. It is a recollection that touches me personally, since in his penultimate book, entitled "Rise, Let Us Go!", the Pope speaks of the bishop as a "sower" and "servant of the word" and comments (p.36):

"The task of the bishop, in fact, is to make himself the servant of the word. Just like any teacher the bishop sits on his chair, that chair which has its symbolic setting in the church called 'Cathedral'. He sits there to preach, to proclaim and to expound the Word of God". The Pope goes on to note that there are obviously a variety of collaborators of the Bishop in the proclamation of the Word: the priests, the deacons, the catechists, the teachers, the professors of theology, and an increasing number of well-educated lay people who are faithful to the Gospel.

But I continue (and here is where the Pope's words touch me personally): "However, no one can substitute for the presence of the Bishop who sits on his Cathedra or presents himself at the ambo of his episcopal church and personally expounds the word of God to those he has

assembled about him. Like the scribe who became a disciple of the kingdom, he too is like the head of the household who brings forth from his treasure things new and old. I am happy to mention here Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, emeritus Archbishop of Milan, whose catecheses in the cathedral of his city drew large crowds of people, to whom he unveiled the treasury of God's Word. His is only one of numerous examples that demonstrate how great a hunger for the word of God exists among the people. How important it is that this hunger be satisfied! I have always harbored the conviction that if I wish to satisfy this hunger in others I must follow the example of Mary in becoming first of all myself one who listens to the word of God and meditates on it in my heart".

I cited this page because I have vividly recall some beautiful moments experienced in the Milan cathedral, particularly in the company of thousands and thousands of young people listening in silence to the word of God. I cited it aslo by way of honoring the memory of John Paul II, who was kind enough to mention me in this his penultimate book. But with this citation I wish to make the further point that the opportunity we have today to abundantly satisfy the hunger so many people have for the Word of God is also the fruit and the merit of the conciliar document whose fortieth anniversary we are celebrating, namely the *Dei Verbum*.

2. WHAT WERE THE OPEN QUESTIONS WITH RESPECT TO SCRIPTURE AT THE TIME OF THE COUNCIL?

I limit myself here to a few remarks, sufficient to highlight the topic with which we are concerned. In fact, a cursory review of the published reports of the time readily reveals that there were at least three burning issues in the realm of biblical studies and with reference to the presence of Scripture in the Church.

1. The relationship between Tradition and Scripture. This topic was especially vibrant in the world of Europe and the North, in the context of the dialogue between Protestants and Catholics. At issue was the question of whether the Church derived its dogmas from Sacred Scripture alone or also from an oral tradition containing things not said by Scripture.

The Council of Trent, four centuries earlier, had already discussed the issue and had discarded the formula that had been proposed, namely, that revealed truth is found "partim in libris scriptis et partim in sine scripto traditionibus" in favor of a formula that would not pre-judge the issue, that is: revealed truth is found "in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus": thus, not "partim – partim" but "et – et".

The problem presented itself now in raw form, in the aftermath of heated discussions on the part of recent scholars, Catholic and Protestant. The Council treated the question in some depth. But it is not my task to reconstruct here the history of the discussion. I will mention below only the solution that was ultimately arrived at.

2. The application of the historical critical method to Sacred Scripture and the related problem of the inerrancy of the sacred books. Some progress had been made with respect to the very rigid doctrine of the past. Identifying literary genres was recognized as a valid procedure, and this thanks to the Encyclical "Divino afflante Spiritu" of 1943. But the question still remained pending, and the whole issue had resulted in a sharp controversy at the end of the 1950's. The primary target of this controversy was the teaching of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, which was accused of not taking into account the traditional truth of the inerrancy of the sacred books

The problem affected not only the interpretation of Scripture, but also the daily relationship of the faithful with the Bible. If the faithful were obligated to a quasi-fundamentalistic interpretation of the sacred books, many of them, especially the more highly educated, would simply have walked away.

3. Another very lively theme, particularly relevant to the topic of this paper, was that of the "biblical movement", which for over fifty years had been favoring a new familiarity with the

sacred texts and a more spiritual approach to Scripture, understood as a source of prayer and inspiration for life. But the practices in question were somewhat elitist in their appeal, and had also been the object of suspicion and criticism. It was important to officially recognize what was good in this movement, to regulate this new blossoming of practices, to give them a place in the Church, and where necessary to correct them, giving serious attention to the dangers of deviation that continue to be found today with respect to this reading of the Bible on the part of the laity.

These are then the great themes that stirred the minds of the council Fathers. On the other hand, the concept of revelation, which was later to prove decisive for the shaping of the entire Constitution, was not at issue at the opening of the Council.

3. HOW THEN, IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COUNCIL, DID THE PROCESS OF CLARIFICATION COME ABOUT WITH RESPECT TO THESE THEMES, AND ESPECIALLY WITH RESPECT TO THE THIRD, THAT OF SACRED SCRIPTURE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH?

The preparatory draft on these questions, entrusted to the appropriate commission, was presented to the Fathers on 14 November 1962 under the title: "Constitutio de fontibus Revelationis" (Constitution on the Sources of Revelation)".

That first session was stormy. Cardinal Liénart said simply: "Hoc schema mihi non placet" (I don't like this draft). Cardinals Frings, Léger, Koenig, Alfrinck, Ritter and Bea would likewise express strong criticisms of the draft. Other Fathers however took the opposite position. It was thus that the council Fathers arrived, with hard work and considerable tension, at the vote of 20 November, where the decision to continue the discussion of the proposed scheme prevailed, to the great displeasure of many. Except that Pope John XXIII intervened with a very wise gesture, insisting that the draft be withdrawn and entrusted to a new commission to be re-written.

Then began a prolonged effort which, through a series of ups and downs, would produce numerous text forms, the last of which was finally accepted on 22 September 1965. But "modi" (modifications) continued to be proposed. They were examined and inserted in the text, which was subjected to a vote on 20 October 1965. And so it was that the Council arrived at the final vote of the following November, which registered 2344 votes in favor and 6 opposed.

What were the major points clarified by the new draft, to which was given the title of "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation", or "Dei Verbum" from its opening words, which were inserted thanks to a proposal made in the final discussion (September 1965)? I recall five.

1. The concept of "revelation", which, as I said, was not in question at the beginning of the Council, but which was then clarified gradually in the course of the discussions and the re-writings of the text, till it came to be expressed as it now stands in n. 2 of the Constitution, was no longer spoken of with reference to truths, but primarily with reference to God's self-communication: "In his goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (DV n.2)"

This clarification on the nature of revelation had a positive effect on the entire text, and helped to insure a favorable reception of the document.

2. A broad concept of Tradition. With respect to what had been the usual way of speaking in the past, the Council offered, in the final text of the Constitution, a broad concept of Tradition, which was expressed as follows: "The Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes" (n.8). The unity of Tradition and Scripture was thus also affirmed, against any attempt at separation: "Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity

and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit” (n.9).

In the following section the relationship between the three concepts: Tradition, Scripture and Word of God is described: “Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church” (n.10).

With respect to discussions on the interpretation of Scripture, and especially on the absence of any error in it, the Council proposed a broad concept of inerrancy in its final formulation. The first preparatory scheme had talked about an inerrancy “in qualibet re religiosa et profana”. The final text (n.11) affirms that “the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of our salvation”. This formulation silenced many empty debates of the past on this issue.

But what interests us most of all here is the work the Council devoted to the importance and centrality of Sacred Scripture in the life of the Church. In its final draft, the document makes its own the fundamental concerns of the biblical movement and promotes a prayerful familiarity of all the faithful with all of Scripture. The Council worked on this theme throughout all the sessions, right up to the last, with continuous re-writings of the text, proposals and last-minute amendments which make the history of this chapter very complex and difficult to describe. I will limit myself to the fundamental points, beginning with the consideration of the place held by Scripture in the Catholic Church at the time of Vatican II.

4. WHAT CAN BE SAID OF THE PRESENCE OF SCRIPTURE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH AT THE TIME OF VATICAN II?

The situation up until toward the beginning of the twentieth century was once described with the words of Paul Claudel, who affirmed: “There is an unbounded respect toward Sacred Scripture (on the part of the faithful): it is shown above all by the way people stay away from it!” (Cf. *L'Écriture Sainte*, in *La Vie intellectuelle* 16 [1948] 10). There may be some exaggeration here; it is true, however, that among Catholics, and above all among the laity, a certain distance was indeed maintained with respect to the text of Scripture (even if indirect ways of reaching its contents were many). There are many explanations of this situation, not least of which the fact that until the eighteenth century only a minority of the world's population was literate. But the main reason was that of a certain diffidence of ecclesiastical authorities toward the reading of the Bible on the part of the laity. This diffidence was born primarily in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation and of other movements in force since the Middle Ages, which promoted direct contact of the laity with Scripture, but in effect divorced its reading from an ecclesial context.

Up until the Middle Ages, in fact, no evidence exists of provisions aimed at limiting access to Scripture, even if the prohibitive cost of manuscripts would have largely inhibited direct usage of the texts by the faithful. The information we have regarding clear-cut restrictions appears for the first time in the records of a few regional Councils, for example that of Tolosa of 1229, on the occasion of the struggle against the Albigensians and the Council of Oxford of 1408, in the aftermath of Wicliffe. Other prohibitions will follow in England, in France and elsewhere. Paul IV in 1559 and Pius IV in 1564, in promulgating the index of prohibited books, also forbid the printing and the possession of Bibles in the vernacular without a special permission. This meant that many lay people would be practically impeded from access to the entire Bible in their native language. In fact the practice of printing only the Vulgate Latin version continued. For example, in Italy, after a first Italian translation prior to the Council of Trent, that of 1471 (the so-called Malermi Bible) one had to wait till 1700, that is to the translation of Antonio Martini, to have a Bible translated into Italian for Catholics. In fact, in 1757 a general permission was granted for vernacular editions translated from the Vulgate, provided they were approved by competent authorities and were furnished with notes. The Bible of Martini was based on the same Vulgate

Latin version, while the first Catholic translations made from the original texts did not appear in Italy till the first half of the twentieth century.

In contrast, the biblical movement warmly supported a direct contact with the Bible and a prayerful familiarity on the part of all the faithful with the entire text of Scripture, in the language of the people, translated from the original texts. In its most mature forms, the movement wanted this reading to take place in the framework of the tradition of the Church, understood in very much the same sense as the *Dei Verbum* was to describe it, that is the totality of what the Church transmits in its life, in its worship, in its prayer and in its teaching. It did not want to be a movement only for a few elites. For this reason it had to face a significant amount of opposition and misunderstanding, which have not altogether disappeared even today.

5. WHAT CONTRIBUTION DID THE COUNCIL MAKE TO THE PRESENCE OF SCRIPTURE IN THE CHURCH?

Vatican II treats this topic above all in chapter 6 of the *Dei Verbum*, which has the title “Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church”. From the start it enunciates a fundamental principle (n.21): “Like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture”. After this affirmation the chapter applies the principle in question to translations into modern languages and to the need for a profound study of the sacred texts on the part of exegetes. It underlines the importance of Sacred Scripture in theology and finally it recommends the reading of the Bible to all the faithful. Indeed, after having recommended the reading of Scripture to all clerics, and in the first place to priests, deacons and catechists, it continues as follows (n.25): “The sacred synod also earnestly and especially urges all the Christian faithful, especially Religious, to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the ‘excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ’”. This urgent exhortation to all the faithful, which was fundamental for the biblical movement, was in response to the request of many Conciliar Fathers. An pointed statement of Saint Jerome was also added: “For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”. The Council then recommends that all the faithful “should gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy ... or through devotional reading [today it is usually called “lectio divina”, and we will return to this]. The text then goes on to say that “prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for (and here Saint Ambrose is cited) ‘we speak to Him when we pray, we hear Him when we read the divine saying’” (Saint Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum*, I, 20, 88).

It is a question then of a reading that we could call “spiritual”, that is, done under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, thanks to whom “all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). It is a reading that takes its guidance from that Spirit of truth that leads “into all the truth” (John 16:13) and that “searches everything even the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:10). It intends then to be a reading done in the Church, in the footprints of the great ecclesial tradition, in the context of all the truths of faith and in communion with the pastors of the Church.

6. WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE BIBLICAL ANIMATION OF PASTORAL PRACTICE, ABOVE ALL WITH RESPECT TO THE LECTIO DIVINA OF THE FAITHFUL?

In my experience as Bishop of Milan for over 22 years I had occasion to witness concretely the fruits of such prayer made on the basis of Scripture, above all as realized in an enormous number of young people and in many adults who found in this familiarity with the Bible the capacity to orientate their lives according to the will of God even in the large modern city and in secularized surroundings.

Many committed members of the faithful and many priests found in the prayerful reading of Scripture a way to insure a vital unity in the context of a life often fragmented and torn apart by

a thousand different exigencies, in the midst of which it was essential to find a firm point of reference. In fact, the plan of God presented to us by the Scriptures, which has its highpoint in Jesus Christ, does allow us to unify our lives within the framework of His salvation plan.

Moreover, a prayerful familiarity with the Bible helps us to confront one of the greatest challenges of our time, that of living together as diverse people, not only in terms of our ethnicity but also in terms of our culture, without destroying one another and also without ignoring one another, respecting each other and providing a mutual stimulus to one another toward a greater authenticity in life.

This holds true also for every ecumenical journey and also for the encounter between the great religions, which should lead neither to conflict nor to the erection of fences, but rather should drive sincerely religious men and women to an understanding of the treasures of others and to help them to understand their own, such that everyone is invited to arrive at a greater truth and transparency before God and before his calls.

If I ask myself about the roots of this experience, I find them principally in the fact that before the Word through which “all things were made” and without which “nothing that exists was made” (Jn1:3) and in which we “have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet 1:23) we recognize each other in our common origin, in our dignity as fundamentally brothers and sisters, beyond all the further divisions.

The concrete ways in which the biblical animation of pastoral ministry can take place are obviously many. It is a question of leaving room for the creative energy of pastors and of the faithful. I could mention many of these experiences, such as the week of evening meditations in the Cathedral or in the parishes on a character of the Bible or on a biblical book; the catecheses on radio or on television where I spoke in the diocese to an audience of hundreds of thousands of persons. Even the so-called “Cattedra dei non credenti” (Chair of non-believers), which allowed people in search of faith to come together, had its own kind of reference to the text of Scripture.

Here I would like above all to mention the properly *lectio divina* experience, which in a sense is the most fundamental and gives the basic method for the whole animation that follows from it. The Council recommends this kind of “lectio divina” to all the faithful. What is meant is obviously a spiritual and meditative experience that is not properly exegetical. The idea is to put oneself before the text with a simple explanation, one that captures its fundamental meanings and permanent message and that can challenge the one who reads and meditates and move him to pray on the basis of the text he has before him. In fact the Bible is to be seen not only in its contents and in its affirmations, like a text that says something to someone, but also as though it were a Someone who speaks to the one reading it and stirs in him a dialogue of faith and of hope, of repentance, of intercession, of self-offering... Such was the traditional “lectio divina” in the first millennium of the Christian era, like that which appeared as a prevalent method in the biblical homilies of the Fathers of the Church (I think of the biblical explanations of Saint Ambrose in Milan or those of Augustine at Hippo): a reading ordered to an encounter with the Author of the Word, a reading that has the capacity to fashion and to orientate a human life.

Personally I have always tried to make even the most simple among the faithful practice this type of reading of the Bible, without too many methodical complications. It was not by accident that I promoted in the Cathedral at Milan the schools of the Word, which taught thousands of young people to approach the sacred text simply and prayerfully. There are in fact many ways of doing “lectio”, but personally I am convinced that people need to be taught a simple method that can be easily remembered, which I express with the triad: lectio, meditatio, contemplatio.

By “lectio” I mean the reading and re-reading of the text before us (ideally, that of the liturgy of the day) seeking to discover its scansion (the structure), the key words, the characters, the actions and their qualifiers, placing it in the context of the biblical book to which the passage

belongs and in the context either of the whole of Scripture or of one's own time (we read this text "today"!)). This moment is often neglected because people have the impression that the text is already known, that they may even have read it or heard it read many times before. But the text should be read each time as though for the first time and if it is analyzed in a simple way it will reveal aspects that have thus far remained hidden or implicit. It is substantially a matter of responding to the question: what is this text saying?

By "meditatio" I mean reflection on the message of the text, on the permanent values it conveys to us, on the coordinates of the divine activity it makes known to us. It amounts to a response to the question: what is this text saying to us? What messages and what values does it communicate to us?

By "contemplatio" or "oratio" I mean the most personal moment of the "lectio divina", that in which I enter into dialogue with the One who is speaking to me through this text and the through the whole of Scripture.

It seems evident to me from this description that such an exercise of biblical reading brings everyone back to that Word in which we find our unity and at the same time it causes our hearts to thaw in a way that resembles what happened when the two disciples were listening to the words of Jesus on the road to Emmaus: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Lk 24:32).

It is along this line of fervor of heart focused on the Word that it is possible to hope for a renewal of the Church beyond what can be accomplished by discussions and consultations. It is our fervent wish therefore that what Vatican Council II proposed in the *Dei Verbum* be truly implemented as a pastoral method in all Christian communities and with all the faithful – namely, that such a method of meditation and prayer based on Scripture become a practice common to all Christians. This, also because it would constitute an effective antidote to the practical atheism of our society, especially in the West, and a leaven of communion even in relation to the great religions of the East of our planet. This emphatic insistence of the Church on *lectio divina* has continued even after the Council. The *Dei Verbum* was in fact followed by a variety of important official documents which underscored and deepened some aspects of the Constitution. I will recall a few of these: with regard to the interpretation of Scripture (cf. chapter 3 of the Constitution) the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" of 1993. For the relationship between the two Testaments (cf. chapters 3 and 4) the document of the same Biblical Commission "The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible" of 2001.

Then on numerous occasions the point has been emphasized that Sacred Scripture must have the central place that is its due in the life of the Church. In this connection exhortations to "lectio divina" have continued to multiply. The instruction of the Pontifical Biblical Commission of 1993 spoke of *lectio* as of a prayer that is born of a reading of the Bible under the action of the Holy Spirit. In the programmatic document for the third millennium *Novo Millennio Ineunte* the Pope underscores the necessity (n.39) "that the hearing of the Word become a vital encounter, in the ancient and still valid tradition of *lectio divina*, which enables us to draw from the biblical text the living word that challenges, orientates and forms our lives." We would then have to add the document of the Congregation for the consecrated life (*Ripartire da Cristo*) and other similar documents of the various Roman Congregations and the documents of the Episcopal Conferences of the various countries (for example the C.E.I.). This shows then to what extent even at the official level the footprints left on the ground of the Church by the *Dei Verbum* have continued to bear fruit.

We should also mention those aspects that have received more in depth consideration by theologians and exegetes. I recall in particular the theme of the relationship between revelation as divine communication and Scripture. On this topic, a theologian expressed himself in a recent work as follows: "The impression of a certain abstraction that can result today from an integral reading of the *Dei Verbum* ... derives from the fact that chapter 6 on "Sacred Scripture

in the Life of the Church” does not structure the whole of the Constitution or even really the concept of revelation in a profound way. And nevertheless it is precisely in this chapter that the pastoral principle assigned as programmatic for the Council by John XXIII is arrived at. Here we encounter one of the principal problems of the reception of the Council, which must take into account the fact that this principle was not maintained in its full depth in all the documents and that, because of their delayed promulgation, some fundamental and very controversial texts, such as the *Dei Verbum*, could not sufficiently influence the writing of the ecclesiological documents previously adopted”. (Christof Theobald, *Il Regno*, 2004, p. 790)

This is why new areas of research are opening up even forty years after the publication of the *Dei Verbum*, in view of a more organic penetration of the themes evoked by this conciliar text and above all in view of a pastoral action that would truly bring out the primacy of Scripture in the daily lives of the faithful, in the parishes and in the communities. The future of the Constitution is therefore in our hands, but above all in the hands of the Holy Spirit who, having guided the conciliar Fathers over a delicate and difficult terrain, will also direct us all today and tomorrow to nourish ourselves on the Word and to conform our lives to it.