

FROM DEI VERBUM TO NOVO MILLENIO INEUNTE – THE RECEPTION PROCESS OF DEI VERBUM IN THE LIGHT OF THE CHANGE OF PARADIGM IN THE PAST 40 YEARS

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Introduction

In the past year, we have been celebrating 40 years since the Vatican II Council. Each of the major documents of that Council merits special celebration. It is therefore right and fitting that we are gathered here these days for the International Congress on *Dei Verbum*. I thank the organizers for giving me the great honour of addressing this prestigious audience. The programme specifies what is required of me, namely to trace the development within the life of the Church of the attitude to the Word of God in Scripture, “From *Dei Verbum* to *Novo Millennio Ineunte* - the reception process of *Dei Verbum* in the light of the change of paradigm in the past 40 years.” Let me apologize in advance to those who may be looking forward to a coordinated academic treatise on this subject. This is because I have rather prepared a talk that is in the form of a commentary on different “snap-shots” of the issue under discussion. But in the process, I hope that a general picture will emerge which will remind us of what has happened in the past 40 years. In particular, I hope that this will position us for the tasks that lie ahead.

In biblical terms, 40 years is an important period of time. The people of Israel spent 40 years in the desert, during which time they not only roamed about the wilderness but also forged themselves into a powerful worshipping community that was able to take over the promised land of Canaan. We remember also that the Lord Jesus was in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights during which time he was tempted. The Lord risen in glory spent 40 days with his disciples before his ascension, during which time he confirmed their faith in the resurrection and prepared them for the reception of the Holy Spirit. Forty years is the average period of a generation. From the remarks of the chief priests and Pharisees in Matthew, it is also considered the year of maturity: “you are not yet 40 and you have seen Abraham?” It is therefore appropriate that we celebrate 40 years of *Dei Verbum*, which is a document that has been the point of reference of the Church’s attitude to Holy Scripture since the second Vatican Council.

1. The Second Vatican Council

The second Vatican Council, convoked by His Holiness Pope John XXIII, has now passed into history as the Council that has prepared the Church for the modern world. Among others, it has been described as the council of updating, the council of unity, and the council of renewal. In context of this international conference, it would be appropriate to call it the Council of the Bible. The message of *Dei Verbum* needs to be read within this general context.

1.1 The Council of Updating

It is said that the intention of Pope John XXIII was that the windows of the Church be thrown open. But this was not only so that the fresh air from outside can come in, but above all so that the Spirit of God, acting in the Church might come out and renew the face of the earth. It meant taking good note of the realities around us and reading carefully the signs of the time. This has been understood in different ways by different people, sometimes wrongly. The Italian word “*aggiornamento*”, or “bringing up to date” does not mean that the Church had to compromise or reconcile herself with every passing fashion of the world. Rather it is that the Church must position herself in such a way that she can carry out her mission more effectively in the world in which we are living. From this point of view, it can be said that the intentions of Pope John XXIII and the aims of the Council have been generally followed and to a large extent achieved under the leadership of the Popes that have followed; Paul VI, John Paul I and especially John Paul II.

1.2 The Council of Unity

The Council has also become known as the Council of Unity. It set in motion a movement of unity which sought to break down the many barriers that separate humanity. Since “charity begins at home”, it addressed the divisions and frictions within the Catholic Church. But in particular, it tackled the barriers that have separated Christian Churches for centuries. Thus, it gave a great impetus to the ecumenical movement which has brought the different Christian traditions closer together. The same Council also started the action of the Church to reach out to other believers and even to those who claim to have no faith in God. All these have been given concrete expression in the institutions created specifically to ensure that these laudable objectives are pursued with concrete programmes of action, and ever-growing vigor. Thus we now have the Pontifical Councils for the Promotion of Christian Unity, for Interreligious Dialogue, as well as for Culture.

The council took place in the political context of a very divided world. Two world power blocks, East and West, Communist/Socialist and Capitalist were facing one another with dangerous weapons, menacing the very continued existence of our planet. To some extent, the seeds of the eventual collapse of Communism were sown at this Council. Looking back now, we can understand what great role the Ostpolitik of Paul VI played and how much the vigorous political and diplomatic activities under John Paul II have contributed to bringing about the major changes we are now witnessing on the political landscape of the world. A new world order has been emerging. Unfortunately, however, historic opportunities for forging a better world for all are being wasted through arrogance, and the inability or unwillingness to open out to others in a spirit of global solidarity.

Thus, there was another great division in the world at that time, the division between the rich and the poor. This, unfortunately, has hardly begun to heal. Indeed, it will appear that the gap between the rich and the poor has continued to widen. The rich have been taking giant strides in science and technology, leaving the poor countries behind. Our dear continent of Africa has become the forgotten continent of a world that is galloping ahead, with little or no concern for human solidarity, equity and even simple justice. The spirit of Vatican II, expressed especially in the powerful passages of *Gaudium et Spes*: “On the Church in the Modern World” has offered the world clear guidance on how to ensure greater justice. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, established as a result of the second Vatican Council, has continued to carry out vigorous activities at all levels to ensure that the beautiful words of Catholic Social Doctrine do not remain in the air but that they be applied to the concrete realities of our complex modern world.

1.3 The Council of Renewal

The Council has also been considered as the Council of Renewal. But this renewal movement did not just start out of a vacuum. It grew out of already existing waves of renewal movements. The ecumenical renewal movement, for example, was already making progress, although in rather restricted circles of both the Catholic and non-Catholic world. There was also already what can be considered a Charismatic Renewal Movement which had begun in different parts of the Church but which, as it were, exploded after the second Vatican Council.

Finally, and more relevant to our topic, there is the Biblical Renewal Movement which had started in different segments of the Church, not only at the level of scientific exegetes but also on the lower level of pastoral use of the Bible for the spiritual development of the people of God.

The second Vatican Council has turned out to be God’s own opportunity, the appointed time, the *kairos*. Since then, the action of the spirit has been moving with new vigour.

1.4 The Council of the Bible

All through the Council sessions, the Holy Bible was enthroned in the middle of the Basilica of St Peter, which served as the Council hall, where all the plenary deliberations took place. That

was a clear symbol of the central role of the Word of God in all the deliberations of the Council. This is also obvious in all the documents of the Council, as can be seen from the copious scripture quotations that effectively enriched them. The very introductory paragraph of *Dei Verbum* brings this out very clearly where it declares that the Council was gathered to listen with reverence and proclaim with faith the Word of God. One can therefore describe the second Vatican Council as the Council of the Bible.

The Council not only used copiously the Word of God. It also devoted a full document to it, *Dei Verbum*. This document was issued as a “dogmatic constitution”, thus putting it on the highest level of conciliar teaching. No wonder Pope John Paul II once regretted that it had received the level of attention that it deserved.

But what was the main message of this document? Here we shall be brief because others will, I am sure, touch adequately on this point. (1) I will only recall here a few major elements of the message of this conciliar document.

Holy Scripture is placed within the context of revelation which in turn is presented in the context of the history of salvation. The written words of Scripture are linked organically with the revelation of God himself all through the ages and down to our days and to the end of time. The Word of God lasts forever. The written word in Scripture finds its place within the context of this revelation and takes its origin from the inspiration which the human authors enjoyed through the Holy Spirit. Connected with this one notes with admiration the sensitive and careful way in which the long debated relationship between Tradition and Scripture was worked out in the Council. Divine revelation is conserved in the Church through tradition. Scripture is the summary of this tradition but a very privileged summary since it is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The place of the Bible in the Church was thus clearly laid out.

Many issues of great controversy were handled in simple language but with profound truth. Thus we are reminded of the role of the Church even in determining what books are to be considered inspired. The Church is the final guarantor of the interpretation of the Bible. But at the same time, the Church is not independent of Scripture. Scripture remains a fundamental guide and rule of faith and of life of the Church. For this reason, the Church continues to celebrate the Word of God in Scripture with as much devotion and dedication as she celebrates the Word of God in the Holy Eucharist. These are powerful messages which have continued to influence the life and spirituality of the Catholic Church since the second Vatican Council.

2. Forty Years of Dei Verbum in the Church

We shall now look at and highlight some specific areas with regard to the reception of *Dei Verbum* in the Church since the last 40 years.

The majority of Catholics living today are post Vatican II products. Those who knew and can still remember the Church as it was before 1965 are certainly in the minority, if not in this hall certainly in the world out there. This is especially true in the new churches of Africa and Asia where the majority of Christians are young people. Because of this, we probably today tend to take for granted many of the great fruits of *Dei Verbum* in the life of the Church. It is therefore important to recall them here so that we may continue to appreciate the grace with which the Spirit has blessed the Church as a result of *Dei Verbum*:

2.1 The Bible: the Book of the Church

The Bible has become very much the book of the Church. There was a time when it would appear that Catholics were discouraged from reading the Bible. At least in my own experience as a child in Nigeria, this was to some extent true. Indeed to carry a Bible around was considered a Protestant thing to do. The Catholic went to church with his rosary and missal. He learnt about his faith through the catechism and the famous “Bible History” books. The Protestant carried the Bible and perhaps also a hymn book to church and to Sunday school.

This attitude of “caution” about direct access to the biblical text was not without reason. There was a valid preoccupation about the danger of falling into doctrinal error through a wrong interpretation of the Bible. Did St. Peter himself not warn about the uninstructed who read the Bible to their own spiritual ruin?

But since *Dei Verbum*, a lot has changed in this regard. The Bible is now very much a Catholic Holy Book. The Council itself strongly recommended that there should be open access to the Bible for all the faithful. As a result of this, a lot has been done to make available Catholic editions of the Bible, whether they be translations or new editions. Besides the text of the Bible itself, there has been an explosion of literature on Scripture at different levels, aimed at different categories of Christ’s faithful. We all know, too, how much the Bible has been a characteristic of the new liturgical era. In particular, the new Lectionary has made available a wider range of readings from the Scriptures. Beyond the Eucharistic Liturgy, Bible services and celebrations have become the order of the day. For members of the different forms of Catholic Charismatic Renewal, the love of the Bible is often as strong as the emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit. All this was not so before Vatican II and we must thank God for it.

2.2 Scripture as Soul of Theology

Dei Verbum insisted that Holy Scripture must be the soul of theology. Since Vatican II, Scripture has been at the centre of the whole range of theological study. Every branch of theology now goes a long way to lay strong biblical foundations for whatever assertions are made. The result of this is that biblical studies have become vitally important in theology in general. The professors of Sacred Scripture therefore occupy a vital position and play a central role in every theological institution, especially seminaries preparing pastors for the Church.

2.3 Flourishing Scientific Exegesis

Scientific exegesis has been highly encouraged not only by *Dei Verbum* but already by earlier encyclicals like *Divino Afflante Spiritu* and *Providentissimus Deus*. Scripture studies have been given a great boost not only in the famous Biblical Institute in Rome but in many other institutions of higher ecclesiastical studies all over the world. The old controversy over how far modern exegetical methods are compatible with the Catholic view of the Bible has long been resolved. Catholics are now in the forefront of modern exegesis. There is no more fear of courageous research into the interpretation of the Bible. High-level biblical research institutes are springing up all over the world. Similarly, associations of scientific exegetes are also growing. The prestigious Pontifical Biblical Commission, under the supervision of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has continued to be both a pacesetter and monitor for Catholic scientific exegesis. Publications and productions, both literary and electronic, are being widely distributed. Most significantly, too, is the volume of material that has successfully popularized the fruits and the efforts of scientific exegetes, all for the good of the people of God and to the greater glory of God.

2.4 Ecumenical Dimension

We must note especially the ecumenical dimension of the positive fruits of *Dei Verbum* in the last 40 years. The programme of the Catholic Church to reach out to other Christian communities has various ramifications. These are being pursued very vigorously by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. But much of this work has been made possible by the progress made in the understanding of the Bible through the movement unleashed on the Church by *Dei Verbum*. It is not an accident that this International Congress is being held under the patronage of the same Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. This is in line with the arrangement whereby the over-all ecclesiastical supervision of the Catholic Biblical Federation, and consequently of the biblical apostolate of the Church in general, is domiciled with the same Pontifical Council.

It is well known that one of the factors in the sad and tragic division within Christianity has been due to different interpretations of the same Holy Scripture. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, Scripture which has been the bone of contention has gradually become our common point of

reference. *Dei Verbum* clearly encouraged an ecumenical approach to Scripture. This has been followed up with vigour and success. This is one area where the second Vatican Council has had very great impact on our brothers and sisters of other Christian traditions. From the moment that scientific exegesis was able to devise commonly agreed objective criteria for arriving at what the Bible actually says, instead of biased interpretation based on pre-conceived theological conditions, it became possible for all Christians to read the Bible and to use it in view of arriving at a common understanding of what Holy Scripture says. This has brought about a great revolution in the relationship between our different churches. It is this also which has made it possible for our Church to be fully involved in ecumenical and interdenominational translations, publication and distribution of the Bible. This is particularly important for mission lands where a lot of duplication of efforts has taken place in the past, as Catholics refused to use what was called “Protestant” translations of the Bible. Similarly, many of the scientific organizations that study the Scriptures are now ecumenical to the core. In those fora, Catholic and non-Catholic exegetes strive together to improve our common understanding of the Word of God as contained in Scripture.

This has had its powerful positive impact on ecumenical theology. The divisions and frictions between Christian churches have often claimed to be based on doctrinal diversities which each church claims to have no control over. But as a common reading of the Scriptures became progressively possible, it has also become possible to make a breakthrough in many doctrinal issues that for so many centuries had appeared intractable. A typical example is the agreement reached recently between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran tradition over the age-old controversy about justification. As we know, this issue divided not only Catholics and Lutherans, but also has had an impact on our relationship with most of the other Protestant bodies. Other issues of similar joint ecumenical reflection include the eucharist, mutual recognition of ministries and the primacy of the Roman Pontiff. More and more, when we examine the work of bilateral commissions in which theological issues that divide the Church are tabled for discussion, we often find that the division of theological opinions every now and again runs across our denominational boundaries. This is because in each tradition there is greater freedom to espouse a diversity of interpretation of the same text, provided that the diversity is compatible with our common faith. This has greatly reduced the reasons or even the excuses for our remaining divided.

Providence made it possible for me to have a fairly long experience of serving the Church in this apostolate of ecumenical discussions. First, I was involved on the bilateral level with the Methodist Church. More recently, I worked on the multilateral level as a Catholic member of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. From this experience, I have arrived at the strong conviction that the actual hard nuts of theological issues that still divide us are very few indeed. I also believe that even those issues which still seem to divide us may well not be impossible to accommodate, with the necessary good will on all sides, and in obedience to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We have found on the other hand that what now keep churches divided have more to do with our history and the political baggage of the past. The Faith and Order Commission has been working recently on a very interesting study on ethnic and national factors in church division and church unity agenda. The result of the study is very interesting indeed and one hopes that it will be taken into serious consideration. In our world full of dangerous divisions, ecumenism has become all the more crucial. We can no longer delay. If the followers of the Lord Jesus and the bearers of his message cannot speak with a common voice, how will the world believe? The role of Holy Scripture in this whole enterprise is obvious and *Dei Verbum* has set the pace and indicated the direction that we need to follow if we are to make appreciable progress.

2.5 The Jewish Scriptures

Dei Verbum speaks very clearly on the ever abiding importance of the Jewish scriptures, which we call the “Old Testament”, but which for the Jew is simply “the scriptures”. It affirms the unity of both the Old and New Testaments. The role of the people of Israel as the providential recipients and carriers of the Old Testament revelation is clearly acknowledged. All this provided firm biblical foundation for the significant statements which the Council made about the attitude

of the Church to the people of Israel and their permanently valid role in the one history of salvation. (See *Nostrae Aetate*). Not long ago, the Pontifical Biblical Commission published an authoritative study on this issue, a study that has been received with positive echoes in both Christian and Jewish circles.

Since the promulgation of *Dei Verbum*, there has been a not so loud but nevertheless sustained and significant dialogue between the Catholic Church and the representatives of various strands of contemporary Jewish religious community. These contacts and common discussions, some official, some less so, have built on the foundations laid by *Dei Verbum*.

It is significant that the office for this dialogue is NOT in the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, but rather in that for Promoting Christian Unity. The message is clear: with the Jews, we are at least cousins, if not brothers and sisters in the faith. This positive development is likely to continue and accelerate under Pope Benedict XVI, who has already had high level meetings with Jewish leaders, the first being straight after his installation as Pope.

This brings us to a few further reflections on what lies ahead.

3. Looking Ahead

Forty years is a long time in the life of a single individual but it is a short period in the life of the Church. From the point of view of the time-frame of the Church of God that is 2000 years old, 40 years is only the beginning of the reception of the second Vatican Council and consequently of *Dei Verbum*. Therefore, we need to be patient with ourselves even if we seem not to have fully achieved all the aims and objectives of *Dei Verbum*. Rather we ought to thank God for the progress made in such a relatively short time. It is from this point of view that we look at a few areas that can be considered our agenda for the years that lie ahead.

3.1 Consolidating our Gains

First, we have to stress that we need to consolidate the gains that are already made. This sounds obvious but it is not always acknowledged. There is need to watch out against every attempt to roll back the progress already made. The danger of this will grow the farther away we get from the days of *Dei Verbum*. The positive results that we have mentioned a while ago must be kept in mind and sustained with all our efforts.

3.2 Vigilance for Balance

There is need for great vigilance for balance in a few areas of the way we handle Scripture in the Church. *Dei Verbum* was very careful in the way it presents the relationship between Scripture and Tradition. This balance must be maintained with similar care and attention. Our experience in the past 40 years has been that this has not always been easy. There are, of course, those who carried away by the new wave of biblical enthusiasm have almost turned to biblical fundamentalism. These are those who practically demand that whatever we do must be supported and justified by a concrete text of Scripture. In my country, for example, the question "Where is it in the Bible?" is always thrown at us Catholics. We need to be able to give a reasoned and balanced reaction to such challenges. On the other hand, there is the opposite reaction of those who still believe that emphasis on the Bible is somehow giving in to Protestantism, as if the Bible does not belong to the Catholic Church. And so, we see the tendency to want to fall back only on tradition, and a tradition that is quoted over and against Scripture. Among those who hold this tendency are some who seem to consider the second Vatican Council as a tragic mistake. Fortunately, they are in the minority and they should not in any way be encouraged.

Similarly, the delicate balance between Sacred Scripture and the Church Doctrine has to be maintained. On the one hand, Scripture remains the soul of theology and the rule of faith in the sense that the Church cannot teach anything that contradicts Scripture properly understood. On the other hand, since the Church has received the truth of the Gospel through the Lord Jesus

even before Sacred Scripture, it must be clear that the foundation for its faith cannot be based on scripture alone. Therefore, we need to avoid unnecessary and futile controversies on matters of this nature. We need not be ashamed to admit that some of our doctrines, e.g. the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary may not be easy to establish on the basis of scripture alone.

3.3 Scientific Exegesis for All

The world of our days is unfortunately divided very much between the rich and the poor. There are those who have all the means of modern technology and those who don't. This division in the world is reflected also in the area of scientific exegesis. In many parts of the world especially the poor countries, which are also mainly mission lands, facilities for scientific exegesis are very limited, whether in terms of institutions or of publications and support for research. In this regard, we must at this point express our deep appreciation to the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith in Rome, as well as the Pontifical Mission Societies in many countries that have constantly been supporting the poorer churches in the training of exegetes to the highest level of professional competence. Many, including myself, have enjoyed this privilege of studying in the best institutions abroad, whether in the *Biblicum* here in Rome or in similar institutions elsewhere. We are also grateful for the contributions being made to encourage the work we are trying to do in our different countries, setting up programmes and projects of scientific institutions in our cultural and ecclesial environments. But a lot still needs to be done in this regard. In particular, more still needs to be done to set up Theological Faculties that will have provisions for scientific exegetical programmes. Many of our exegetes, highly trained and equipped, come home and are handicapped by lack of adequate facilities, including even books and simple journals.

An organization called the Panafrican Association of Catholic Exegetes (PACE) has existed for more than twenty years now. It has simply been struggling to survive, largely due to lack of adequate and regular funding. This organization brings together as many Catholic exegetes as possible from all over Africa, in order to reflect together over various themes of the Scriptures. Its last meeting took place only last week in Kinshasa, Congo DR. Much of its work has been published but a lot is lying down waiting. In particular, there is always a lot of difficulties raising the funds to hold meetings. These problems will continue for as long as our churches live in lands that are poor and impoverished. We hope that this International Congress will offer suggestions on issues of this nature.

There is, however, a different range of problems that are more prevalent in the rich lands. Here scientific exegesis has become so professional that it can go off on its own, not only independent of the Church but totally oblivious to the concerns of the Christian community. This is all the more a danger where scientific exegesis becomes simply an academic subject in a secular university that is completely out of the control of the Church. Scientific freedom can easily become license to say anything. In an academic world where very often authors sell not because they have told the truth but because they have said something that seems controversial, the temptation to write "for the galleries" and make good money is often difficult to resist. Part of the solution for this could be that the Church pays as much attention as possible to her own institutions of scientific exegesis. She should fund them well enough to retain and maintain competent exegetes who can put into the market of ideas and publications the Word of Life in a most scientific way. If indeed we say that Scripture is the soul of theology and that exegesis is most important in the life of the Church, then this ought to be reflected in the budget of the Church.

3.4 Wide Access to Scripture

"The poor have the gospels preached to them". This is a quotation from Isaiah which Jesus read and declared fulfilled in the Synagogue of Nazareth. This was one of the signs of the arrival of the Messiah. Indeed it is true that the poor are often more receptive of the Gospel than those who are rich and feel self-sufficient. If that is true, then the gospel must be made available to the poor. *Dei Verbum* stated very clearly that access to Sacred Scripture must be wide open to all categories of Christ's faithful. This strong recommendation: wide open access of Scripture to

everybody is still to be fully implemented, especially in poor countries. Starting from the mere availability of the sacred text, in many places the cost of the Bible is beyond the reach of the average Catholic. This is generally also because very often, the so-called “Catholic Bibles” are imported from abroad and are much more expensive than the highly subsidized Protestant Bibles.

In this connection, we should acknowledge the great contribution being made by many towards making available cheap editions of the Bible to mission and poor lands. The Catholic Biblical Federation has been involved in this project for over three decades. In particular the Society of St. Paul, both male and female institutes, as well as the Society of the Divine Word, SVDs, have a very enviable track record in this regard. But much more still needs to be done.

The obstacle to access to Scripture is not only economic in terms of text at affordable price. There is also the linguistic barrier where translations into the local languages are not available. Especially in Africa and the poor countries where illiteracy rate is very high, the importance of translations in local languages cannot be over emphasized. The illiterate may not be able to read the Bible on their own. But they can have access to the Word of God if they own a Bible that can be read to them by others who can read. When I was a young boy, even at the age of six and seven, my father used to ask me to read various sections of the Bible in our local language to the family, as we gathered in the evening after supper to share the Word of God. If there were no Bible in our local language, it would have been a different matter reading in English and having to translate simultaneously. This is unfortunately what is happening in many places even today.

Generally, Protestants have been working very hard in Bible translations. From my own experience, I can say that we have not been doing so well. In my country Nigeria, I happen to be the current Chairman of the Translations Committee of the Bible Society of Nigeria. We have difficulties getting Catholics to be fully involved in the projects of translations into our various local languages. And yet the Bible Society members, most of whom are Protestants, constantly admit that the Catholic priests are far better prepared, theologically and scientifically, for Bible translation than the average Protestant pastor. This is sometimes part of the reluctance that still lingers on as regards cooperating with Protestants in Bible translation, a reluctance which by now should no longer be there. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity issued many years ago a very useful guideline for interdenominational translations, which has been found very useful and acceptable both to us Catholics and the interdenominational Bible Societies.

I believe that we need to stress more and more the need for more translations. Often, we restrict our efforts to the so-called “major languages”. The result is that many people are still condemned to hearing the Scriptures in a second or even third language, with which they are not very familiar. Again here, the Protestants have gone ahead of us, insisting that even if there are only ten thousand people speaking a particular language, they deserve to have the Bible in their own tongue. As we can see, we have a long way to go.

Access to Sacred Scripture will require also that we put up programmes that will promote the love of Sacred Scripture among our people. This has to be done through catechesis but also through provision of attractive forms of the presentation of the word of God. Again, here in particular, it is necessary to produce Bibles that will reach different categories of readers, for example Bible for Children, Bible for the Aged, even Bible for the Visually Handicapped and so on. Some effort has gone in this direction but we believe more should be done.

Dei Verbum made a very interesting recommendation, namely, that effort should be made to produce Bibles geared towards non-Christian readers. I have not seen much effort in this direction. It seems to be a sentence of *Dei Verbum* that many people have never read. And yet, I believe that where the effort is made, it does make its impact. Behind this is the theological conviction that the Word of God is as sharp as a two-edged sword which can pierce through the heart and reach people even when we least expect it. We were told for example that desert

dwellers in the Sahara who are Muslims, but who listened to Bible programmes on the radio, are becoming Christians without ever meeting any Christian preacher. Here we can see the power of the Word of God working independently of our own efforts. In Nigeria, we have already the Bible in Hausa, the language which is spoken by a large majority of our Muslims. However, we have a tentative programme to produce a version of the Hausa Bible using Arabic scripts. This is because many of our Muslims read more easily the Arabic script than the Western alphabet, even if they may not understand Arabic texts. The project had met with the opposition of some sectors among fanatical Muslims. They claimed that the project was trying to cleverly deceive Muslims into reading the Bible thinking that they are reading the Koran. Of course this was not the intention. Unfortunately, the project is not getting much support from the Christian community either. This Conference might look again at this recommendation. In the years ahead, what more effort could be made in the direction of producing special editions of the Bible for non-Christians of different religions?

3.5 The Challenge of New Technologies

Finally there is the whole area of the new communications technology. If the Word of God is God's communication to humanity, then it cannot but make full use of the modern means of communication. Already Pope Paul VI warned that God himself would not forgive the Church if we fail to make full use of the modern means of communication which are God's own blessings on our generation. Between 1965 and today, a lot has happened in this area. Radio and television are no longer what they were in those days. Instant and satellite and cable television have taken over. Computer and the internet are now the order of the day. We cannot lag behind in this area. I remember about twenty years ago when computers and internet began to make their appearance, Bro. Ferdinand Poswick, a Benedictine monk of the Abbey of Maredsous, active in the Catholic Biblical Federation in those days, kept talking to us about Bible and computers, and that this is the direction for the future. We did not quite understand what he was saying at that time. Now it is very clear. The communications highway is now completely taken over either by secular messages or even pornographic and criminal materials. The Word of God must find its way also on to the same highway, so that the world may believe. In this area of radio, television and internet, again the Protestants seem to be doing a lot of work. We will do well to link hands with them wherever possible. We should also have our own Catholic initiatives. I believe this is an area where the Catholic Biblical Federation ought to encourage the Church worldwide to more vigorous action. We note here that the modern information technology somehow has a way of bridging the gap between the rich and the poor. It is now possible even in the poorest village of Africa to set up a computer system with internet, relying only on solar energy and satellite communication. This was not possible twenty years ago and certainly not in 1965. It means, therefore, that new frontiers can be open and more people reached using the new technology. In the years ahead, we have to take this into serious consideration. This is an area where amateurism is just not enough. We need to bring in the contribution of experts and high level technicians. I imagine the financial outlay may appear at first high. But the results in the long run will be well worth the investment.

Here is definitely an area where there is a crying need for world-wide solidarity. Those who have been supporting the missionary activities of the Church in the poorer nations should have this as a high priority. It is good and fitting to continue helping to build churches. But a well-prepared radio programme may reach far more people with the message of the gospel, especially those who may never come to our churches.

3.6 A Call for an Ordinary Synod on the Word of God

Permit me to conclude these reflections with a call and indeed an appeal, which I strongly suggest for this August assembly to approve and endorse: namely to request that the Holy Father convokes as soon as possible an Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on "*The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*". As we all know, synods have now become an important feature of the post-Vatican II Church. Pope John Paul II, during his long pontificate, made it a powerful and effective instrument of collegiality and pastoral solidarity. He also used it to promote urgent Church concerns.

Looking back, we can now see that synods have served to confirm and re-launch many themes of the Vatican II magisterium. Here are some examples of synod themes that can be linked with specific Council documents:

- a. Evangelization – *Ad gentes*
- b. Justice and Peace – *Gaudium et Spes*
- c. Laity – *Apostolicam Actuositatem*
- d. Priestly Formation – *Presbyterorum Ordinis* and *Optatam Totius*
- e. Consecrated Life – *Perfectae Caritatis*
- f. Bishops – *Christus Dominus*

It is about time to look at *Dei Verbum*, especially the issues raised in chapter six of the document. In a private audience granted to the Executive Committee of the Catholic Biblical Federation in 1986, Pope John Paul II remarked with regret that *Dei Verbum* had been “too much neglected”. I do not think that the situation has improved very much since then.

We are now about to celebrate a General Ordinary Synod on the Eucharist, which will certainly evoke many of the themes of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. It would indeed be theologically logical to follow it up with a synod on the Word of God. After all, *DV* 21 declares that: “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord.” It goes on further to state that “in the sacred liturgy (the Church) “never ceases... to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ”. It is clear that on this “one table”, the Word of God and the Body of Christ go together.

We recall that as from the 1980s, we spoke often of a “New Era of Evangelization ... towards the year 2000”. That “magical” year has now come and gone and there is a danger that the enthusiasm for a New Evangelization may be waning. A synod on the Bible would be a most effective way to carry the zeal for a New Evangelization *beyond* the year 2000. These concerns were addressed by Pope John Paul II in his programmatic encyclical: *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. A synod on the Word of God would give a fresh boost to this plan of action.

Conclusion

The second Vatican Council has been a gift of God to the world of our day. It prepared the Church for the great upheavals that have rocked our world in recent times. *Dei Verbum* is one of the main pillars of that Council. The Church of God has seen a lot of changes and improvement as a result of the messages of the second Vatican Council, especially that of *Dei Verbum*. As we start our new millennium, we cannot fully implement the programme which Pope John Paul II laid out in the *Novo Millennio Ineunte* unless we once again rededicate ourselves to a strong emphasis on the Scripture in the life of the Church and in the world of our days. As *Dei Verbum* rightly states, God our heavenly Father continues to talk to us in our daily experiences, and in the lives of those who went before us. But above all, he speaks to us in Sacred Scripture, inspired by the Spirit for our salvation. May the Word of God dwell in our hearts both now and forever. Amen.