

THE WORD OF GOD IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

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Dear friends:

It is with great joy and emotion that I take the podium to initiate this Congress on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the *Dei Verbum*. We decided on it at the Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Biblical Federation held in Beirut in 2002. And I must say that the enthusiasm generated by that meeting has sustained us in overcoming the many difficulties we had to confront to make it a reality. Dear Beatitude, reverend Cardinals, Bishops, dear brothers and sisters of the Biblical Federation, all you dear friends, here we are together in Rome: welcome to this long awaited Congress. I believe none of us were present in the conciliar hall on 18 November 1965 when the Council Fathers confirmed the text of the *Dei Verbum* almost unanimously (of 2350 voting, 2344 placet and 6 non placet.) The drafting of the text was exhausting, among other things because it was confronting a complex theological issue that had notable consequences also at the pastoral level. The positive reception of the document demonstrated how opportune, how providential was the choice.

And it is truly remarkable that the *Dei Verbum*, the shortest of the conciliar texts, was the one which, together with the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, brought with it more profound changes in the life of the Church than any other. And the presence at this our Congress of so many brothers and sisters of other Christian Churches and Confessions – whom I greet with genuine affection: welcome among us! – is a strong indication of the ecumenical value that the *Dei Verbum* had and continues to have in the lives of our Christian communities. It is enough to think of the impetus that resulted from the conciliar document to overcome disagreements relative to the structure and translation of the interconfessional Bible. The Holy Scriptures, venerated by all as an invaluable treasure, have become the privileged place for the encounter among Christians, and hence one of the richest sources for supplying a second breath to ecumenism. We could also say that listening together to the Word of God is today the way that not only allows us to see the visible unity among all Christians but that can also most expeditiously lead us toward Eucharistic communion. Was this not after all the path taken by the two disciples on the road to Emmaus? If we allow the word of God to follow its course, as Paul writes to the Thessalonians (2 Thess 3:1), if we allow it to transform our hearts, we too will be led to the Eucharistic table, the sign of full communion.

The *Dei Verbum* incorporated the results of a long itinerary of debates and reflections. This is not the forum to discuss them here: though it would be very useful to trace the history of the hearing of the Bible on the part of the faithful in the course of the two thousand years of Christianity. You all know how dominant was the influence of Holy Scripture in the life of the Church during the first millennium: bishops and priests, monks and theologians, engaged in regular and passionate discussions on the Bible. Their words, their preaching, their studies were for the most part commentaries on the Sacred Scriptures. And even the common faithful were exhorted to have daily contact with them. One need only recall the severity of Saint John Chrysostom who scolded a Christian for not knowing how many Letters of Paul there were. The fact is that the entire theological and spiritual literature of the first millennium testifies to the centrality of the Bible in the reflection and in the life of the Church. And the reading of Scripture was recommended to all. Not the slightest evidence exists of any prohibition against the reading of Scripture in those centuries, even though they witnessed strong interventions on the part of bishops against heresy. Cesarius of Arles was so convinced of the spiritual importance of the daily reading of the Bible that he exhorted the illiterate rich to pay someone to read to them from the Scriptures: “If people who cannot read enlist the services of professional scribes to procure themselves earthly goods, you, whoever you are, who know not how to read and write, why not seek out someone who for a fee will read to you the divine Scriptures, so that you can obtain eternal rewards?”

The situation in the second millennium has been somewhat more vexed, even though since its beginning it saw the diffusion in the churches of the so-called *Biblia pauperum* whose aim was to enable even the illiterate to “read” the Bible through images. The awareness that one could not be a Christian without knowing Sacred Scripture was clear. And the engagement for a more evangelical Church passed through a renewed relationship between Scripture and the life of the believer. One need think only of Francis of Assisi and the radical character of his determination to follow of the Gospel *sine glossa*. Unfortunately, the polemical climate that subsequently involved Western Christianity had the added effect, above all in the Catholic sphere, of diminishing the direct recourse to the Bible on the part of the faithful. The Council of Trent, which had however reminded the bishops to strengthen biblical studies, did not find an adequate hearing. It is certainly true that in the complex situation of the life of the Church in the modern age, the polemical climate did much to weaken the bond between the Bible and the faithful. But, among other things through the stimulus of the other Christian traditions, a movement of renewal of biblical studies began in the Catholic Church, which was then sanctioned by the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*. In the first half of the twentieth century the Catholic Church increasingly discovered a new relationship with Scripture. Not only did a more rich understanding of the sacred texts mature through historical-critical studies, but the Bible was also more robustly rediscovered as a source of the spiritual and pastoral life.

The book and the chalice

Dear friends, within a few days the Eucharistic Synod will begin. An extraordinary event for the whole Church. And how could we not see as providential the fact that this is following immediately upon our Congress? The nexus between the Word of God and the Eucharist is a firm tradition in the Church. Blessed John XXIII, when he was Patriarch of Venice, in the pastoral letter on the Word of God addressed to the faithful for lent of 1952, wrote: “To teach Sacred Scripture, particularly the Gospel, to the people ... and to make the sacred book more familiar to them, is the alpha of the activities of a bishop and of his priests. The omega – allow me to use this image from the Book of Revelation – is represented by the consecrated cup of our daily altar ... The two realities go together: the Word of Jesus and the Blood of Jesus. Between the one and the other follow all the other letters of the alphabet: all the affairs of individual, domestic, social life; everything that is also important, but secondary with reference to the eternal destiny of the children of God, and which has no value except to the extent that it is nourished and sustained by the two terminal letters: that is, the Word of Jesus that continues to resound in all its tones in the Holy Church from the sacred book: and the blood of Jesus in the divine sacrifice, perennial source of graces and blessings”. These words express with uncommon spiritual force how much the *Word* and the *Chalice*, the Bible and the Eucharist, constitute the *alpha* and the *omega* of the Church’s life and the life of every believer.

The *Dei Verbum* also affirms: “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord” (21). And John Paul II, opening his letter for the indiction of the Year of the Eucharist with the icon of Emmaus, traced the connection as follows: from the hearing of the Word one moves to the *fractio panis*. For this reason we feel profoundly linked to the next Synod of Bishops. For our part we would like to make a small contribution for a first verification of the reception of the *Dei Verbum* with the hope that it might be useful for a reflection at the universal level. The presence of so many bishops coming from more than 100 countries could effectively suggest to the respective episcopal conferences that they should hold a meeting on the reception of the *Dei Verbum* in their respective countries (if they have not already done so, as has been done, for example in Italy).

The fortieth anniversary of the *Dei Verbum* is without doubt a propitious occasion. And it is certainly with pleasure that we observe what the conciliar Fathers wished for, namely a new spiritual thrust among believers that results from a new understanding of the Scriptures, together of course with the implementation of new initiatives. The text goes: “Just as the life of the Church is strengthened through more frequent celebration of the Eucharistic mystery, similarly we may hope for a new stimulus for the life of the Spirit from a growing reverence for the word of God, which ‘endures forever’ (Is 40:8; see 1 Peter 1:23-25)” (*Dei Verbum* 26). And

so it has come to pass. There can be no doubt that today the Bible is not only studied with far greater competence, but above all the bread of the Word of God is distributed with greater abundance and tasted with greater awareness. This is what very specifically concerns us here.

The theme of our Congress, in fact, is a literal citation of the title of chapter VI of the Constitution: "The Word of God in the life of the Church". Moreover, the Catholic Biblical Federation, born in 1969 on the initiative of Cardinal Bea, has the objective of helping believers to drink more broadly and more continuously at the inexhaustible fountains of life contained in the Bible. The council Fathers invite the faithful to "gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose and other aids which, in our time, with approval and active support of the shepherds of the Church, are commendably spread everywhere". They know well, in fact, that "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ".

The Catholic Biblical Federation, which today numbers more than 93 full-fledged members and 227 associate members representing 127 countries, has for all of these years sought to serve that invitation of the Council and would like to continue to do so. The many qualified people who are participating in this Congress evidence the vitality of the work of the members of the Federation. I would like to say that this Congress too is also a sign of this: I think it is the first time so many bishops, together with so many of the faithful, from more than a hundred countries of the world, and with the presence of many representatives of other Churches, are meeting to reflect on and discuss the centrality of the Word of God in the life of the Church. And allow me to thank the Italian Episcopal Conference for the contribution they have made in making possible this Congress of ours, in cooperation with Siemens Italia which, with farsightedness and generosity, has understood that assistance for a meeting like this is not marginal to the objectives of an enterprise that looks to the entire world. For my part it is my sincere wish that such ties will only be strengthened in the future.

The Congress – as you can see from the program – will center around three principal reports: that of Cardinal Kasper, which will underscore primarily the theological aspect of the *Dei Verbum*, then that of Archbishop Onaiyekan, which will trace the itinerary of the last forty years following the conciliar document, and the third, that of Cardinal Martini, which will reflect above all on the pastoral aspect of the Constitution. These days will also feature a rather nutritious series of round table discussions. These will demonstrate the extraordinary journey that has been taken in the Church with regard to the relationship of the faithful with the Sacred Scriptures. They will also highlight the problems that remain unresolved today in the effort to insure that the Bible becomes the book of every believer and of all Christian communities.

At the beginning of the third millennium

We should certainly begin right now thanking the Lord if Christians have entered into the third millennium with a significant baggage of knowledge and love for the Holy Scriptures – a baggage far richer than in the past and which therefore makes us hope that they will become ever more "the salt of the earth and the light of the world". However, we should not hide from the fact that we still have a long way to go before the Bible will truly have its proper centrality both in the pastoral life of our communities and in the spiritual lives of individual believers. Not that there could ever come a time when the journey would be at an end. Every Christian generation should allow itself to be fashioned by the Word of God. Every generation should listen and then announce. And this is a task that cannot be postponed.

And I would like, as it were in synthesis, to recall the exhortation of John Paul II to the Christians of Europe and to propose it once again to the Churches of every part of the world, which we here, in a certain way, represent. John Paul II said: "Church in Europe, enter into the new millennium with the book of the Gospel!... in the attentive study of the Word we will find nourishment and strength to carry out our mission every day". This is not so much a mere exhortation as it is an expression of the very mission of the Church at the beginning of the third millennium. And the Pope continued: "*Let us take this book in our hands! Let us receive it from*

the Lord who continuously offers it to us through his Church (cf. Rev. 10:8). *Let us devour it* (cf. Rev 10:9), so that it may become the life of our lives. *Let us savor it* to the last drop: this will exhaust us, but it will give us joy, because it is sweet as honey (cf. Rev 10:9-10). *We will be filled with hope and able to share it* with every man and woman whom we meet on our journey” (Ecclesia in Europa, 65).

But looking today at our ecclesial communities would we not perhaps have to say, even if somewhat summarily and approximately, that there is still little Bible in the life and culture of believers, as well as in pastoral life itself? The situation is of course very different in the different countries. But I think we all feel the urgency for a greater presence of the Word of God in the lives of our communities. Wishing to pause at one aspect, that of the relationship the faithful have with the Sacred Scriptures, which is the heart of the task of the Catholic Biblical Federation, a recent survey (the data are in process of being published) reports that 80% of practicing Catholics in a number of countries of Europe (Italy, France, Spain) hear the Bible only during Sunday Mass, and hardly 3% of practicing Catholics read it on a daily basis.

Obviously, this involves not only a material ignorance of the Bible (for example, 40% believe that Saint Paul wrote a Gospel and 26% that Saint Peter did too), but above all it suggests that people do not have a feel for the Bible as their own book, as the book for their own lives. It would seem, in sum, that for practicing Catholics of Europe the Bible continues to be a book largely reserved to the clergy. There is however a piece of evidence that raises an interesting question because it shows the desire the faithful have for the Word of God. 41% of practicing Catholics maintain that the homily is the most useful moment in their lives for the growth of their faith. This means that this moment of the Eucharistic Liturgy has an absolutely extraordinary potentiality for the growth of faith among believers. And here the question becomes truly a burning one: how are the homilies of our celebrations? I think that none of us can doubt the urgency to reflect profoundly on this aspect of pastoral life. I recall that an Italian writer, referring to the homily, once defined it as “the torture of the faithful”. But besides this there are numerous other open problems. One need think only of the danger of a fundamentalistic interpretation of the Bible or, at the other extreme, the minimizing of its importance even in liturgical celebrations (it happens, and not infrequently, that literary texts are preferred to Sacred Scripture even in liturgical celebrations!). I think in these coming days a good number of questions relative to our topic will emerge. I have in mind, for example, those Christian communities that still do not have a translation of the Bible in their own language, or the task of seeing to it that the liturgical translation matches the Bible the faithful have in their hands so that they have the same text. In this connection, we could wish for an even closer dialogue with the Biblical Associations in the various countries, both with reference to the problems pertaining to translation and with regard to the commentaries on the sacred texts. In any case, these are some among the many other questions that will make this meeting particularly interesting.

The centrality of the Word of God in the spiritual life and in pastoral engagement

But I would like to spend a word underlining what I think is the heart of the question, that is the encounter of believers with the Word of God. I do not intend to dwell on the necessity of the diffusion of the Bible. Every effort should of course be made to get the Bible into the hands of every believer. I would say that it is a fundamental right of every Christian to have a copy of the Bible of his or her own. John Paul II, speaking to a meeting held by the Italian Bishops' Conference on the topic of the Word of God, remarked: “The arduous task of the new evangelization involves putting the Bible back into the hands of the people of God” (1997). It often happens that it is hard to find a Bible in some parishes; if we are obliged to have the liturgical books, lectionaries in particular, it is all the more evident that we should have a Bible in the parish. The Bible is as it were the tabernacle of the Word of God: it should accordingly be honored and open so that everyone can nourish themselves just as they do with the Eucharist. But what I would like to underscore is the effort we must make to insure that every Christian has his or her own Bible, one that they can read from every day, one that they can even take with them when they go on vacation. I can testify to the efficacy I see in the diocese of Terni, where I

am bishop, when each year I supply every member of the diocese with a book of the Bible to which is attached a brief commentary of my own. The commentary – which is more spiritual than exegetical in character – makes the text immediately fruitful along the lines of the *lectio divina* that we all look forward to and that becomes a kind of common ground that unites all Christians. And I make only a brief reference to the Old Testament to say that with the Jewish people too a path is opened here that we should follow more boldly: the midrashic reading of the Bible is closely related to our spiritual reading.

In any case, it is here that the true question of the relationship between the Bible and the believer comes into play. And I express this with a question: is the bible the true inspiration of the life of believers in all of its aspects? Is the Bible the source of pastoral ministry in our dioceses, in our parishes? If Saint Gregory the Great said: “Sacred Scripture grows with the one who reads it”, are we and our Christian communities growing under the guidance of the Word of God? An exegete friend of mine once told the story of a bishop who gave him the draft of his pastoral letter and said to him: “would you mind adding a few good biblical quotations to the text?” Poor bishop; in the past the Bible was used at least to serve as supporting evidence for dogmatic truths, certainly not for the statements of bishops! This little incident is a kind of emblematic if extreme example of how problematic it is to think of the Bible as at our service, to view it as an armory of statements to be used at our pleasure. It is urgent instead to rediscover the primacy of Scripture both in our spiritual lives and in pastoral ministry. Some are even speaking of the “supremacy” of Scripture in the lives of the faithful. “Supremacy”, obviously, does not mean exclusivity but that the Bible should be the inspiration of our whole lives as believers and of the Church itself. It is the light that illuminates the situation, not vice versa. The Bible is not understood from the outside, but from the inside.

And part of this inside is the Church, is the community of believers. These words of then Cardinal Ratzinger are significant: “The Church is not the word, but the place where the word dwells and lives. This means that the Church is obligated to be truly a space of life and not a space of death for the word. The church cannot allow the word to get lost in the chattering of just anyone, in the word that belongs to the times that change, but should preserve it in its immutable identity. But in order that the word might be preserved, the Church should live it, should suffer it. It should subject the vital forces of an epoch to the judgment of this word, but it should also place a new life, human flesh and blood, at the word’s disposal. To limit ourselves merely to preserving the word would be to avoid suffering and would certainly not be the way to bring the word into the present time” (J. Ratzinger, *Dogma e predicazione*, p. 20). Viewed in this vital perspective the Bible becomes a light that illumines the spiritual life, the pastoral life, culture, the sciences, psychology, even politics and the other fields of life. Moreover, is it not perhaps true that the bishop, the theologian, the priest, the seminarian, the religious, even every individual Christian as such should be born and formed with the incorruptible seed of the Word of God?

To be sure, at this point, the questions become personal too: “How much time do I devote to reading and listening to the Bible? And how many books of the Bible have I read?” Questions such as these reveal the intensity of our love for the Word of God and the intensity of our desire to listen to the Lord. And it follows from this that it is indispensable for us to find the time to read the Bible, if not to memorize it. And if it happens that we have too little time, because we have so much to do, it is the “to do” that should be sacrificed, rather than the listening to the Word of God. We know well that this all requires a struggle against the mentality and the very culture in which we are immersed. The hearing of the Word of God – we could say *lectio divina* understood as a reverend hearing – becomes the examination board (?) for the Church at the beginning of this new millennium. Moreover, we know well that the Christian community depends on the hearing of the Word. The *Dei Verbum* says: “The force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: “For the word of God is living and active” (21).

For this reason, the Holy Scriptures cannot be merely the possession of certain people, the clergy, for example, or the educated. John Paul II, when presenting the 1993 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, said: “It gives us great joy to see the Bible taken in hand by people who are humble and poor, who can bring to its interpretation and actualization a more penetrating light, from the spiritual and existential point of view, than that which comes from a science that is sure of itself”. And Benedict XVI, continuing along these lines, said that “the Christian people are the true owner of the Bible and for this reason its true exegete” (The Salt of the Earth,). By listening to the Bible in fact the believer discovers his or her true identity: to be a disciple. And that he or she always remains. For this reason, together with Samuel, every Christian should repeat the words: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3:10). This is a spiritual attitude that places the believer under the force of the Word. And this is the significance of the splendid opening of the *Dei Verbum*: “Hearing the Word of God with reverence..”. Hearing the word of God means allowing oneself to be formed by it, allowing oneself to be led by it, allowing oneself to be offered the words so that they can become our own. The Bible, in sum, makes the Church also in the sense that it “makes” the believer, whom it builds up in its image and likeness.

The Bible is the privileged place where God and man meet each other. Abraham J. Heschel, wrote: “The Bible speaks not only of a search for God on the part of man, but also of the pursuit of man on the part of God” (Dio alla ricerca dell'uomo, Roma 1983, p. 156). This is why the Bible touches the deepest chords of man's being and of his history. Bonhoeffer, with great spiritual wisdom, said: “One who has received the word of God should begin to search for God; he cannot do otherwise. The more clearly and profoundly the word of God is revealed to us, the more lively does the desire in us become to know in a perfectly clear manner the unfathomable depths of God himself. With the gift of his word, God moves us to seek an ever more rich knowledge and an ever more wonderful gift. He wants no false gratification. The more we receive, the more we should seek him, and the more we seek, the more we receive of him” (DBW 15, 518). The Bible helps us to discover the true face of God, that of a father who does not cease to pursue man, as though he cannot do without him. And who could fail to understand how important it is to speak of this God to the men and women of today?

The bible also reveals to the believer his own face. One who reads the pages of the Bible learns little by little to read himself and to discover himself within a larger story: that of the Lord with men, and of men with God. We can all find ourselves in the pages of Scripture: in the stories of sorrow, of death, of betrayal, of hatred, but also the stories of hope, of friendship, of healing, of compassion, of help, of transformation. The ancient rabbinic tradition said “Turn the Torah over and over, because everything may be found in it and even you yourself in the entirety of your being” (Abot 5,22). Everyone will find themselves in these pages: they will hear life stories that seem to speak of themselves, of their betrayals and of their hopes, of their anxieties and of their dreams, of their prayers and of their dramas, of their present and of their future. Gregory the Great said: “Sacred Scripture presents itself to the eyes of our soul as a mirror, in which we can contemplate our internal countenance”.

The reading of the Bible broadens the walls of the heart and of the mind. And it manifests that primacy of the human person that permeates many contemporary cultures. Its words stand as the basis of the radical equality of all men and women, of the irrevocable dignity of every human person and of the indestructible universality of salvation, because it offers a God who is Father of all. Without the Bible the story of the world would be very different. And this is the foundation for the singular link that unites the Jewish people to Christians. The Bible helps us to understand our own roots and at the same time it gives us the task of dialogue with the Other. For this reason, some – even in the lay world – have made the suggestion that the Bible be studied in all schools as a text that has sustained the history of so many peoples and that can also inspire the future of the planet.

A new enthusiasm for the Word of God

Dear friends, what should we expect from this Congress? It is a difficult question to answer. But one objective we should certainly set for ourselves. And I take it from the homily given by Blessed John XXIII when he took possession of Saint John Lateran as bishop of Rome: "If all the cares of pastoral ministry are dear to us and if we are aware of how urgent they all are, above all we feel it our duty, everywhere and with constancy of action, to arouse an enthusiasm for every manifestation of the divine book, which is made to illuminate our journey every step of the way, from infancy to our last years.

Dear friends, this "enthusiasm for every manifestation of the divine book" which Blessed John XXIII, the initiator of the Second Vatican Council, wished to arouse in his time, is exactly what we need today as well. It is our hope and prayer that this Congress will help to arouse in us, and wherever we find ourselves, a new enthusiasm for the word of God.

Welcome to you all! And buon lavoro! Thanks.