

UT DEI VERBUM CURRAT

Address of Alexander M. Schweitzer, General Secretary of the Catholic Biblical Federation
at the opening of the exhibition

Your Beatitude, Eminences, Excellencies, honorable guests, dear friends:

I welcome you most cordially to this festive opening of the biblical exhibition which will accompany our Congress. We have given this display the title “Ut Dei Verbum currat” and when we call it that, we are very conscious of the contradiction that may result from the rather stable character of an exhibition of ready-made products on the one hand and the dynamic quality of the theme “Ut Dei Verbum currat” – taken from Paul’s Second Letter to the Thessalonians (2 Thess 3:1) – on the other.

In fact, the Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council placed great emphasis on the *dynamis*, the transforming power that inhabits the Word of God. “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 children, the food of the soul, the ... source of spiritual life. Consequently these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: “For the word of God is living and active” (Heb 4:12).” (DV 21) This underlining of the Spirit-aspect, the “dynamic” quality of the Word of God was something new forty years ago – just as *Dei Verbum* as a whole represents a new attitude toward the Bible, a new role for Sacred Scripture in the life of the Church.

After 400 years of “hibernation” – as the period since the counter-Reformation could be described with respect to the role of the Bible in the Church – the Word of God was “rediscovered”. The question of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition was thought through anew and adjustments were made. The indispensable place of the historical-critical methods in biblical exegesis in our time after the enlightenment was laid down. But above all the Bible was put back into the hands of the faithful; from now on Sacred Scripture was not only conveyed in liturgy, often in unintelligible Latin, but was accessible in the mother tongue. Today the Bible is no longer consulted merely as a source of proof texts to bolster church dogmas; rather it is the starting point for our theological questioning and a standard of reference for our faith life.

The question of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition is once again coming to the fore these days with the discussion relative to *Liturgiam Authenticam*, an Instruction of the Congregation for Divine Worship from the year 2001 which has in part also put some strains on ecumenical efforts. It would be worthwhile, therefore, to recall in this regard the statements of the conciliar Constitution *Dei Verbum*. *Dei Verbum* invites us “to give a place of honor” to the Vulgate, the ancient Christian Bible translation of the Latin Church, which has profoundly marked her theology and liturgy for hundreds of years. The translation traditions of the non-Latin Churches were likewise to be held in honor as belonging to their traditions. For the translation of the Bible into modern languages, however, *Dei Verbum* clearly demands that we go back to the original text (DV 22) – common to all the denominations – and it thereby defines the relationship between Scripture and tradition in a way that is quite new. This return to the original text brought not only strong impulses for interconfessional and ecumenical collaboration, but also sanctioned and empowered the efforts to make Sacred Scripture available to the people in the modern languages. In this way it helped to launch the translation boom of the last several decades.

And this brings us right to our exhibition. On many of the tables over there you will see examples of this translation activity, which cannot be praised highly enough. The ability to hold in one’s hands a copy of Sacred Scripture in one’s native language is the first prerequisite for an understanding, for a wide-ranging personal access to God’s Word in Scripture. Numerous member institutions of the Catholic Biblical Federation are engaged in the area of translation, publication and distribution of the Bible. And the extent of the collaboration in this area that has

taken place in the past decades with the Bible Societies cannot be emphasized enough. The General Secretary of the United Bible Societies, Reverend Miller Milloy, is about to catalogue for us the impressive number of already completed languages, but also those which still remain to be done. I will say only this much: the number of languages into which the Bible has yet to be translated is larger than that of the languages in which a translation already exists. I am delighted that Reverend Milloy has accepted our invitation to say a few words in connection with this festive opening. This will bring visibly to expression how significant has been the interconfessional collaboration in the realm of Bible translation in the past 40 years, but also, and even more so, how important it is in view of the tasks that still lie before us. This is moreover a collaboration that takes its mandate from *Dei Verbum* itself (DV 22) and that has received the stamp of approval and comes to expression in a number of other documents – as, for example, in the CBF Constitution or the Directory for Ecumenism (Pontifical Council for the Unity of Christians: Directory of the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, section "Common Bible Work", paragraphs 183-186, Rome: March 23, 1993).

Besides its clarifications regarding the role of historical-critical exegesis and the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, the new understanding of the Second Vatican Council in *re biblica* has above all brought with it profound changes for the area of pastoral ministry. And this was and is where the main emphasis of the work of the Catholic Biblical Federation, with its 319 member institutions (among them 90 Bishops' Conferences) in 127 countries, lies. Its *raison d'être* could be concisely expressed in terms of the demand of *Dei Verbum* for a broad, life-related access to Sacred Scripture for all believers (see. DV 22: "*Aditus ad Sacram Scripturam Cristifidelibus late pateat oportet*"). It is a question here of getting the Bible into people's hands and at the same time of offering them means and methods for the right use of Sacred Scripture, such as suitable (pastoral) commentaries, methods of prayerful reading (*lectio divina*), models for education and ongoing-formation etc.; so that Sacred Scripture can become a source of spiritual life and the written word of the Bible, the living Word of God.

You will find numerous examples of this biblical-pastoral engagement in the framework of this exhibition as well. They range from the various possibilities of translating the biblical message into appropriate picture language of a particular culture or group, to work material for Bible groups, Bible Weeks and Bible Months, pastoral commentaries on the biblical text which take into account the different social and cultural contexts, formation models with appropriate materials for lay people and clerics, biblically founded catechetical models, and even the various electronic media and digital formats in which the biblical message can be conveyed today.

The challenges that confront us today become visible and tangible here. We could think of the many people, who are still unable to read, or of those who live in cultures in which there is no reading tradition. Hence, the communication of the good news cannot rely on the printed word alone.

We could think of the temptations of fundamentalism, to which we Christians are not immune, and which has to do in the first place with the way how to use the Bible. Here the accompanying material, the commentaries, the teaching play an especially important role.

We could think of the hermeneutical challenges that result from the ever more rapid social developments and multicultural realities in the age of globalization. The question by what means, in what formats, in what language the good news – which remains ever the same – should be communicated or conveyed so as to provide the conditions for its understanding becomes increasingly important.

Nor can we forget the economical factor. An "option for the poor" in our context must mean very concretely that the message of Sacred Scripture should be made widely available even to those who cannot afford to purchase an expensive Bible or who would have no way of attending Bible courses. And the majority of humanity actually belongs to this group.

And let us also not forget those people who live with physical disabilities, such as blindness. Bible editions in Braille or Audio-Bibles are indispensable aids here.

Finally, we should give some thought to the receptivity models and communication habits of the younger generations, which have grown up in the world of electronic communication. In this realm our work is just beginning, in spite of the numerous sample materials you will see at this exhibition.

The diversity of the exhibits and of the realms of ecclesial life to which they refer turns our attention to another fundamental challenge. A biblical pastoral ministry understood according to the mind of *Dei Verbum* no longer remains a special sector within the medley of the various fields of pastoral activity; rather, it means the biblical inspiration and animation of the whole realm of pastoral ministry. In some areas we have already come a long way toward a biblically grounded, organical pastoral ministry, in others our journey toward this goal is just starting.

The great variety of exhibits from all over the world points also in another direction, namely to the missionary and universal dimension of the Word of God. *Dei Verbum* underscores the self-effective power of the Word among mankind (DV 25), and it thus contributes to a renewal of the basic understanding of mission. "The Word of God is designed for human beings, and the service of the Word .. can therefore not restrict itself to inner-ecclesial reform. This service is ultimately directed to humanity as a whole. Not only the Church, but every human being in his inmost depths lives from the Word of God..." (cf. J. Ratzinger, Commentary on *Dei Verbum* in LTHK, 1967).

The world-encompassing diversity of this exhibition is in the last analysis also a witness to the fullness and the variety of approaches to the Bible, corresponding to the diversity of social, cultural and ecclesial contexts. The displays offer a panorama of the concrete Bible work in the various parts of our globe. They give a tiny impression of the *dynamis* that inhabits the Word of God (and thereby also justify the dynamic title of the exhibition). Many of the methods can of course only with difficulty or not at all be shown through materials and exhibits. In this connection I would like to take this opportunity to mention the forum "Creative ways of proclaiming the Word" that will take place tomorrow evening. This will provide a setting in which you will be able to concretely experience approaches to the Bible in action, such as e.g. bibliodrama.

And of course: this exhibition, with all its great variety, has definite limitations of its own. Not only the limits imposed by the available space; we could in fact easily have accepted double the number of exhibits. I am thinking rather of the limits beyond which efforts and "success" in the work in the Lord's vineyard simply cannot be shown or grasped. And this is true regardless of the number of impressive statistics we could cite (of newly baptized, of Bible translations, etc.), and regardless of how interesting or exciting an exhibition we can put on. Ultimately, we must and we may leave the "final evaluation" in the hands of the Lord of the vineyard.

Dear Congress participants, honorable guests, my wish is that this Congress on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of *Dei Verbum* and this accompanying exhibition will give us new incentives, new inspiration and new encouragement for our work in the service of the Word of God. I would like to conclude with the words *Dei Verbum* makes its own, presenting them in its very last chapter as an outlook: Finally, let us pray, brothers and sisters, that the word of the Lord may speed on and triumph (cf. 2 Thess 3:1).