

The Bible as a platform for dialogue

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1. Two biblical images

I would like to begin this talk with two biblical images, both of them from Luke's magisterial pen.

a) Acts 8:26-40

On a desert road going down from Jerusalem to Gaza, a man, sitting in his traveling chariot, is reading the Holy Scriptures. He is not a Jew, but a eunuch who came from Ethiopia, a region located on the borders of the Roman Empire. The Spirit tells Philip "Go ahead and catch up to that chariot". Philip approaches. The meeting begins with a question - "Do you understand what you are reading?" - The story proceeds with the one "sitting beside" the other in friendly dialogue and, eventually, results in baptism.

The scene appears calm, serene, almost as if it were a chance encounter. Yet we perceive a powerful energy flow, an irrepressible dynamism: there is the strength of the Spirit that pushes and directs, there is the passion of God that wants to reach every man, there is the expansive vitality of the Church, the zeal of those who announce the good news and the anxiety of those who search. On top of everything there is the scroll of Scripture - in the hands of a foreigner. The Bible relies on its reader, whoever he is, neither opposing nor imposing. The scroll of Scripture is willing to open to all its message of salvation, which is open, inviting, mysterious but not enigmatic, fascinating though not immediately gratifying. Subsequently the text is laid out between two men in dialogue. This fact, too, is highly emblematic and full of prophecy: the Word of God creates communication and communion or, more precisely, the Jesus of whom the Scripture speaks unites men in a dialogue of friendship.

b) Lk 24:13-35

The second image is also situated within a journey that starts from Jerusalem. This time it is the Risen Jesus who makes himself the companion in traveling and in dialogue to the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. Here we are not dealing with the physical text of the Bible, but it is the Risen Jesus himself, the center of divine revelation, who is explaining it. From Jerusalem to Gaza Philip "starting from the Scriptures, announced Jesus" to the eunuch. From Jerusalem to Emmaus, Jesus himself "explained to them in all the Scriptures that referred to him".

At the beginning of the scene the two disciples "conversed and discussed together" along the way, but their dialogue is sterile, heavy: each adds his own doubts and problems to those of the other. Sad faces, tired steps, lost looks, cold hearts: this is how Jesus finds them. Like Philip, He comes near with a question: "What are you discussing as you walk along?" making their hearts burn, but he inspires their trust and turns their dialogue into hope.

In the end, as the Ethiopian ends up being baptized, and the two from Emmaus, who are already numbered among the disciples, are led to the Eucharist. In both cases the conclusion is a

continuation of the journey with an inner change. The eunuch "full of joy, continued on his way" (Acts 8:39). The two disciples "left without delay and returned to Jerusalem" (Lk 24:33) to tell the story, to share the joy and to widen the dialogue on the Risen Jesus among the whole community.

I could end the story here, leaving time and space to contemplate these two images so full of meaning. It is known that we Chinese love to reserve a lot of white space in our paintings. White space alludes to infinity. It is an invitation to transcend, to launch oneself towards the beyond, to immerse oneself in the infinite, to pause in the mystery, to dilate oneself in beauty. With the discretion of those who do not intend to invade too much white space in order not to profane silence, I proceed in an evocative way to present some reflections on the vast theme that has been assigned to me.

2. Map of these reflections

Here I will lay out a map of the reflections that I intend to propose:

The word "dialogue" has been extensively appreciated in the Church since the first encyclical of Paul VI *Ecclesiam suam* (August 6, 1964). It is an enlightening document that has opened courageous paths and made the Vatican Council II travel a long way. Since then it has become a key word in ecclesial language and has permeated theological thought and pastoral practice at every level.

Already in *Ecclesiam suam* dialogue is situated in a broad horizon and understood as a reality containing various dimensions, therefore the binomial "Bible - dialogue" must be considered under different perspectives.

From a theological point of view, the Bible presents itself as a platform of the

- dialogue between God and man
- interaction between *logos* and *dialogos*

From the hermeneutic point of view we focus on

- dialogue in the Bible
- dialogue between the Bible and its readers
- dialogue between Bible readers

From the point of view of the vast range of the dynamism of the Bible we point out

- dialogue with Jews
- ecumenical dialogue
- interreligious dialogue
- intercultural dialogue

3. The Bible as a witness of the dialogue between God and man

"Lord, do not be silent, do not withdraw from me" (Ps 35:22; Ps 109:1): this cry of the psalmist expresses a deep yearning of humanity. Man is afraid of the silence and of being abandoned by God. Man has always felt to be insurmountable the distance between the human and the divine, between heaven and earth, between his world and the mysterious and unreachable world that transcends it infinitely. He has always wanted this distance to contract, the two spheres to touch, not for a collision, but for an embrace, for dialogue, for understanding.

To respond to this fundamental human need, various forms of divination have been developed in various archaic cultures. I am thinking, for example, of my own Chinese culture, which has a very long and rich history in this regard. In reality, this yearning for dialogue with the divine is innate in man, it forms part of that inextinguishable yearning, of that anxiety of which Augustine speaks: "It is found in the very intention of God". God put it in the heart of man when he created it in his image. "From the very circumstance of his origin man is already invited to converse with God," says *Gaudium et Spes*.

Now the unexpected surprise, which cannot be deduced from human reasoning, is that God took the initiative to reveal himself and to enter into dialogue with man. *Dei Verbum* affirms with conviction and amazement, as a confession of faith and as an announcement of joy: "In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will [...]. Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself." Revelation has a dialogical and friendly dimension. It is an act of gratuitous love on the part of God. He reveals himself and does it with "goodness and wisdom". The purpose of revelation is not, therefore, a cold belief in detached truths, but is "entering into communion with God", becoming "participants in his nature", at the invitation of God himself.

The Bible is both a witness and an extension of this dialogue of love. It is not a revelation of ideas about God, therefore, but is the communication of God's life.

4. Jesus Christ: center of the interaction between *logos* and *dialogos*

The fact that God desires and actually dialogues with humanity is already surprising, but what is even more puzzling and imaginable is that God becomes flesh in Jesus Christ: with him the eternal enters history, the infinite dwells in space, the divine Word is expressed in human words¹.

Faced with the mystery of Jesus, John suggested an approach of reflection, which would enjoy much support in the subsequent theology, that of the Logos. In this sense the whole history of salvation can be interpreted according to the key of the word. Heb 1:1-2 offers a beautiful summary: "God, who had already spoken in ancient times many times and in different ways to the fathers through the prophets, lately, in these days, has spoken to us through the Son".

¹ Pope Benedict XVI explained this with clarity in Nos. 11-13 of the Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, under the title "Christology of the Word".

To speak is to pronounce oneself, to express oneself in a conscious way, to give meaning to things, to make reality exist or modify reality effectively, to communicate and relate to one another. Here it is that the *logos* opens itself to dialogue at the moment when one person opens up to another.

The Son of God, the divine Logos is in constant dialogue with the Father and the Spirit; through his incarnation, humanity is involved in intra-Trinitarian dialogue. The same Logos, made flesh and expressing himself in human words, introduces all human beings to dialogue directly with God and among themselves in a profound communion of life and love.

The Bible is a platform for dialogue because it has at its center the divine Logos that has assumed the human *logos*. While remaining strictly within the restricted contingencies of human language, the biblical text, precisely because it is centered on Jesus Christ, is made a fruitful place for this mysterious divine-human interweaving, a terrain in which an admirable vital circulation takes place between *logos* and *dialogos*.

The two images presented at the beginning illustrate this reality well. In the first the dialogue between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch leads to the Logos starting from the sacred text, the divine Word in person. In the second it is the Logos that begins to dialogue with the two disciples explaining to them the Scripture. In both scenes, thanks to Jesus Christ, Scripture offers a platform for the interaction between divine Logos and human dialogue².

"Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ". This is an expression of St. Jerome that is well known and much quoted. We think that the patron saint of biblical scholars would not be in disagreement with a similar paraphrase: knowledge of Scripture is knowledge of Christ.

5. Dialogue in the Bible

The Bible, as we know, is not a complex of abstract truths to believe, it is not a code of norms to be observed, but is studded with names, faces, people of all kinds; people who intertwine in life at various levels, who interact with each other in various ways. They converse with each other, or are put into dialogue by the narrator to produce meaning. The Bible narrates many events, reports many meetings and records many dialogues. There are many dialogues between God and the various biblical characters throughout history, and many dialogues between them.

Let us look at the dialogues of Jesus in the Gospels: they have a considerable quantitative and qualitative relevance. Jesus communicates with his disciples personally and in groups, with the crowd, with the authorities, with men and women, with friends and adversaries, but above all with the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the suffering, with sinners. Not all his interlocutors are at the point of being able to support a dialogue with him, but he lowers himself and raises the level of the other. He knows how to see and value the possibility of good even in those people whom others consider irretrievably lost, he knows how to discover solitudes, yearnings, needs and hidden

² The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in No. 108 clearly states: "The Christian faith, however, is not a religion of the Book ". Christianity is the religion of the "Word" of God: of a Word that is not "a written and mute word, but the incarnate and living Word". In order that the words of the Sacred Books do not remain a dead letter, it is necessary that Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, through the Holy Spirit reveal to us the meaning so that we understand the Scriptures ".

feelings. He guides, educates, criticizes, reproaches. His pedagogical and mystagogical art through dialogue is refined and effective.

Among the evangelists, John seems particularly interested in identifying this aspect. Just think of Jesus' dialogues with Nicodemus, with the Samaritan woman, with the man born blind and with other connected characters, with Martha before the death of Lazarus, with Pilate during the trial, with Mary Magdalen on the morning of the resurrection, etc. These are all dialogues full of theological and anthropological significance, beautiful from a literary point of view. No less striking are the more concise dialogues with the disciples: with the first two following him at the indication of John the Baptist, with Nathaniel, Peter, Philip, Thomas, etc.

Luke also loves to reveal Jesus, his person, his mission, his goodness and mercy through personal dialogues. It is touching to see that until the last minutes of life, hanging on the cross, Jesus still dialogues, promising paradise to the "good thief".

6. Dialogue with the author and with the biblical text

In the episode of Acts 8 the Ethiopian asks Philip in reference to the passage from Isaiah that he was reading: "Of what person does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" (Acts 8:34) He follows a correct interpretative process: he wants to discover the author's intent, he tries to enter into dialogue with whoever wrote the text and with what the text actually says.

Here we are in the field of biblical hermeneutics. The Bible, as a text, written in human language by human authors located in time and space, is subject to communicative mechanisms, in which these three factors interact: the speaker, the hearer and the message. Its interpretation therefore requires the use of adequate scientific methods. But the Bible also has unique characteristics: according to the Christian faith, the biblical texts are inspired by the Spirit and "have God as their author"³, they safeguard the Word of God expressed "in a human manner"⁴. Consequently, the reader of the Bible enters into a much wider dialogical perspective than the interpretation of an ordinary text. What in the hermeneutic the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer calls "fusion of horizons" is more dynamic and fascinating when we refer to the Bible. The Bible thus truly constitutes the "place", the "platform", where the divine author who reveals himself, the human authors of the texts, the texts themselves with their openness to an infinite interpretation, and the reader, in his real context and with his personal characteristics, all enter into dialogue.

7. The Bible establishes a dialogue between its readers

If we look at this dialogic reality from the historical perspective, we see that the Bible introduces its reader into a long chain of believers, creating a strong bond between the generations. Those who read the Bible have a similar experience to those who browse through a family album, where they meet the faces of numerous ancestors in the faith, some in the foreground, others less distinct.

³ *Dei Verbum* 11. A more extensive exposition on the inspiration and on the relationship "God - human author" of the Bible can be found in the document: PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *Inspiration and truth of the Holy Scripture*, 2014.

⁴ *Dei Verbum* 12.

Readers therefore feel enveloped as the Letter to the Hebrews says, "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12: 1). The Bible, in fact, unites many stories of faith in the one history of salvation, puts together many personal dialogues in a single dialogue between God and humanity.

This interweaving of stories and faces is found not only within the biblical text, but also in its transmission, in the tradition throughout the history of the Church. The Christian who reads the Bible in the XXI century reads it enriched by all the understanding that the text has had during these centuries, he reads it charged with a fruitful *Wirkungsgeschichte* (history of the effect). The effects produced by one generation are transformed into a horizon of meaning for subsequent generations. It's all a continuous flow, dynamic and vital.

There is also this that is beautiful: the Bible establishes a dialogue between its readers in a sense not only diachronic, but also synchronic. The sacred text makes us discover not only ancestors, but also brothers and sisters, contemporary friends in the faith, creates living, concrete communities. It is to this sense that Benedict XVI refers to the "Church as the original place of the hermeneutics of the Bible."⁵ Particularly in the liturgy, in the various forms of sharing and community reading of the Bible, this dialogic efficacy is more explicit and alive. The word of God, when accepted, celebrated, lived, becomes a source of dialogue.

Let us recall the image of Jesus' encounter with the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. Jesus, before being recognized, interpreted to them "what referred to him in all the Scriptures ", "beginning with Moses and all the prophets" (Lk 24:27). Jesus introduces himself and now tries to insert the two disciples into the vital current of history and tradition.

After the encounter with Jesus, with their eyes enlightened, with hearts inflamed and minds renewed, the two disciples leave without delay to return to the community of brothers, to tell and share, to establish a new dialogue of joy and hope.

8. The Bible in dialogue with Judaism

It is an evident and very positive fact that in the past century Christians have come a long way in becoming aware of the bonds that unite them to the Jewish people. With ever greater conviction they recognize the Jewish roots of their faith, they increasingly appreciate the rich heritage they have in common, in particular the treasure of Sacred Scripture. This process was strengthened and accelerated by the conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate*, which, as Pope Francis claims 50 years after its promulgation, represents "the definitive "yes" to the Jewish roots of Christianity and the irrevocable "no" to anti-Semitism"⁶. The document recommends "the mutual knowledge that is obtained above all from biblical and theological studies and fraternal dialogue"⁷. From then on, study, research and dialogue initiatives have been multiplied to deepen this relationship. Also at the level of publications of the Vatican curia there is no lack of important documents that bear witness to this effort. As regards the Bible, the text of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The*

⁵ *Verbum Domini*, 29-30

⁶ FRANCIS, SPEECH TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PROMOTED BY THE "INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHRISTIAN AND JEWS", 30 JUNE 2015.

⁷ *Nostra aetate*, 4

Jewish People and its Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible, 2014 is of particular importance⁸. It should be emphasized that the Popes of the Council and since the Council are all promoters of this dialogue. The list of what they have said or written in this regard would be long; I mention here only one of John Paul II: "The encounter between the people of God of the Old Covenant, which is never abrogated by God (cf Rom 11: 29), and that of the New Covenant, is at the same time a dialogue within our Church, in some manner between the first and the second part of her Bible"⁹. Despite the theological and hermeneutical differences, dialogue in the Scriptures remains a fruitful terrain, where Jews and Christians can value their mysterious belonging to a single saving plan of the one God. Paul reminds us of the great irrevocable gifts that God has given to Israel: "adoption as children, glory, covenants, legislation, worship, promises; to them belong the patriarchs and from them comes Christ according to the flesh" (Rom 9:4-5). The Church participates in these gifts as a participant in the root of Israel. The people of the Old Covenant are the good olive tree on which the Church has been grafted (cf Rom 11:17-18): "The words of God have been entrusted to them" (Rom 3:2). We Christians are deeply grateful to the generations of Jews who have guarded, loved, proclaimed, transmitted, fixed the divine words in writing. Their interpretation of the sacred text, rich in wisdom, open to the plurality of senses, concrete and vital in the implementation and oral transmission, is a source of teaching for Christian exegesis¹⁰.

The following description of the Hebrew biblical interpretation by Rabbi Abram Joshua Heschel suggests how much human and spiritual wisdom there is in the Hebrew approach to the Bible and how much we can learn from this rich tradition: "The Bible is a seed, God is the sun, but we are the soil. And it awaits us that each generation leads to new understandings and achievements. [...] We at Sinai have received both the word and the spirit to understand it [...]. In the hands of many peoples it becomes a book; in the life of Israel there remains a voice, a *Torah* deep in the heart"¹¹.

In recent times, interesting collaborative publications of biblical comments have emerged, made by Jews and Christians, thus testifying that it is possible, beautiful and enriching to get together in listening to the Word. Within the Italian language, a work of this kind entitled "The Bible of Friendship" came out of the press just this year. Songs from the Torah / Pentateuch commented on by Jews and Christians, with a preface by Pope Francis and Rabbi Abraham Skorka¹². It is an example that illustrates how the Bible is effectively a platform for dialogue and friendship.

⁸ Also noteworthy is a short text that offers guidelines and suggestions in the field of catechesis, published by the COMMITTEE FOR RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH JUDAISM, *Jews and Judaism in the preaching and in the catechesis of the Catholic Church*, 1985

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Address to the meeting with representatives of the Jewish community, Mainz, Germany, 17 November 1980, quoted in: *Jews and Judaism in the preaching of the catechesis of the Catholic Church*, 86.

¹⁰ In the document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, published in 1993 by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, speaking of the Hebrew interpretation of the Scriptures, the constant concern for the actualization of the biblical text is mentioned and appreciated, as expressed for example in the *Targumim*, or the ancient translations or Aramaic paraphrases, and in the *Midrashim*, or rather the interpretations that seek further meanings in the biblical text that are not immediately perceptible. Still in the paragraph entitled *Approach through recourse to Jewish interpretative traditions*, he states: "The best Christian exegetes since Origen and St. Jerome, have always tried to profit from Jewish biblical scholarship for a better understanding of Scripture. Many modern exegetes follow their example".

¹¹ HESCHEL Abram Joshua, *Dio alla ricerca dell'uomo*, Roma, Borla 1983, 299.

¹² Marco CASSUTO MORSELLI e Giulio MICHELINI (a cura di), *La Bibbia dell'Amicizia. Brani della Torah/Pentateuco commentati da ebrei e cristiani*, Cinisello Balsamo (MI), Edizioni San Paolo 2019.

Again: a priceless treasure is the possibility of praying together with the same biblical text. In particular, the book of Psalms, which Jews and Christians use together in their community and personal prayer, tangibly and visibly bears witness to this profound unity existing between the two faiths, beyond all differences. What more beautiful dialogue can there be between Jews and Christians, if not the experience of coming together, in brotherhood and friendship, to dialogue with God by saying the same words, taken from the same text, loved by both?

At the end of this section, I would like to recall a sentence by another Hebrew author, Rabbi Martin Buber, one of the fathers of contemporary Judaism, a famous philosopher, theologian, writer. At a meeting of Christian missionaries in Stuttgart in 1930, he asked himself: "What do we and you have in common? If we take the question literally, we have *a Book and a wait*. For you the Book is the vestibule, for us it is the sanctuary. But in this place we can be together, and at the same time listen to the voice that speaks here ... Your expectation is directed to the second coming, ours at the coming that has not been anticipated by the first ... But we can wait for the advent of the One together, and there are times when we can prepare the way before him together"¹³.

9. The Bible and ecumenical dialogue

Anyone who revisits the history of the ecumenical movement that has developed throughout the past century cannot fail to be struck by the effect that the Bible has had on its course and on the people who were its promoters.

The "Biblical Renewal" and the "ecumenical movement" began almost at the same time; both represent an authentic sign of the times, fruit of the action of the Spirit in the Church. Within the Catholic Church, both have found a decisive consolidation and new life in the Second Vatican Council.

The birth and 50 years of life of the *Catholic Biblical Federation* itself testify to this strong bond between the Bible and ecumenism, still expressed by its close collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, which is its ecclesiastical authority and represents its bond with the Holy See¹⁴.

We cannot, however, ignore a paradoxical fact: the Bible, source of the unity of the Church and the bond of faith of all Christians, can become a source of division through our own fault. Not infrequently, in the past and also today, "the word of God is the object of an attempt, more or less conscious, of appropriation by believers with a view to finding confirmation or even points of support for attributing strong plausibility to one's identity group, community or church"¹⁵. The harsh rebuke that Jesus addressed to the scribes and Pharisees of his time also applies to us: "you have annulled the word of God with your tradition" (Mt 15:6). We still do not agree on the list of canonical books, we still have unreconciled differences in the interpretation of the Bible, we still

¹³ MARTIN BUBER, *Israel and the World, Essays in a Time of Crisis*. Schocken, New York, 1948, 39, citato da Gerard S. SLOYAN, *Buber and the Significance of Jesus= From The Bridge*, Vol. 3., Pantheon, New York, 1958, 209.

¹⁴ Cf *Constitution of the Catholic Biblical Federation*, art. 1 and 4.

¹⁵ DEGLI INNOCENTI Mario (Editor). *The torn Bible. The interpretation of the Scriptures as a path of union among Christians*, Milan, Ancora 2002, pp. 5-6.

draw theological, pastoral and diverging existential consequences from the biblical texts themselves. Aware of this, our return to listening to the Word with humility and sincerity must inspire a path of purification and conversion. All Christians have in common the "following of Christ": the more we are converted together with Christ and his Gospel the closer we come to each other.

It is the Bible itself that guides us on this journey, shows us how to live unity in diversity. The Second Vatican Council confirms with full confidence: "In dialogue, sacred Scripture is the excellent instrument in the powerful hand of God for the achievement of that unity which the Savior offers to all men"¹⁶. Turning together to the Bible is to learn to place ourselves with docility under the action of the Spirit and to seek together a way to live as authentic Christians.

Much progress has been made in this post-conciliar half-century. In different parts of the world, projects of ecumenical or interfaith translations of the Bible have been realized or are being carried out. They are bold enterprises that require a lot of energy and competence, but that have borne and continue to bear much fruit. The process of elaboration is already a unique experience of ecumenical dialogue between biblical scholars of different denominations, without mentioning the benefit to the vast audience of readers¹⁷.

In the field of scientific research we can say that the ecumenical understanding occurs more easily than in the other fields of reflection on the faith, as for example in systematic theology. Today exegetes of different denominations largely adopt the same methods, elaborating similar hermeneutical methods. Certainly some differences of interpretation remain, but this is not always negative, since, mentioned in the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Interpretations of the Bible in the Church are often stimulating and can be complementary and fruitful".

Within the Catholic Church the Ecumenical Directory explicitly recommends doing everything possible to promote and encourage Christians of various denominations to read the Holy Scriptures together¹⁸. In fact, schools of the Word, biblical groups, *lectio divina* and other forms of community deepening of the Bible are often conducted on an interdenominational level.

In fact, schools of the Word, biblical groups, *lectio divina* and other forms of community deepening of the Bible are often conducted on an interdenominational level. In bilateral international theological dialogues, which the *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity* officially and regularly conducts with some non-Catholic churches, the Word of God always has a fundamental role: often the Bible acts as a catalyst in bringing out the convergences between the churches or in generating discussion and in-depth analysis on different points.

Even in multilateral dialogues the Bible is very much present. Within the *Faith and Order Commission* of the *World Council of Churches* various dialogues and studies have been conducted

¹⁶ *Unitatis redintegratio*, No. 21.

¹⁷ Benedetto XVI, in *Verbum Domini*, No. 115, encourages this effort and the contribution that the Catholic Biblical Federation offers to support it.

¹⁸ "Everything that can be done to make members of the Churches and ecclesial Communities read the Word of God, and to do that together when possible (e.g., Bible Weeks), reinforces this bond of unity that already unites them, helps them to be open to the unifying action of God and strengthens the common witness to the saving Word of God which they give to the world". (*The Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism*, 1993, 183)

over the last few decades in order to identify ecumenical hermeneutical principles for an understanding of the Bible, of Tradition and of Christian symbols¹⁹. In 2018, the *World Council of Churches*, together with the *United Bible Societies*, published a volume entitled *Your Word is Truth. The Bible in Ten Christian Traditions*²⁰, in which the authors, belonging to 10 different Christian denominations, present the role and principles of understanding the Bible, each according to its own tradition. It is an interesting and new ecumenical approach to the Bible.

In addition to reflecting together on the Bible and dialoguing in sincerity and charity, one very important aspect is to pray together with the Word of God, to get together in order to dialogue with God. This is the most authentic way of participating in Jesus' prayer: "so that they may all be one" (Jn 17:20).

Of particular importance is the widely spread and tested tradition of the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*. Every year it is celebrated with a theme and a biblical text to meditate on, pray over, celebrate, share and live together, and each year the biblical passage with the material for reflection and the celebration are prepared by a different community by geographical area and Christian denomination. Prayer together shows that ecumenism is above all a spiritual commitment. And praying together with the biblical texts testifies that all Christians recognize that the Word of God is at the center of faith and life. The effectiveness of ecumenical dialogue depends very much on the ability of Christians to remain in this center and to draw strength from it.

10. The Bible in interreligious dialogue and with non-believers

We are entering a very complex and delicate field for which I lack both competence and time to deal with it here. Pope Benedict XVI, collecting the reflection of the 2008 synod, dedicated some paragraphs to this topic in *Verbum Domini*, treating the subject in a unified and concise manner²¹, paying particular attention to the dialogue with the great religions that possess sacred texts, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism. Of course the dialogue is not limited to a technical comparison between the various texts, but should be extended to the values expressed in them, such as the ethics of love, the transcendence of God and human solidarity, peace, justice, respect for life, of the family, of creation, etc. Furthermore, let us not forget that even for us Christians the Word of God is not solely identified with the Bible not is it limited to the Bible. The center of our faith is not a book, but the person of Jesus who reveals himself in it. And this Jesus can surprise at any time and in any place as an unknown life partner, and can make anyone's heart burn with Scripture, as he did to the two disciples of Emmaus.

¹⁹ The results of these studies are partly merged into the following documents: *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels. An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics*, Faith and Order Paper No. 182, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1998; *Interpreting Together. Essays in Hermeneutics*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 2001

²⁰ *Your Word is Truth: The Bible in Ten Christian Traditions*, edited by J. Michael WEST and Gunnar MÄGI, United Bible Societies and WCC Publications, 2018.

²¹ *Verbum Domini*, 117-120

And who is there who has no religious reference? Who doesn't have a book that guides him in life? Can the Bible become the platform for dialogue even in the context that Benedict XVI evocatively calls "the courtyard of the Gentiles"²²? Together with the concrete effort of "first announcement"²³ and in search of adequate ways of evangelization, I think one thing is indispensable: we must trust more in the power of the Word of God. The Bible itself often speaks of the Word of God as a real subject in action: it is "alive and effective", "cuts", "penetrates" (Heb 4:12), "runs fast" (Ps 147), "enlightens" (Ps 119, 105), "heals" (Ps 107,20), "inflames" (Jer 23.29), etc. Throughout history the Word of God, guarded and conveyed by the Bible, has touched many hearts, infused wisdom and intelligence into many minds, changed many lives, prompted many people to perform works they did not believe they were capable of doing, has built community, has moved entire peoples. The pastoral action of the Church consists in allowing the Word to exert its force of attraction, to carry out its dynamism, not only among believers, but also beyond the borders.

The mysterious invitation addressed to Augustine: "*tolle et lege*" is emblematic. He is not the only one to have felt it in the depths of his heart. In fact, the Ethiopian eunuch reads the Scriptures without being able to understand them completely; this means that he feels this irresistible charm. The Spirit that acts in him is the same that drives Philip to approach him, to establish dialogue. The Spirit that stimulates us to read is the same Spirit that inspired the Scriptures²⁴.

11. The Bible in intercultural dialogue

The Bible is in itself a testimony of inextricable fusion of different cultures. It is truly an intercultural document. Already in its process of formation it has been a fruitful platform for dialogue between cultures, traditions, currents of thought, languages and symbols, etc. Throughout the history of its diffusion over time and space, it has continued to dialogue with the various scenarios that presented themselves gradually. Particularly in the western world the Bible has become "the great code," the great code²⁵ of thought, of literature, of art and of all the different forms of cultural and of all forms of cultural expression.

Today, as Pope John Paul II already recognized in the 1990 Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, "a new culture is underway, new ways of communicating with new messages, new techniques and new psychological attitudes"²⁶. The Bible tells us that it is God "who makes all things new" (Ap 21:5), it is He who helps us to face new challenges with new courage and wisdom.

²² Words of Pope Benedict XVI, December 21, 2009: "I think that the Church should also today open a sort of "court of the gentiles" where men can in some way engage with God, without knowing him and before they have found the access to his mystery, to whose service lies the internal life of the Church. Dialogue with religions must today be complemented above all by dialogue with those for whom religion is a foreign thing, to whom God is unknown and who, however, would not want to simply remain without God, but approach him at least as an Unknown."

²³ Cf *Evangelii Gaudium*, n.164-166.

²⁴ Cf *Dei Verbum* 12: "Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written"

²⁵ The expression is of BLAKE William, made famous by FRYE Northrop, *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature*, London 1982.

²⁶ *Redemptoris missio*, n. 37.

One of the major challenges of our complex and globalized society is to consider cultural and religious pluralism not only as an irreversible fact, but as an opportunity for growth for all. The way to realize this ideal is by authentic dialogue that goes beyond healthy coexistence, beyond a simple juxtaposition of identity, to arrive at a profound and mutual interaction: "We need to move from the dialogue of cultures to the culture of dialogue."²⁷

The Bible can offer fruitful ground and an energetic incentive to this culture of dialogue, provided that it is not considered as a static monument to be admired and preserved or a collection of knowledge to be acquired and passed on. The Word of God that is revealed in the Bible is living, dynamic, grows, develops, creates thoughts and life forms, gives birth to a community of believers (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20). "The Bible grows with those who read it," said Gregory the Great²⁸, once set in writing, the Word of God no longer grows in content, but continues to grow in credibility through those who live and testify to it, in depth of meaning in study and meditation, in vitality, in liturgical celebration and pastoral care, it grows in universality and cultural relevance in its penetration into different socio-cultural contexts and grows in fruitfulness in intercultural dialogue.

Another condition is the following: the Bible must be received as it actually is, as a school and training ground for humanization. The Bible presents man in his concrete situation, the man who acts and speaks, loves and hates, works and rests, laughs and cries, fights and suffers, sins and repents, desires and dreams, asks questions and seeks answers, he complains and has fun, he lives and dies; he is the man of every time and every place. Deep down, there is a radical similarity between all men and women of every culture and every age. Vatican II recognizes that the Gospel message "is in harmony with the most secret aspirations of the human heart"²⁹. The Bible reveals man to himself, offers him a mirror where he can contemplate his own reality and better understand the tiring and fascinating dynamics of his journey, the constant mechanisms at work in his relationship with God, with the world and with the others. In particular: the biblical reader finds in wisdom literature an offer of meaning in daily life, in historical books the narration of the human adventure with its ups and downs, in the Psalms waves of deep feelings that fill his heart and in the teachings of Jesus is a mysterious elevation of his whole existence, a yearning for the regions where love, freedom, truth and justice live.

Reading the Bible, the horizon of meaning is widened more and more and almost spontaneously the reader engages the teachers and the wise men, the traditions and the customs, the ideals of goodness and happiness in his or her own culture. Thus, for example, a Chinese could find an accord between some of the teachings of Confucius or Lao Tse and the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, between some family stories and the story of the life of the patriarchs of the Old Testament, among some sapiential aphorisms and Bible proverbs etc. In this way the reading of the Bible helps to discover the "seeds of the Word" scattered in every human culture,

²⁷ RUSSO Adolfo, *Interculturality: the future of religions and humanity*, in TORIELLO Filippo (ed.) *The Bible at a time of interculture*, Pontifical Theological Faculty of Southern Italy, section St. Thomas of Aquinas - Naples 2013, 41.

²⁸ GREGORY THE GREAT, *Moralia* 20:1.

²⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22

helps to widen the horizon and broaden the heart. The Bible involves cultures in a dialogue and a symphony on the beauty of life and on that God who loves and cares for every human being.

I would like to recall once again the image of Philip's encounter with the eunuch: two men of different cultures sit side by side, on the same cart, with the scroll of Scripture lying between them. It is the Scripture that unites the two men in a friendly dialogue, it is the Scripture that forms a bridge of communication between two different cultures, creating an intercultural understanding.

12. Conclusion

I end by evoking the figure of a great master, card. Carlo Maria Martini, the man of dialogue because he is totally rooted in the Word of God. He himself says: From listening to and frequenting the Holy Scriptures "paths of spiritual deepening are born that lead to the root of great human problems and allow us to grasp a common basis for dialogue with all people of good will, including those of other religions or non-believers. Meditating for a long time on the Scriptures I realized that what was produced in me in the mind and in the heart (the "burning heart" of which the two disciples of Emmaus speak) could also be found in the profound experience of others, especially the young. I can therefore say that it is the study of the Bible and meditation on the Bible that led me to the practice of dialogue. Today a dialoguing spirit is more necessary than ever"³⁰.

To definitively close this reflection, I would like to reiterate the final words with which Luke concludes the two narrations. Both the Ethiopian and the two disciples of Emmaus resume their journey full of joy and enthusiasm, they return to their usual context, to their ordinary life, but they are inwardly transformed by the encounter with Jesus, by dialogue with him and by the Scriptures which speaks of him, and of the atmosphere of friendship created around him. "The joy of the Gospel fills the heart and the whole life of those who meet with Jesus", says Pope Francis the Apostolic Exhortation *Evanglii Gaudium*. We hope that our experience in these days will be transformative, so that we can start again full of joy, to share it with others.

³⁰ A dialoguing spirit. Remarks by Card. Martini at the ceremony for the conferral of the Principe de Asturias awards, Oviedo, Spain, October 27, 2000, published in the periodical *Culture e Fede* Vol. IX/1 (2001) 16.