

THE WORD OF GOD AS THE SOUL OF THE PASTORAL LIFE OF THE CHURCH IN THE ECUMENICAL COMMUNITY¹

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On the occasion of your “International Biblical-Pastoral Congress”, with which you are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of your “Catholic Bible Federation” I wish to extend a very cordial welcome and my congratulations to you. It is no coincidence that your Federation is connected to the Holy See via the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. The initial reason for this connection is the farsighted initiative of both Cardinals Augustin Bea and Johannes Willebrands, who were both presidents of said Pontifical Council and to whom the implementation of the Dogmatic Constitution of the Second Vatican Council on the Divine Revelation “*Dei verbum*” in the life and mission of the Church was an important concern. Being assigned to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity therefore also renders the ecumenical dimension of the bible pastoral of the Catholic Church visible, which is essentially founded on the fact that the Holy Scripture is common to all Christians and that there is perhaps no other reality which binds us Christians in the various churches and church communities more closely together than the Holy Scripture.

Looking back on our history, however, we encounter the opposite. This is because we realize that the great schisms in the Western Church in the 16th century began with a controversial reading and interpretation of the Word of God and “in a certain sense extended into the Bible itself”². But in the Ecumenical Movement we have also realized that overcoming the church schisms, too, can only be made possible based on a common reading of the Holy Scripture. This is an example of the great gift made to us by the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed twenty years ago on October 31st, 1999, in Augsburg by the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and which has since been adopted by the World Methodist Council, the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the Anglican World Communion as well. With respect to what is surely the most central doctrine of our faith, which became one of the main reasons for the schism in the Church in the Western world, this marked the achievement of a broad consensus which may be deemed an ecumenical milestone, arrived at primarily because Protestants and Catholics listened to the witness borne by the New Testament together. In hearing the Word of God together there lies an enormous hidden force for the ecumenical reunification of all Christians. In order to find unity in faith once again, we must listen together to the Word of God testified to in the Holy Scripture.³

1. The Centrality of the Word of God in the Life of the Church

This ecumenical dimension has also characterized the biblical pastoral work in our Catholic Church ever since the Second Vatican Council. With the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, “*Dei verbum*”, which, in the words of Cardinal Carlo M. Martini, can doubtless be acknowledged as “possibly the most wonderful document of the Council”⁴, it placed the Word of God back in the center of the life of the Church and expressed the centrality of the Word of God with the following statement: “The Church has always venerated the Divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy,

¹ Lecture at the International Biblical-Pastoral Congress “The Bible and Life: Biblical Inspiration of the Entire Pastoral Life and Mission of the Church (VD 73): Experiences and Challenges” on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Catholic Biblical Federation in Rome on April 23rd, 2019.

² J. Ratzinger, *Die erste Sitzungsperiode des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils. Ein Rückblick* (Cologne 1963) 60.

³ Vgl. Ch. Böttigheimer, *Die eine Bibel und die vielen Kirchen. Die Heilige Schrift im ökumenischen Verständnis* (Freiburg i. Br. 2016).

⁴ Carlo M. Martini, *Die Bischofssynode über das Wort Gottes*, in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 133 (2008) 291-296, zit. 291.

she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body."⁵ This inseparable bond between the Word of God and the body of Christ, in other words of the two tables, was evidenced already during the Second Vatican Council by the Sacred Scripture being placed at the center of St. Peter's Basilica for veneration during the Eucharist, which was celebrated at the beginning of every main session.

Following the Second Vatican Council, the popes have also reminded us of the centrality of the word of God in the life of the Church time and again. This brings to mind the remarkable Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii nuntiandi" of 1975, in which Pope Paul VI discerned the Church's most fundamental identity in its evangelic activity: "Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize."⁶ We should also be reminded of the Apostolic Letter "Novo millennio ineunte", which Pope John Paul II wrote at the close of the Jubilee Year 2000 and in which he presented a pastoral program for the Church at the beginning of the third millennium, placing particular emphasis on the need to listen to and proclaim the word of God: "This is surely a priority for the Church at the dawn of the new millennium."⁷ Subsequently Pope Benedict XVI dedicated the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2008 to the theme "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church". He went on to lend even more depth to the fruitful outcome of this synod in his post-synodal exhortation "Verbum Domini", stating his conviction that "there is no greater priority than this: to enable the people of our time once more to encounter God, the God who speaks to us and shares his love so that we might have life in abundance."⁸ And in his Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii gaudium" of 2015, Pope Francis invited the church to open "a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come."⁹

To bring out the centrality of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church is doubtless the primary duty of biblical pastoral service. This is eminently true and urgently necessary in today's world, in which we are veritably inundated by words, and words are prone to inflation, so that we tend to say, time and again: "Those are just words, nothing but words". In the world of today, the number of words – on the radio and on television, conveyed by conventional and electronic media, the internet and e-mail – has increased immensely, but the value of these words has diminished immensely as well. In the light of this inflation of words, the danger is great that those words which are at the center of Christian annunciation are perceived too as nothing but words, which no longer come at a cost. Therefore it is extremely difficult to hear that one word, among the many words of everyday life, that is the Word of God. In this situation all those in the biblical pastoral service have a great responsibility to bear witness with their actions and above all with their existence to the fact that our lives as human beings are not just about words, but rather about the Word, the one Word of eternal life, as expressed in a very deep way in the First Epistle of John: "When this life became visible, we saw it; so we speak of it and tell you about the eternal life which was with the Father and was made known to us"(1 John 1, 2).

2. Dimensions of the Church's Biblical Pastoral Service

If we reflect on the meaning of the Word of God for the existence of Christians and the life of the Church, then we will realize in a new way that, as "Verbum Domini" states, the bible is the soul of the entire ordinary and extraordinary pastoral service, since it leads us to "a greater awareness of the person of Christ, who reveals the Father and is the fullness of divine

⁵ Dei verbum, no. 21.

⁶ Paul VI., Evangelii nuntiandi, no. 14.

⁷ John Paul II., Novo millennio ineunte, no. 40.

⁸ Benedict XVI., Verbum Domini. no. 2.

⁹ Francis, Evangelii gaudium. no. 1.

revelation”¹⁰. This statement basically covers all dimensions of what biblical pastoral work is about.

a) The “Laid Table” of the Word of God

First and foremost we must realize that in the Holy Scripture we encounter the divine revelation, specifically: God Himself who speaks to us. This insight must define the way we handle the Word of God and will distinguish us from every other thinking person in a characteristic way: it is a characteristic of the thinking person that thought precedes word. Persons who have been obliged to listen to themselves first in order to know what to think are not persons we would usually deem particularly intelligent, let alone wise, and rightly so. For the herald of the Word of God, however, the Word always precedes his thoughts. Naturally this is only because it is not his own word which he is announcing, but rather the Word of God, which approaches him and which he must first receive and accept. For the herald cannot invent the Word of God; he can only find it, or, even better: let it find him. The Word of God always precedes the thinking of us as humans, the thinking of the herald of the Word of God is always reflective and contemplative thought.

Biblical pastoral work is honest and credible when it does set out to itself lay the table of the Word of God for mankind. Rather, the opposite applies, i.e. that it can sit down at the table which has already been “laid”, that is at the table which has already been laid by God Himself. The task of biblical pastoral work is therefore to be seen in helping people to gain access to this “laid table” of the Word of God. This means, above all, that we must not regard the Holy Scripture as a book of the past and accordingly only speak of past events and interpretations. This would cause the Word of God to appear primarily as a Word of the past, which must be historically interpreted. There can be no doubt that this work is essential and necessary for the understanding of the Holy Scripture, since for us as believers, it must be an innermost concern to listen carefully to what the biblical text says in order to be able to understand it as such. But if historical-critical exegesis is practiced as the sole road of access to the Holy Scripture and thereby absolutized, the Word of God is encased in the past and ultimately the Bible as the Bible and with it its canon is denied. To truly accept the canon as canon means to read the Word of God above and beyond its historical moment, to encounter the Word of God not only as a Word pronounced in the past but as a living Word which God has given as a gift through the people of times past to the people of all times as a contemporary Word, which speaks into our lives and touches our hearts.

Historical-critical and theological-spiritual interpretations of the Scripture are inextricably linked to biblical pastoral work.¹¹ This is the only way to escape the double danger which the great medieval theologian Hugh of Saint Victor, who was referred to as the “second Saint Augustine” called attention to in his time: On the one hand, those who proclaim the Word of God cannot act as if they were scholars of grammar who are ignorant of the alphabet. On the other hand they cannot concentrate on the alphabet alone and in so doing lose sight of the beautiful harmony of grammar. They cannot simply take note of the Word of God in an act of pure curiosity; rather, they must digest it and make it a part of their innermost selves, so that it may become their own personal word. It is only then that they can convey it in an equally personal way and bring it to the people, as summarized very accurately by Pope John Paul II in one of his statements: “To nourish ourselves with the word in order to be <servants of the word> in the work of evangelization.”¹² Letting ourselves be nourished must precede

¹⁰ Benedict XVI., *Verbum Domini*, no. 73.

¹¹ Cf. B. Körner, *Die Bibel als Wort Gottes auslegen. Historisch-kritische Exegese und Dogmatik* (Würzburg 2011).

¹² John Paul II., *Novo millennio ineunte*, no. 40.

evangelization. We are always hearers of the Word at first, for it is only thus that we can become servants of the Word.

b) The Word of God as Person and as Scripture

Such careful handling of the Holy Scripture is advisable, above all due to its content, since in it we encounter what one might refer to as God's love letters, addressed to His people. Individuals already attach great value to love letters on an interpersonal level; and yet, at the same time they are aware of the fact that the sender of those letters is more important than the letters themselves. This difference must be perceived as a source of guidance in biblical pastoral work as well. For the Word of God, which we are called upon to proclaim, cannot simply be identified with the Holy Scripture. The Word of God is not primarily Scripture, but rather a personal reality: Jesus Christ Himself is the living Word of God. In this sense, the word of God precedes Holy Scripture and is primarily a Person, namely the Son of God made flesh. God has revealed Himself through Him; and Holy Scripture authentically testifies to and communicates this revelation.

This analogous understanding of the Word of God, which is the basis for the Conciliar Constitution on Divine Revelation, "Dei verbum" as well as for the post-synodal exhortation "Verbum domini" by Pope Benedict XVI, also leads to a broader understanding of God's revelation. It is not to be understood as a mere communication of divine truths, but rather as a personal and historical act on the part of God, thus making it a living, personal and communal event or, in the words of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger: „Revelation, in the Christian realm, is not a system of sentences but a historical, and, for the believer, an ongoing event of a new relationship between God and man.”¹³ Since God revealed Himself in history, and in it ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ, His revelation is more than what is written. God's revelation precedes the Holy Scripture and "is found in it, but is not simply identical with it". The revelation of God is more than its material principle, which is the Holy Scripture; it is "life, which dwells in the Church and brings Scripture alive while illuminating its hidden depths"¹⁴.

In this fundamental sense, the Christian Faith does not recognize either inlibration, and much less inverbation, rather it recognizes the incarnation of the Son of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the deepest reason why Christianity is not a book religion, as Judaism is and, in a different way, Islam; it professes a person in whom the divine source of all reality is manifest and revealed as love. The quintessence of Christianity can be summarized in a nutshell in the words of the Catholic New Testament scholar Thomas Söding: "Christianity has a Holy Scripture but it is not a book religion. At the heart of Christianity is man: Jesus of Nazareth. Through Him humanity is joint with divinity, and God with mankind."¹⁵

Sacred Scripture is indispensable for recognizing and becoming acquainted with Jesus Christ as the living Word of God, a precept expressed by St. Jerome, the great exegete in the time of the Church fathers, in this succinct statement: "The man who does not know the Scriptures does not know the power and wisdom of God. Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ".¹⁶ The question of who Christ is and the question of how Holy Scripture should be read are therefore inextricably linked. Since Jesus Christ is the living Word of God and, one might say, interprets Himself in the words of the Holy Scripture, one must familiarize oneself

¹³ J. Ratzinger, *Das Problem der Dogmengeschichte in der Sicht der katholischen Theologie* (Cologne and Opladen 1966) 19.

¹⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Bemerkungen zum Schema „De fontibus revelationis“*, in: idem., *Zur Lehre des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils = Gesammelte Schriften. Band 7 / 1* (Freiburg i. Br. 2012) 157-174, cit. 165.

¹⁵ Th. Söding, *Gotteswort durch Menschenwort. Das Buch der Bücher und das Leben der Menschen*, in: K.-H. Kronawitter / M. Langer (Hrsg.), *Von Gott und der Welt. Ein theologisches Lesebuch* (Regensburg 2008) 212-223, cit. 219.

¹⁶ Jerome, *Preface to the Commentary on Isaiah*: PL 24, 17.

with the Holy Scripture in order to know Christ. Conversely, Scripture remains forbearing and profane, being meaningless without a personal encounter with Christ. Scripture only speaks to us if it leads us to live in a personal relationship of friendship with Jesus Christ as the living Word of God in the faith communion of the Church.

c) The Word of God in the Realm of the Church

The personal understanding of the sender of the divine love letters also corresponds to a personal understanding of their recipient. For the divine revelation as a living and personal event can only reach completion when it has been received in faith by those to whom it was addressed. Since a revelation which is not received cannot be revealed to anyone either, the concept of revelation must always include the receiving subject.

This subject is not primarily the individual Christian, who can only believe together with the entire Church as a co-believer. Rather, the true addressees of God's revelation and its authentic enunciation in the Holy Scripture are the people of God, and more specifically Israel in particular, followed by the Church. This is shown by the basic circumstance that the emergence of the Holy Scripture is an expression of the faith of the Church and the Bible is a book of the Church, which emerged from and is passed on by Church tradition, because without the Church as a believing subject it would be impossible to speak of the "Holy Scripture". Without the Church the Bible would be no more than a historical collection of writings, which evolved over an entire millennium. From this collection of literature, the Bible became "*one* book", and more specifically the "Holy Scripture" with its twofold entity of Old and New Testament, but only by virtue of God's people wandering through history. The Holy Scripture presents itself as a single book above all because it evolved entirely from the grass roots of the one people of God and because the author of the Bible is consequently the people of God themselves, as the New Testament scholar Gerhard Lohfink points out: "The Holy Scripture is not a parcel of 73 books tied up as an afterthought, but rather it grew, like a tree. At the end, entirely new branches were grafted on to the tree: this was the New Testament. But these branches, too, draw their sustenance from the sap of the one tree and are supported by its trunk."¹⁷

Reflecting on how closely the Holy Scripture and the Church belong together, we recognize that Holy Scripture is and remains a living book through the people of God alone, as the subject receiving and internalizing it. Vice versa, the people of God cannot exist without Holy Scripture because it is the foundation of their existence, their vocation and their identity. This identity of the Church is illustrated quite beautifully in the biblical scene in Luke, where many people are gathered around Jesus while His mother and brothers are waiting outside, wanting to see Him (Lk 8, 19-21). For Jesus, this scene provides an occasion to speak of His true relatives, those who are not simply identical to His biological relatives at all. For Jesus' true relatives, His mother and brothers, "are those who hear the word of God and act according to it". With these words, Jesus points to the quintessential core of the Church's community of faith. Hearing and acting on the word of God forms families and constitutes the Church. The true family of Jesus is the group of disciples and hence the Church, as a result of hearing and acting on the word of God. Therefore, biblical pastoral work is the work of the Church in the deepest possible sense, and it is the soul of the pastoral service of the Church.

3. Living with the Word of God

Delving deeply into the Holy Scripture, we recognize that it is Mary who is one of the very first true relatives of Jesus. For she appears to us as an icon for the readiness to receive the Word of God and hear the Word of God. It is predominantly St. Luke the Evangelist who

¹⁷ G. Lohfink, *Bibel ja – Kirche nein. Kriterien richtiger Bibelauslegung* (Bad Tölz 2004) 117.

portrays Mary as the person who is utterly receptive to the Word of God, as reflected especially in three biblical passages:

At the Annunciation of the birth of Jesus, we are told that Mary was greatly troubled at the angel's greeting and "wondered what his words meant" (Lk 1, 29). The word used by Luke for "wondered" points to the word for "dialogue" in the Greek language. Luke thereby expresses the fact that Mary enters into a personal and intimate conversation with the word of God addressed to her, that she engages in a quiet dialogue with Him and fathoms the deeper meaning of this Word.

Mary responds in a similar fashion in the story of Christmas, following the shepherds' adoration of the Christ child lying in the crib: "Mary remembered all these things and thought deeply about them" (Lk 2, 19). Mary translates the Christmas experience into the Word and immerses herself in the Word, so that it may germinate in the soil of her heart.

The Gospel according to Luke contains a third reference to this Word - Image in the account of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple: "His mother treasured all these things in her heart" (Lk 2, 51). Naturally the impact of these words stems from the preceding sentence: "But they did not understand his answer". What Luke wishes to express is that God's word cannot always be immediately understood, even by those who are believers and thus open to God, calling for the humility and patience with which Mary takes into her heart what she does not understand at first, where it can slowly begin to take effect.

These three scenes show that Mary was utterly open to the Word of God. In this fundamental stance, Mary is the archetype and primordial form of the Church, formed by those "who hear God's word and act according to it". Hence Mary need not stand between the Christian denominations; on the contrary, she is a helpful companion on the path toward Christian unity, a gift given to us only if we listen to the Word of God together. Together we can learn from Mary how biblical pastoral work can be carried out together in a credible way. For as an archetype of the Church, Mary shows us how we Christians should relate to the Word of God in the Church, so that we may be truly at home in His Word.

The Church fathers coined a profound concept by likening this 'feeling at home' in the Holy Scripture to a spiritual Garden of Eden, through which we can stroll with the living God and marvel at the beauty and harmony of His plan of salvation. I wish to thank the "Catholic Bible Federation" for their work, which constitutes a constant renewal of their invitation to the Church and the Ecumenism to stroll with God and His living Word. I extend my congratulations to you on the 50th anniversary of your foundation and wish you a successful continuation of your work, so that what the poet Heinrich Heine wrote about the fundamental meaning of the Word of God in the lives of the Jews be proven time and again in our Church as well: "The Jews, who appreciate the value of precious things, knew right well what they did when, at the burning of the second temple, they left to their fate the gold and silver implements of sacrifice, the candlesticks and lamps, even the breastplate of the High Priest adorned with great jewels, but saved the Bible. This was the real treasure of the Temple."¹⁸ Clearly the Jews knew, and we Christians know it as well, that the Bible gives us the gift of God's love letters, bearing witness to the endless love of this God who speaks to us and therefore gives us the gift of His Word.

¹⁸ H. Heine: 'On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany' (Preface to the 2nd German edition, in: Complete Works. Volume 5 (Munich 1976) 511.

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