

HOW DO WE INTERPRET THE BIBLE AS CATHOLICS TODAY?

*The following article is based on the section entitled ***The Interpretation of Sacred Scripture in the Church*** from ***VERBUM DOMINI***, the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI on ***THE WORD OF GOD IN THE LIFE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH*** and is offered for your reflection, prayer and action for ***BIBLE SUNDAY 2015*** by the Regional Biblical Commission of the Bishops' Conference of Malaysia- Singapore-Brunel.*

As we seek to read and understand the Bible, we may ask if there is a distinctive Catholic way of doing so. How should we approach God's Word as we try to understand and live it out in our daily lives?

THE BIBLE - THE BOOK OF THE LIVING COMMUNITY OF THE CHURCH

When attempting to understand the Bible and interpreting it, we need to remember that "*The Bible was written by the People of God for the People of God, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.*" From this, we must remember that only in communion with the People of God can we truly enter into the heart of the truth that God himself wishes to convey to us. Yes, we might read the Bible individually for our own personal growth, but we must always remember that the Bible grew out of the lived experience of the People of God and we must thus see its message through the eyes of the community guided by the Spirit that gave rise to it and which continues to see it as God's Word to humanity.

The Church interpreted the Jewish Scriptures that we know today as the Old Testament in the light of the Incarnation, Life and Ministry (particularly, the Passion, Death and Resurrection) of the Lord Jesus Christ. Likewise the Church's experience of Jesus in his earthly lifetime and later after the Ascension as it grew from its beginnings at Pentecost gave rise to the books of the New Testament. If the Bible is understood as having come from the Church, then surely, it is with the Church and in harmony with its teachings and under the guidance of the Magisterium (teaching office) that we must interpret its contents and message which God has chosen to communicate.

INTERPRETATION

METHODS Various methods have been employed in order to obtain a richer understanding of biblical texts. Recent work in interpreting the Bible has relied much on the indispensable 'historico-critical' method as well as other recently-developed methods of textual analysis which have brought about much benefit. The historico-critical method considers the different types and styles (genres) of writing and also attempts to look at the context of the event at that time itself before attempting to see its message for our own time. Indeed serious methods of historical research are essential to a proper understanding of any text.

CRITERIA The Dogmatic Constitution from the Second Vatican Council, ***Dei Verbum*** indicates three fundamental criteria for an appreciation of the divine dimension of the Bible:

- 1) *The text must be interpreted with attention to the unity of the whole of Scripture -* Thus we should not attempt to look at a passage in isolation from what the rest of Scripture is saying.

- 2) *Account is to be taken of the living Tradition of the whole Church* - Again we look at the passage not in isolation in terms of time but how it has been seen through the ages from the early church onwards.
- 3) *Respect must be shown for the analogy of faith* – A passage cannot be seen in opposition to the faith and teaching of the Church.

BIBLICAL EXEGESIS AND THEOLOGY

History is the arena in which God works. Therefore it must be interpreted in the light of faith and reason. Biblical Exegesis or Interpretation needs to go hand-in-hand with Theology. In this way, we are able to avoid extreme subjective and arbitrary positions such as fundamentalist positions, wherein reason is ignored or the tendency can be to spiritualize everything. While we always start looking at a text from the *literal sense*, we must be open to the message beyond it allowing the *spiritual sense* to also emerge and not allow ourselves to be manipulated or led into error. The *spiritual sense* is “the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it.” Hence, interpretation of Sacred Scripture must involve our personal and living faith. Interpretation seeks saving truth for the life of the individual Christian and for the Church. It recognizes the historical value of the biblical tradition and seeks to discover the living meaning of the Sacred Scriptures for the lives of believers today.

To this end, our interpretation must pass from *letter to spirit*. The Word of God can never simply be equated with the letter of the text. An authentic process of interpretation is never purely an intellectual process but also a *lived* one, requiring full involvement in the life of the Church, which is life “according to the Spirit” (*Gal 5:16*).

DANGERS

One danger that the Bible is seen only as a historical book, dealing with the past without recognizing that it is just as valid today. It has a message for our own time! Another danger is looking at it with a secularized mentality without the eyes of faith. For example, when a divine element is present, it is explained away and reduced to the human element. In this way, it denies the historicity of the divine element. This can be harmful to the life of the Church because it casts doubt over fundamental mysteries of Christianity and their historicity.

However it is important that we remember that biblical interpretation or exegesis “*is truly faithful to the proper intention of biblical texts when it goes not only to the heart of their formulation to find the reality of faith there expressed, but also seeks to link this reality to the experience of faith in our present world*”. (*Verbum Domini 37*) The Word of God is active and alive. It is addressed to each of us in the here and now of our lives.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW TESTAMENTS

We should also consider the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments. The New Testament itself acknowledges the Old Testament as the Word of God and thus accepts the authority of the Sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people. The New Testament often uses the same language and frequently refers to passages from the Old. It explicitly acknowledges them by citing many parts of them as a basis for argument. The New Testament is seen as fulfilling the Old Testament but this must be seen in the following terms:

- a basic aspect of *continuity*, as seen in the New Testament use of typology. Hebrews 11:17-19 which concerns the sacrifice of Isaac leading to God receiving him back. In the light of v. 19: "God was able to raise men from the dead", God raising Isaac to life is a typology of Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection from the dead.
- an aspect of *discontinuity*, with regard to the institutions of the Old Testament. For instance, the High Priesthood of Christ in the Letter to the Hebrews is seen as being radically different from the Old Testament priesthood.
- an aspect of *fulfilment and transcendence*. We see this in Jesus quoting Isaiah as he sets out his mission in Luke 4:18-19.

DIFFICULT PASSAGES

There are "dark" or difficult passages of the Bible that we have to contend with – some of these contain violence and immorality. What we have to remember here is that biblical revelation is progressive; God's plan is manifested *progressively* and it is accomplished slowly, *in successive stages*. Despite their weaknesses, God chose the people of Israel and patiently worked to guide and educate them. We must understand the cultural and moral level of a very different period from our own where instances of violence and massacre were not denounced. Here we need to allow qualified experts to help us understand the different contexts and look beyond to see the underlying message of God.

ECUMENISM

Interpreting the Bible also involves our relations with other Christians. The unity of God's people, which the ecumenical movement seeks to restore, is profoundly based in Scripture. By listening, sharing and meditating together on the Scriptures, we experience a real, albeit incomplete communion. This spurs us on towards the dialogue of charity and enables growth in the dialogue of truth.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the saints stand out as the best examples to us today as persons who have truly lived the word of God. They let themselves be shaped by the Word of God through listening, reading and meditation, allowing themselves to be "good soil" in which the divine sower planted the Word.

May the Word bear within us fruits of holiness, "thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold" (*Mk 4:20*).

The full text of Verbum Domini may be seen at

http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1 *How does being a Catholic affect the way I interpret the Bible?*

2 *Look at the readings this Sunday. What is the connection between the First Reading and the Gospel? Can you see a) continuity, b) discontinuity, c) fulfillment ?*

3 *How do I approach difficult passages in the Bible?*