

BIBLICAL PASTORAL MINISTRY AND THE MINISTRIES OF THE WORD

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0. Introduction

0.1. Purpose of the talk

The purpose of this reflection is to try to specify what is Biblical Apostolate Ministry and in what extent it is related to the services of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church; hence in the life and mission of any disciple of Christ.

0.2. Terminology clarification

There are many designations for Biblical Apostolate with more or less the same contents. We are basically used to “Apostolate of the Bible”, “Biblical Pastoral”, ”and “Biblical Pastoral Ministry”. It may be a little bit confusing; however, the different terminologies convey practically the same message. The basic idea behind all this is first of all, the reality of a specific Apostolate of the Bible. This Apostolate is Biblical, not in the sense that it is Bible-based or Bible-nourished; but this Apostolate is Biblical because it entails specific commitments and activities for the sake of the Bible.

In the same line *Dei Verbum* is asking the ministry of the Word to be nourished by the Word of God; this can be seen as a result of a Apostolate of the Bible. In other words, the Apostolate of the Bible or Biblical Pastoral Ministry should lead to a Biblical Apostolate, an Apostolate fed by the Word of God.

1. The Ministries of the Word of God: types, ministers and aims

The official mission of the Church is traditionally divided into three aspects: the sanctification, the teaching and the pastoral government or administration. Note that I am using the word “ministry” in plural, while the common use of it is singular.

a) The Canonical Ministry of the Word

According to the Canon Law, the ministry of the Word has a precise aim and sources. Canon 760 reads: “The mystery of Christ is to be set forth completely and faithfully in the ministry of the word, which must be based upon sacred scripture, tradition, liturgy, the magisterium, and the life of the Church”. The main means to achieve this are preaching and catechesis. These two pastoral activities are subject to regulations concerning the agents, the contents and the place. Indeed all of them in their various ramifications are doctrinal (“the mysteries of faith”) and moral (“norms of Christian life”, “moral principles even about social orders” and “any human affairs”). The Bible is used

as a book for dogmatic and moral teachings of the Church. Even though the Ministry of the Word is understood as “the function of proclaiming the Gospel of God”, the core of it finally is the teaching of the mysteries of faith coupled with moral teachings deriving from the Bible.

The duties of the components of the Church are set out differently. The Clergy do preach or proclaim the Gospel, while the Consecrated people have to give witness to it in a special way even though they are seldom called upon to help in proclaiming the Good News (c. 758). “The lay members of the Christian faithful are witnesses of the gospel message by word and the example of a Christian life” (c. 759).

In sum, to understand the meaning of the Canonical Ministry of the Word of God, one needs to enlarge the meaning that “Word of God” and to consider that Ministry as a mandate to preach and to teach on behalf of the Church. Mandated Ministers preach or teach the Word of God, others listen and witness to it.

b) The Scientific Ministry of the Word of God

Right from the beginning of the Church, some dedicate their life to the study of the Written Word of God. The practice is not proper to the Christian Community; rather the latter took it from the Jewish Community where Scribes and Rabbis are conversant with the Law.

In a recent past, the Catholic Church, due to historical factors, gave to the Study of the Bible an official status. Allow me to mention in this regard the well-known Biblical Encyclicals: *Providentissimus Deus*, *Spiritus Paraclitus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Other official Biblical documents of the Church are: *Dei Verbum* and “*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*”.

The concern of these documents is to set the aim of Biblical Studies, while acknowledging their usefulness. No 55 of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* reads:

Hence their exegetical explanation should aim especially at the theological doctrine, avoiding useless disputations and omitting all that is calculated rather to gratify curiosity than to promote true learning and solid piety. The literal sense and especially the theological let them propose with such definiteness, explain with such skill and inculcate with such ardor that in their students may be in a sense verified what happened to the disciples on the way to Emmaus, when, having heard the words of the Master, they exclaimed: "Was not our heart burning within us, whilst He opened to us the Scriptures?" (Pius XII, 1946).

The document on “*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*” streamlines the task of those engaged in this Scientific Ministry of the Word of God and gives the major activities it involves: research, teaching and publications of books, including this form of publication “*which renders a very great service by its ability to adapt itself to a variety of readers, from the well-educated to children of catechism age, reaching biblical*

groups, apostolic movements and religious congregations. Exegetes who have a gift for popularization provide an extremely useful and fruitful work, one that is indispensable if the fruit of exegetical studies is to be dispersed as widely as need demands”.

Once again, the Scientific Service of the Word of God is or should be “pastoral-oriented”; not only for preaching, but mostly for spiritual personal nourishment of both the Scholar and the readers, and a better understanding of the Written Word of God:

In all this variety of tasks, the Catholic exegete has no other purpose than the service of the Word of God. The aim of the exegete is not to substitute for the biblical texts the results of his or her work, whether that involves the reconstruction of ancient sources used by the inspired authors or up-to-date presentation of the latest conclusions of exegetical science. On the contrary, the aim of the exegete is to shed light more and more on the biblical texts themselves, helping them to be better appreciated for what they are in themselves and understood with ever more historical accuracy and spiritual depth.

c) The Pastoral Use of the Bible

The Pastoral Use of the Bible is the use of the Book of the Word of God in any pastoral activities, except liturgy, homily, and catechetical. This restriction is debatable¹; but the idea behind it is to mark out the Canonical Ministries of the Word, with an official mandate of the Church. In any case, the Pastoral Use of the Bible is focused on helping others using the Bible; for instance in spiritual direction, consoling, healing, counseling, etc. A typical Pastoral Use of the Bible is described in the frequently quoted statement of St Paul 2Tm 3:16: *“All scripture is inspired by God and **useful for refuting error, for guiding people’s lives and teaching them to be upright”**.*

This Pastoral Use of the Bible is the closest to Biblical Pastoral Ministry among the Ministries of the Word. In this title, it can be included, just like Bible-based or a Bible-nourished Apostolate (Biblical Apostolate: An Apostolate that is Biblical) in the Apostolate of the Bible.

The above distinction between the Canonical Ministry of the Bible and the Pastoral Use of it can be confusing. But I am in the opinion that it is helpful to separate realities before we put them together (as goes the saying in French: “Distinguer pour unir” (“Distinguishing in order to unite”). A clarification of what Biblical Pastoral Ministry is will probably help to bring more light and dispel the confusion.

2. Characteristics of Biblical Pastoral Ministry

a) Biblical Pastoral Ministry, a way of reading the Bible: reader-reader reading

It is not rare to read or to hear people making a difference between Biblical Studies and Biblical Apostolate; as a result, others make a difference between a Bible Study Group and a Bible Sharing Group. In my own and humble opinion, the difference is not so much

¹ One of the reasons to isolate these ministries is that they are already Bible-centered: The liturgy of the Word in any liturgical celebration and the centrality of the Bible in catechetical.

between a scientific reading or study of the Bible and a spiritual reading of it. The difference lies in the fact that the reader of the Bible, in BPM, is at the same moment the beneficiary of his/her reading. In the BPM perspective, the Bible is not read, studied or explained to another person: it is read, studied and explained by and for the reader him/herself. The reading of the Bible in BPM is a reflexive one. Since there is no beneficiary of the reading or the study of the Bible, relating to the Bible in BPM perspective is an encounter between the reader and the Word of God in the Bible; a real dialogue - you and me relationship – between the Word of God and the reader/listener. This face-to-face relation with the Word of God is the essence of the antic and traditional *Lectio Divina* within and out of the bounds of the monasteries.

b) Biblical Pastoral Ministry, a way of interpreting the Bible: Bible-Life-Bible

The history of the Church witnesses to five basic interpretations of the Bible:

- Intellectual or literary interpretations: using your “Head” alone;
- Fundamentalist interpretations: using everything, but your “Head”;
- Doctrinal/Moral/Theological interpretations: using your “Faith” (the mysteries of faith);
- Pastoral interpretations: using the context of the others (believers and unbelievers alike);
- Spiritual reading or understanding of the Bible: using your own Life: *Lectio Divina*.

The interpretation of the Bible becomes then a process – a long process – journeying from the Bible to your own life and from your life to the Bible. There is a mutual enlightenment between the Bible and one’s life: the Bible helps you to understand your life and your life helps you to understand the Bible. This hermeneutical “va-et-vient” (“to and fro” movement) substantial to *Lectio Divina* is indeed a typical process of understanding sacred or religious literature even in African traditions.

c) Biblical Pastoral Ministry, a way to approach the Bible: Ears-Mouth Approach

In BPM perspective, the Bible is neither a barn of doctrinal and moral teachings nor a library of literary masterpieces of the past. The Bible is a Word, a Voice and a Human-Divine Being, Jesus Christ.

One of my English teachers during my summer holidays told me that you don’t learn a language with your eyes (reading), but with your ears and your mouth. This methodological approach to languages applied to the Bible. In BPM you don’t read the Bible; you don’t study or learn the Bible; you don’t teach the Bible, with your “Head”, with your “Eyes”, but with your Ears and your Mouth: Ears to listen and to obey; Mouth to eat (to drink) and to proclaim (cf. Ez 3:1-4; Dei Verbum: “**Hearing** the Word of God with reverence and **proclaiming** it with faith...”).

The ears and the mouth are connected to internal organs very important both in the Bible and in African tradition: the ears are connected to the heart and the mouth to the stomach. These are places where we store whatever we hear or eat and want to keep. In the Biblical

tradition as well as in the African one, ears and stomach symbolize our feelings and our deeds. For instance, if you are wicked, your heart or your stomach is hard.

In sum an Ears-Mouth Approach develops to an Ears-Mouth-Heart-Stomach Approach: the Bible is not written, firstly to be read, studied or proclaimed. It is written to be listened and to be kept. Therefore in BPM,

- Reading the Bible is listening to and keeping the Word of God
- Studying the Bible is listening to and keeping the Word of God
- Proclaiming or preaching the Written Word of God is listening to and keeping the Word of God.

d) Biblical Pastoral Ministry: specific activities

The major activities identifying the BPM among other Ministries of the Word are:

- **The translation of the Bible**, so that everybody can hear the Word of God in his/her own language or in the language he/she understands better;
- **The distribution of the Bible**: any Christian should have his/her own Bible. For us in Africa, Pope John Paul II put it blankly in *Ecclesia in Africa* no. 58: “*efforts must be made to try to put the Sacred Scriptures into the hands of all the faithful right from their earliest years*”;
- **The promotion of Personal Encounter with the Word**, by promoting the reading and the study of the Bible: “Know your Bible” is one of the BPM slogans;
- **The promotion of Personal Encounter with the Word** through Lectio Divina in its different forms and methods
- **The promotion of Bible Sharing Groups**
- **Biblical formation** through workshops and seminars
- **Biblical formation** through pastoral biblical materials for an adequate understanding, reading and interpretation of the Bible;
- Etc.

Shortly speaking, whatever can be done “*In order that the Word of God may be known, loved, pondered and preserved in the hearts of the faithful (cf. Lk 2: 19, 51)*” (*Ecclesia in Africa* no. 58) is part of BPM activities.

4. BPM part and parcel of the Ministries of the Word

a) BPM and the Ministries of the Word: links

It is important to underline and to emphasize the fact that the distinction between BPM and the other Ministries of Word is not to establish a hermetic barrier or a “Berlin Wall” between these different, yet complementary Ministries. All of them are related to one another. The BPM is by and large the core and the aim of all the Ministries of the Word in the Church, be it Canonical, Scientific or Pastoral. The distinction contained in this paper is aimed at leading to a close collaboration between the Ministries and Ministers of the Word.

b) BPM and the Ministries of the Word: a practical distinction

The practical consequences of this paper entail, for those involved in BPM the unavoidable and fruitful collaboration; that means: identify their best partners, their target groups and the projects they can do together.

In this line, it is possible for us to find our partners among the Bible-based Groups, the Biblical Scholars, the Catechists and the Bible Societies; “ready-to-use” target groups include the Bible-oriented Groups, the Catechists and Catechumens, the Seminarians, the religious men and women, the priests, the bishops. Common projects are Bible distribution, Bible translation and Biblical materials for easy access to the Bible.

CONCLUSION

Awareness of one’s own identity is fundamental in any kind of interrelation and interaction. It is particularly necessary if we want to avoid conflicting relations and actions. The purpose of this reflection is to help the Biblical Pastoral Ministers to appreciate their personal and specific contribution to the spread of the Word of God; and at the same time to evaluate what they can gain from other Ministries and Ministers of God. Indeed it is of greater importance in a process of Biblical Apostolate organization and action planning at a regional, national or diocesan level.

Thanks.

THE WORD OF GOD, GOOD NEWS FOR ALL

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OCCASION:

THE BIBLE AND THE CHURCH IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF KUMASI, 25 YEARS OF BIBLICAL APOSTOLATE KUMASI, JANUARY 14-29,2006

Before I start to address the topics of this paper, permit me to express my gratitude to His Grace, Most Rev. Peter Kwasi Sarpong, Archbishop of Kumasi, the organizers of the Silver Jubilee of Biblical Apostolate in Kumasi, under the efficient direction of Very Rev. Fr. Gabriel Acheampong. I am grateful to all of them for this celebration and for having kindly invited me to share in their joy, not only by attending the celebration, but by breaking the Word of God with you.

The passage we want to reflect on is Mk 1:15. It reads: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel”. Of course, what is translated gospel means literally speaking, “Good News”. You can then guess easily why I entitled my talk, “The Word of God, Good News for all”. However, for a full understanding both of the title and of the passage, we need to bear in mind that it is Jesus who is speaking to us, in his first public preaching activity. This first preaching is described by Mark as “a proclamation of the gospel of God”, that is; “a proclamation of the Good News of God”. Mk 1:14 reads: “After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God”. Consequently we can equate the Good News of God in v. 14 to the Words pronounced by Jesus. Yet we are not going to draw such a conclusion right now. I suggest that we turn firstly to our human experience of what we call good news. Hence we’ll consider four major points: 1) What is good news for us; 2) What is Good News for Mark, the Evangelist; 3) What is Good news for Jesus in Mk 1:14-15; and finally, 3) The good news of Biblical Pastoral Ministry in Kumasi.

1. Good news for human beings

In our human experiences, good or bad news have emotional connotation. Bad news means in fact sad news. In other words, the news is good or bad, depending on the way it affects us. It is not however a completely subjective understanding of the good or the bad news; there is a link with the contents. Unhappy events like death, accident, failures in exams, etc are bad news, while births, marriage, overcoming difficulties, success are good news.

But if we go in this direction of a subjective approach to the events, we may be misled by our feelings, which may result in misunderstanding the Word of God and his Action in our life. The main challenge here is that in the eyes of God, as well as in the light of our own experience, what seems to be bad event can be in reality a good one, and what we assume to be a good event can turn to be a bad one. Let us take two examples from the Bible. The first one is the story of the young man approaching Jesus with the desire to be

perfect or at least to do more than he was doing before. The story is narrated in Mt 19:16-22. I just quote here the last verses: “The young man said to him (Jesus), “All of these I have observed. What do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me”. And the story ended dramatically: “When the young man heard this statement (of Jesus), he went away sad, for he had many possessions”. If the sadness of the young man should determine the value of Jesus Word, then the Word of Jesus asking a rich man who is willing to be perfect, to sell his wealth and follow him is bad. Can Jesus, the Good master, order or advise something bad to somebody asking him the good or the best thing to do?

The second example comes from the Old Testament. In the 3rd chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, God asked the prophet to eat the book of his Word, which the prophet did. The dialogue with God and the prophet insists on eating the book. And the prophet reports: “I ate it, and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth” (Ez 3,3). For Ezekiel, the Word of God he ate was good, since “it was as sweet as honey”. But to rely on the taste of the Word of God (the book) can mislead us. Indeed, in the Book of Revelation chapter 10, the voice told the visionary to take the scroll and to eat it. John the visionary obeyed, like Ezekiel the prophet. But John experienced a contrast meaningful to us. Says Rev. 10,10: “I took the small scroll from the angel’s hand and swallowed it. In my mouth it was like sweet honey, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour”.

We can then conclude that the Word of God is good, since it is sweet like honey, irrespective of the challenging action it performs in our life. “Indeed the Word of God is ... sharper than any two-edged sword”. A sharp sword is naturally painful; when it is a two-edged one, it is from any side painful, “penetrating between soul and spirit”. Nevertheless, it is still the Good News of God, even though we feel sorrow and sadness when we hear it.

In the line of the above conclusion, we can now try to understand the Good News of Jesus calling for conversion in Mk 1:15. But before that, a few considerations on the Good News according to Mark may help our understanding of Jesus’ appeal.

2. The Good News according to Mark

It is interesting to notice that St Mark starts his Gospel using the Greek word for “good news”. Mk 1:1 literally reads: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus, Son of God”. Here the Good News is directly linked to Jesus. On the one hand, Jesus is the author of the good news; in that case, anything, any word, any message coming from him is “good news”, even the invitation directed to the young man to sell his possessions and follow Jesus (Mt 19:21). On the other hand, Jesus is he himself the “Good News”. It is not only his words that are good news, but anything relating to him, from the crib to the tomb. In fact St Luke, who elaborated the narrative on the infancy of Jesus, presented the official announcement of Jesus’ birth as “good news”. “The angel said to them (the shepherds) ‘Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy... For today in the city of David a saviour has been born for you...’” (Lk 2:10-11). At the end of Jesus’ life,

the visit of the ladies to his tomb turned to be a happy experience, full of joy and emotion. The ladies became messengers of the good news of the resurrection, since the Greek word used by both Matthew and Luke has the same roots as “good news” (Mk 16:8; Mt 28:8).

We reach the core, the nucleus of the Good News according to Mark. It is the Resurrection of Christ. It was the Good news to be announced, by the ladies, to the Eleven Apostles and to other disciples. That brings us back to a previous episode of the life of Jesus, when a lady showed him her affection, washing, kissing and anointing his feet (Mk 14:3-9). Jesus concluded the story by asserting: “Amen, I say to you, wherever the good news is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (14,9). What is the “good news to be proclaimed wherever”? What is the good news to be preached to all nations, before the end of the world (cf Mk 13,9-10)? The answer is; the good news of the Death and Resurrection of Christ and its benefits to the humankind. Beginning with the two key-events of Jesus’ Death and Resurrection, the good news is enlarged to the teachings and actions of Christ, as well as to the events of his birth and infancy. Mark writing his gospel after the events, this global understanding of the Good News is present in Mk 1:15 when Jesus invites us to believe in the good news.

Furthermore, the centrality of Jesus, content and author of the “good news”, is again underlined. As author, Jesus is the one through whom the Word of God reaches us. Mark is the only Evangelist to tell us in 1:14 about Jesus “proclaiming the good news of God”. However his preaching and the contents of his first preaching are not new in the Gospel. Indeed the mission of Jesus started after the death of John the Baptist. To perceive the peculiarity of Jesus’ words in Mk 1:15 we may need to compare them with the preaching of his predecessor, John the Baptist.

3. The good news of God in Mk 1:14-15

We have four strong statements in the message of Jesus in Mk 1:15: 1) the fulfillment of the time (“This is the time of fulfillment”), 2) the closeness of the kingdom of God (“The kingdom of God is at hand”), 3) the call to conversion and 4) the call to believe in the gospel. The four statements go together two by two. Apart from that, the first two statements are indicating two seemingly connected realities, while the last two are inviting to concrete actions probably linked to one another: to Repent and to believe in the good news.

The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand: What is the time Jesus is speaking about? John the Baptist is presented as a voice calling for preparing the way and the paths of the Lord (Mk 1:3). In verses 7 and 8, John will publicly acknowledge that somebody, unnamed in the Gospel, is coming after him (1,7-8) and in 1:15 we are told that Jesus’ public ministry began after John’s death. We can conclude that the fulfilled time is no more a time of preparation, but a time of arrival or presence. The new person to come is the one taking over after the death of John the Baptist. Jesus is therefore the completeness of the time; the time is ripe enough and “fully” marked by the

presence of Jesus who is from now on the scene of the story. For Jesus, the good news is his presence in the history of his own people and in the history of humanity. Saint Paul puts it well when he says: “when the fulfillment of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption” (Ga 4:4).

Repent and believe in the good news: The call to repentance is in the line of John the Baptist’s message. Yet the focus here is not on the forgiveness of sins. Rather conversion means believing in the good news of the presence of God in human history through the person, the preaching and the deeds of Jesus. The move here is from a mere moral repentance to conversion as adhesion to the person of Jesus and adherence to his message, to the kingdom of God announced and incarnated by him. We are still in the direction of what we are saying since the beginning of our talk: the centrality of Jesus as core of the Good News of God and center of attention of any deep conversion.

Paul is a good example of the kind of conversion Jesus is calling us to in Mk 1:15. The conversion of Paul begins with his encounter with the Risen Lord on his way to Damascus. But this conversion means a radical change of mentality, of point of view and perspective, resulting in obvious changes of life style or orientation. Saint Paul puts it in a pathetic way in his letter to the Philippians: “Whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ...” (Ph 3:7-8). This is contrasting with the story of the young man of Mt 19; he went away sad, when Christ asked him to go and sell all his wealth and follow him. But both stories are teaching us the same lesson. Confronted with the novelty and the Good News of Jesus, people are always free to accept the presence of Jesus in their history and as the Good News addressed to them by God, or to refuse them. Then the question: how do we answer the Good news of God incarnated by Jesus and proclaimed by him?

4. The good news of the Word of God in Kumasi Archdiocese

The response of Kumasi Archdiocese to the proclamation of the Good News is both individual and as a Family of God. I have no intention of challenging anybody. But I think that the occasion of a Jubilee is of thanksgiving for what has been achieved and of looking forward to the future. I just want Kumasi to be part of the story of the first preaching of Jesus.

The first way is to answer the call of Jesus to conversion. Kumasi and all of us, we have to repent and believe in the Good News of God in/by Jesus. We have two biblical opposite and contrasted examples: the young man of Mt 19 and Saint Paul. We have a choice. But what I wish to point out is that during these 25 years of Biblical Pastoral Ministry, many people came to God and to a daily encounter with Christ in their life story through the reading, the meditation and the sharing of the Bible. For this unknown and numberless people, we should thank God for giving us witnesses of the attractive and dynamic power of his Word. In these men and women, children and youth, youth and

adults, we have illustrations of how we can answer positively to the Good News of God in Jesus and in the Bible. The crowd present these days is a sign of the eagerness of the people of the Archdiocese for the Word of God. The BPM should address this eagerness. I take this opportunity to congratulate the pioneers of this Apostolate in the diocese: Fr Michael Targett, MAfr, and Sr. Miriam Brandy, S.S.L., followed by Sr Mary Anne Hoope, B.V.M, always backed and supported by His Grace Archbishop Peter Kwasi Sarpong.

The second way Kumasi can be part of the story in Mk 1:14-15 is to continue the action performed in the story. In proclaiming the good news of God, Jesus took over from John the Baptist. In his turn Jesus commissioned the Apostles to go and announce the good news during his lifetime (Mk 3,14; 6,12) and after his resurrection (16,15). Therefore there is a place for every body in this chain of announcers of God's Good News. In the gospel of Mark, the preaching of the good news is put twice in a passive form. Mk 13,10 reads: "But the gospel must first be preached to all nations"; and Mk 14,9: "wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the world". I then raise a question: preached by whom? Preached by God or by human beings? Who are the unspecified agents of this proclamation of the good news? It is you, it is me, and it is all of us. May many Christians of Kumasi, stimulated by the silver jubilee of Biblical Apostolate in the Archdiocese, volunteer to commit themselves to this specific apostolate, so that "the Word of God may be known, loved, pondered and preserved in the hearts of the faithful (cf Lk 2:19,51)" and proclaimed to all nations, beginning with their close neighbors. .



The Word Gives Joy and Hope (Lk 2:10-11)
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OCCASION:

<p>THE BIBLE AND THE CHURCH IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF KUMASI, 25 YEARS OF BIBLICAL APOSTOLATE KUMASI, JANUARY 14-29,2006</p>
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Excellencies, Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

It is a special joy and honor for me to speak to you today as a representative of the Catholic Biblical Federation during this grand celebration of the Silver Jubilee of the Kumasi Archdiocesan Biblical Apostolate. In the name of the CBF-President, Bishop Vincenzo Paglia, the General Secretary, Mr. Alexander M. Schweitzer, and the entire Federation I would first of all like to welcome you with all my heart to this anniversary celebration and to express our thanks and respect for your work of the past 25 years.

Father Gabriel invited me to speak on the theme “The Word gives Joy and Hope”. Perhaps to help me get started he went on to mention the Gospel text of Lk 2:10-11. The passage consists of two verses of a story with which we are extremely familiar and which we heard read again at Mass just a few weeks ago: the story of the birth of the Son of God in Bethlehem. Taking Fr. Gabriel’s suggestion as my starting point, I would like therefore to approach my theme in terms of three observations: God’s Word gives joy, God’s Word means light, and God’s Word offers hope.

The Word gives joy for all mankind

“Behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy” (Lk 2:10). With these words the angel announces the birth of the Son of God to the frightened shepherds in

the field. It is a message of joy, a Gospel or good news, that will be for all the people, as the text continues. In Jesus Christ God's promise of joy to all men became tangible, visible. In the child in the manger God's message of salvation became flesh in the world. It is the message that the world is saved, in spite of every hardship, every anxiety: "For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord." (Lk 2:11)

This joy is the theme of many other texts of the Bible. For joy, laughter, merriment are among those gifts that are fundamental to our lives; they are qualities that should mark us out as Christians. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! (Phil 4:4): these are the words of encouragement the Apostle Paul addresses to the community in Philippi. And he continues: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Phil 4:6).

So today too is a day of joy for us and for the Christians of the Archdiocese of Kumasi, of all Ghana, and indeed of all Africa. A day of joy and thanksgiving for everything that has been constructed and achieved, for all the initiatives that have been undertaken by so many people with God's help in the past 25 years.

A quarter of a century ago the Archbishop of Kumasi, His Excellency Peter Kwasi Sarpong, took the first step. He issued a call to Catholic teachers, urging them to collaborate in helping their young students to read the Bible in such a way as to make its message of hope and love an integral part of their lives, helping them to resist the seduction of fundamentalist teachings of all kinds. This first step led to many more: from the setting up of a basic Biblical Formation Program to the running of an archdiocesan Biblical Formation Program, to the foundation of the Association of Biblical Apostolate and to the celebration of an annual Bible Week. Many companions joined the ranks and many more steps led to the path we now are treading, 25 years later. The Word of God gives joy!

Joy – despite fears and problems?

But if only it were so easy – rejoice, and all will be well with the world... The real world often doesn't work that way. Our daily lives can by no means be counted on to provide occasions for joy. On the contrary, whether in the family or in the community, whether in the religious life of our dioceses or in the political-social life of our homelands, our continents and our regions – everywhere we confront great challenges and problems, which can often frighten us. There is a loss of solidarity and sympathy in our families and social communities, there are the problems in our societies that come about through pandemics such as HIV, famines, violence, ethnic conflicts, corruption, discrimination against women, children, the poor in our countries; and there are finally the religious challenges such as fundamentalism, extremism, sectarianism or religious intolerance which so often make open dialogue between religions and a brotherly exchange within

the Christian world or within our own Church so difficult. In view of these difficult situations the call to rejoice can sound incomprehensible or even cynical.

But let us look again at the text of our Christmas story: the angel's message of joy is preceded by an important statement: "Do not be afraid" (Lk 2:10). "Fear not!" - the fear of the shepherds, which is alluded to in the story, does not go unnoticed; it is taken seriously. God sees our pain, our concerns and the problems with which we have to struggle. The response: "Do not be afraid!" confronts these problems with a divine promise: my kingdom has already begun in this world. Through the God who has become man in Jesus of Nazareth our fear will be taken away; and this is why our joy is possible at all. The message of joy that God gives us is addressed precisely to those who stand on the shadowy side of life: to the deprived, the sick, the hungry, the oppressed, the suffering.

Jesus' words as well as his deeds were nothing other than the realization of this promise of joy: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets." (Lk 6:20-21).

So it is these very people in the shadows to whom we are supposed to show special concern – because they are also especially close to the heart of God. If it is to become reality that God's Word "shall not return void to His mouth" (cf. Is 55:11), as the motto of this celebration reads, then it is our task to take this word seriously and to confront these challenges. The Second Vatican Council formulates this Christian mission in its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* as follows: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts." (GS 1)

The CBF – a vibrant network for God's Word

These challenges that we all confront are many and varied. Even the 319 member institutions of the Biblical Federation in their 127 countries face them in the various regions of the world and under the most varied of circumstances. Thousands of women and men have become engaged in Bible work. They translate the Bible into local languages in which no translation yet exists (and there are still more than 3,000 such languages!). They train women and men, catechists, teachers, lay collaborators or future priests. They do serious research on the books of Scripture and produce biblical pastoral materials for community or classroom work. They develop new Bible-reading methods, e.g., for Bible

circles in “small Christian communities”, or offer biblical seminars and workshops. They make their contribution through social projects in education and community work, as well as through the production of periodicals, radio or television programs – and much more. So we are not alone in all of this, but rather part of a vibrant network of people everywhere in the world who all have a common goal: that God’s Word may become a source of joy and hope for all people.

Africa is, by the way, a major priority of our work in the Federation at this time. I am particularly delighted therefore that the director of the Biblical Center for Africa and Madagascar (BICAM), Fr. Moïse Adekambi, who is also regional coordinator of the CBF for Africa, is also present with us today. And it is not by accident that the next and seventh plenary meeting of the CBF in 2008 will take place in Africa, namely in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

To make tangible God’s word as a source of joy and hope for the world, this common goal was articulated already 40 years ago by Vatican II in its Constitution *Dei Verbum*, where we find the words: “Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful.” (DV 22). Last year the CBF, together with the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, celebrated the 40th anniversary of the *Dei Verbum* with an international Bible Congress in Rome. This important event in Rome became a platform for international exchange on truly up-to-date ways of using the Bible and on the further development of Bible work. This was a sign of joy and hope.

The more than 450 participants at the Congress were moreover received in private audience by Pope Benedict XVI. In the course of this meeting the Holy Father directed his thanks explicitly “to all those who work in the service of the translation and diffusion of the bible, supplying the means for expounding it, teaching it and interpreting its message. In this sense, a special thanks goes to the Catholic Biblical Federation for their activities, for the biblical pastoral ministry they promote, for their faithful adherence to the direction of the Magisterium and for their spirit of openness to ecumenical collaboration in the biblical field.” It is a special concern of mine to extend to all of you today this expression of thanks from the Holy Father.

The Word is Light in our World

I would like to pick out a further point from our text from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2: as the angel appears, the glory of the Lord is to be seen, shining brightly. Where God reveals himself and becomes man, there darkness vanishes and it becomes light. God’s word drives out the darkness. “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path”, as the psalmist puts it in Ps 119:105. And, in another Christmas text, the beginning of the Gospel of John, the idea is expressed as follows: “What came to be through him was life, and this life was

the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:4-5).

God’s Word means light. God’s Word continues to create lights in the firmament. In the course of a history with human beings, God always has and continues to allow the lights of his love to shine, whether it be in the history with his chosen people Israel, in the New Covenant in Christ, in his Church, at all times and throughout the world. The promise to Abraham, the liberation of Israel from oppression, the birth of the Son of Man, the preaching of the Apostles, the spread of Christianity – all of these are as many lights of joy that God’s Word has lit. But the Second Vatican Council too, the growth of Christianity in Africa, yes very concretely: the year 2005, the year of the Bible in Africa and the surrounding islands and today’s anniversary celebration here in Kumasi are also lights of this kind – today too such a light has again been kindled!

The Word gives hope: A new world is possible

God’s Word gives joy, God’s Word means light. And God’s Word gives hope. In spite of every sorrow, every challenge, every difficulty we as Christians receive the gift of hope through the incarnation of the Son of God, through Jesus Christ. It is the hope of another, of a different, of a better world. A world in which justice, peace, the preservation of the created universe are the measure of humanity, a world in which oppression, discrimination, violence and exploitation no longer have a place.

This is exactly the message of Jesus, this was the life he lived to model our own: through his conviction that the Kingdom of God had already begun on earth, through his turning to the marginalized men and women of his society, to those who were discriminated against, through his commitment to justice. Thus, all “the nations will put their hope in his name”, as Matthew confesses (Matt 12:21; cf. Is 11:10).

Whoever takes God’s promise of joy and of hope seriously will work actively for a different, a new world. This is what we are all invited to do, as lay persons, catechists, priests, religious, bishops, everyone for himself and in community with others. The message of joy, of light and of hope unites us all in a bond that transcends countries, clans and languages.

Dear friends, once again let me thank you all from the bottom of my heart for your dedication during the past 25 years. You have been working together to help God’s Word become a source of joy, a sign of light and a ground of hope.

Today is a day of joy: we can be proud and thankful as we look back at what has been accomplished in the past years in the Archdiocese of Kumasi and in

Ghana. And it is a day of hope: with a confidence that comes from God's promise: "Fear not!" we can look forward to the future.

I am delighted to have been able to join you in this celebration as representative of the Catholic Biblical Federation. And I have been deeply touched by your spirit of hospitality and the warm reception I have received here. This is truly a fulfillment of God's Word that "the Word that goes forth from his mouth shall not return void" (Is 55:10).

Thank you very much.