



Catechesis and the Proclamation of the Word: A Theological Reflection

Historically, the Catholic laity's involvement with Sacred Scripture, with some notable exceptions, has been cautious and casual. While many clergy and laity might agree that the famine "for hearing the word of the LORD," announced by Amos, is upon us (8:11), few have the time or the training to submit to the discipline of biblical study. Degree and non-degree courses are available, of course, as are Bible-based educational programs from study groups to Web sites. Every year new biblical commentaries appear, aimed specifically at lay readers. Never before have catechetical materials offered such rich scriptural fare. Still, the fact remains that the folks in the pews are hungry not for "food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life" (Jn 6:27). As one young mother put it, "I don't want to enroll in a master's program. I just want to be able to read the Bible."

The frustration of this young mother resonates with the concern that Pope Benedict XVI voiced at the recent Synod of Bishops: "it is absolutely necessary to overcome this dualism between exegesis and theology" (www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/october/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20081014_sinodo_en.html). Succinctly put, what we have to do is to take the Bible out of the library and bring it back into the living room, the place where the family gathers. The task suggested by this analogy must be guided by three operating principles.

The first principle is to examine the role played by literary and historical methods in biblical interpretation. The Bible is the Word of God in human words. The Second Vatican Council described this incarnational quality of Sacred Scripture in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*: "Indeed the words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men" (no. 13, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, new rev. ed., ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]). Because the Bible is the Word of God become incarnate in human language, methods of historical and literary analysis are "indispensable" for biblical interpretation (see Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The*

Interpretation of the Bible in the Church [Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994], 5).

The second principle for making the Bible available to the laity is to help families appreciate the role of the Scriptures in the Church and especially the liturgy. The Bible is the Church's book, the "family album" of the community of faith. This means, as Michael Gorman puts it, "that although the Scriptures were not written to us, they were written for us"—in other words, they were written "for all God's people in all ages and places" (*Elements of Biblical Exegesis* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009], 150). Furthermore, because the Bible is the Church's book, the optimal setting for biblical exposition is the liturgical assembly, where the faith community gathers as one family to be nourished by Word and sacrament.

These two principles describe an inescapable tension that confronts every Christian who seeks to interpret the Bible. On the one hand, interpreting the Bible requires rigorous study, both historical and literary; on the other hand, the Bible belongs to every baptized member of the Church, exegetical skills notwithstanding. This is the tension that the Pope's intervention at the Synod sought to restore. The tension is essential and must be maintained. It is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The activity of the Holy Spirit is the third operating principle. On the one hand, the Spirit, "who scrutinizes everything, even the depths of God," guides the best of biblical scholarship (1 Cor 2:10). On the other hand, that same Spirit comes to the aid of all who hunger for the Word of God. Their hunger is taken up in the "inexpressible groanings" of the Spirit, who intercedes for them "according to God's will" (Rom 8:26-27).

The effective proclamation of the Word of God in catechesis depends on all three of these operating principles, on reliance on the Spirit as well as creative (even if sometimes uncomfortable) fidelity to the tension between the Bible of scholarship and the Bible of the Church.

The word "catechesis" is derived from a Greek word that appears seldom in the New Testament and never in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament

widely used in the early Church. The verb “catechize” is found in Paul’s letters and in Luke’s Acts of the Apostles. For Paul, the word seems already to be a quasi-technical term for teaching based on the Gospel. In Acts 18:24-25, the word is used of Apollos, “an authority on the scriptures. He had been instructed [literally, “catechized”] in the Way of the Lord and, with ardent spirit, spoke and taught accurately about Jesus.” Apparently this biblical scholar joined Paul in catechizing the Corinthians, as we learn from Paul himself when he writes, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth” (1 Cor 3:6). Beyond these two scriptural references, however, little is known of the ministry of Apollos or of how he integrated the Word of God in catechesis. As for Paul, the consummate catechist, scholars seem only to grow in their appreciation for the boldness of his interpretive practice. But Paul’s temerity only exposes our timidity in engaging the biblical text. Perhaps, when it comes to using the Word of God in catechesis, Moses, “the meekest man on the face of the earth” (Nm 12:3), may be more helpful. Consider these verses, which the Bible says Moses spoke to “all Israel”:

For this command which I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you. It is not up in the sky, that you should say, “Who will go up in the sky to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?” Nor is it across the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross the sea to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?” No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out. (Dt 30:11-14)

In these lines, Moses assures the people of Israel that God’s Word is within their reach. They have only to “carry out” what is “already in their mouths and hearts.” Can it really be that simple?

The Fathers of the Church, whose exegetical work has been overlooked by much of modern biblical study, seemed to think so. They approached the Scriptures not as specialists, but as catechists and liturgists who trusted that “the word of God is living and effective” (Heb 4:12). For them the Bible never left the living room. The Fathers were not unaware of the need for critical study. They recognized the importance of the literal sense of Scripture, but they also realized that a living word is patient of many meanings. For them the tension between exegesis and theology was not solved, but resolved, like light through a prism. Their readings of the biblical text were not only intelligent but imaginative.

As they struggle to engage the Word of God, Catholics in general and catechists in particular would do well to rediscover the wisdom of the Fathers of the Church, as well as the witness of the Mother of the Lord. For in exegesis, as in all of Christian life, Mary is our model and our mentor. Luke’s account of the Annunciation presents Mary as the first to hear the Gospel and take it to heart. The Word that she welcomes into her life by her *fiat* is not only enfleshed in her womb; it is embodied in her life. And so Mary becomes the first Christian disciple. But there is more. In the story of the Visitation, the first Christian disciple becomes the first Christian missionary who hastens to share—not *her* good news, but *the* Good News—with her kinswoman Elizabeth. Elizabeth in turn declares Mary doubly blessed: for her unique privilege of being the Mother of the Lord (1:42-43), but even more for her faith in the Word spoken to her by the Lord (1:45).

When Mary responds to Elizabeth’s greeting with the canticle known as the *Magnificat*, she shows herself to be not only the first Christian disciple and the first Christian missionary, but also the first Christian catechist. The *Magnificat* is a model of catechesis. First, it is biblical. It echoes the canticle of Hannah (1 Sm 2:1-10), and it also evokes the Exodus story in its declaration of the new “great things” that the Mighty One has done, in Mary and through her Son, for the salvation of God’s people. The *Magnificat* is a song of praise, a prayer and a proclamation. It is also a confident cry for justice for the powerless and the poor, praising God for lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things (1:52-53). Finally, the whole canticle pulses with joyful hope as it looks to the eschatological future.

Mary’s embrace of the Word of God is not unquestioning or uncritical. Luke describes her pondering—not once, but over and over again—the unfolding revelation that transforms her life (Lk 2:19, 51). Luke also writes of Mary’s appearance with her family at the edge of a crowd listening to Jesus (Lk 8:19-21). He is teaching in parables and has just likened those who, having heard the Word, “embrace it with a generous and good heart” to “the seed that fell on good soil” (8:15). Then, learning that his Mother is in the crowd, he exclaims, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it” (8:21). May we learn from Mary so that he may say the same of us.

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