

**JOURNEY SUGGESTED BY THE SYNOD  
ON THE WORD OF GOD  
FOR THE CHURCH IN THE AMERICAS**

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In order to offer a reflection with the characteristics indicated in the title, we could suggest several modalities. The origins of the term “synod” point to a “common journey.” In fact, the path carried out by the Church was well structured and distinguished right from the beginning of the preparations for the Synod Assembly. This is why we observe that the method of approach could take various directions. But here we will consider together the analysis and proposals enunciated by the members of the Assembly.

For this encounter of study and research on the part of the Paulines, disciples of the Lord “imbued with the Word,” who want to design new pathways for the mission, starting from the ecclesial reality in which many social-cultural components are concentrated, I will try to highlight the proposals of the Bishops for the American Continent. My intent will be to draw attention to convergences of thought, convinced that, as men of apostolic action with serious pastoral responsibilities, their voices represent the aspirations of a people, and are the expressions of a true and sincere ecclesial research. Above all theirs are words heard from the Spirit of God.

First of all, let us look at the great themes presented by Pope Benedict XVI in the opening talk of the Synod. They are words of hope, spoken in the context of many concerns, but which also express a secure awareness that Jesus Christ, victor over death and sin, walks with his Church. So too, the profound reflections of the Reporter General of the Synod, Cardinal Marc Ouellet, provide a precious support in the synodal journey carried out until now. His analysis brought forth and described the most important requisites for the Church, but also the great possibilities for the Word of God in our time.

If on the one hand the Pope and Cardinal Ouellet presented a panorama for the universal Church, the words of the American synod Fathers sketched the experience, preoccupations and convictions that come from the pastoral and ecclesial life of our continent.

The American bishops, present at the Synod, were the voice of the whole Church of our continent, and they expressed themselves in the various synod sessions. But even more, they presented the pathways that they consider to be a course of fidelity. I will share this with you during our meeting and, even though not all of their pronouncements will be quoted, but I will set forth those that I consider of greater convergence.

The final pages of my presentation will clarify what is called “biblical pastoral animation.” This should be the most effective and concrete proposal to assure that our evangelization may be profoundly marked by the Word of God.

## **1 – Words of Pope Benedict the XVI during celebration of the opening of the Synod**

Taking as a departure point for his reflection the texts of the Word proclaimed in the opening Eucharistic Celebration (Is.1-7: the Canticle of the vineyard; Mt 21:33-45: the murderous vine-dressers), the Pope outlined some orientations that he foresaw for the Synod. He noted that his greatest concern was the serious and objective reality that there are people who have received the Gospel but are now insensitive toward it. Nations that were once “rich in faith and vocations are now losing their identity under the harmful and destructive influence of a certain modern culture. There are some who, having decided that "God is dead," declare themselves to be "god..."

But even if some do not welcome the Gospel, the words of Jesus regarding the vine-dressers carry a promise: the vineyard will not be destroyed, that is, there will always be persons disposed to accept it. And analyzing the use that the Gospel makes of Psalm 117:22, Benedict XVI refers to the following citation: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” The owner does not abandon his vineyard. It will be entrusted to others who will be faithful servants. The same image of the vineyard, with its moral and spiritual implications, recurs in some form in the words of Jesus: "I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit" (Jn 15: 1-2). In this context, we can proclaim that it is Christ who wins in the end. Always!

With this confidence, the Pope expressed his desire in the Basilica dedicated to St. Paul, the great Apostle who spread the message of the Gospel in the vast regions of Asia Minor and Europe: “to meaningfully renew this proclamation...” The Word of God demands a response and his love must be reciprocated. The Pope challenged the Church: “may what the biblical text recounts about the vineyard never occur: “[he] looked for it to yield grapes but it yielded wild grapes" (Is 5:2). His concern moves in a double direction, one of an ecclesial character and the other pastoral. On the one hand, the Church must be an announcer: it is a question of identity and loyalty. It is her reason for being. In fact, she continues today throughout the Church to resound the Pauline exclamation: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9: 16).

Under the pastoral aspect, the words of the Pope were convincing: “The Word of God alone can profoundly change man's heart.” From this flows the emphasis he placed on intimacy with the Word, a theme already very dear to this professor of theology, then cardinal and then Pope. His words are enlightening: “Without God, man reaches the point of finding himself lonelier, and society is more divided and bewildered.” In these

times so marked by ethical and cultural disorientation and fragmentation, profound bonds with the Word are the fundamental truth that permits the Church to express her missionary and witness dimension. In other words, without those bonds, the Church and her mission would be a reality without a foundation. And if the Church exists to announce the Gospel, it is essential that she know and live what she proclaims. This is how the Gospel becomes credible.

Thus, for the Church relationship with the Word is not just a way of acting and/or operating; it is much more: a way of being. And in this “way of being,” the other subject that amply recurs in these last years is very important: personal relationship with Jesus Christ. When he proclaimed the Word, the great unifying theme was the Kingdom of God (cf. Mk 1: 14-15). But the person of Jesus is the best expression of this kingdom. In his words, deeds, gaze, prayers, gestures of compassion and pardon, it was God himself who exercised his kingship and offered salvation. And this is true for people of all times. For this reason, Benedict XVI, referring to St. Jerome’s commentary on the prophet Isaiah, expressed his hope for a loving knowledge of the Scriptures: “Whoever does not know Scripture does not know the power and wisdom of God; then ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.”

## **2. Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Reporter General of the Synod (first session)**

The reflection *ante disceptationem* of the Reporter General was a great help for launching the journey of discussions, analyses and proposals, according to the opinion of those who organized the preparation of the Synod. In effect, in all synods, the assembly is the concluding phase of a long and accurate course already traced out in the preparatory phases. Cardinal Ouellet predicted that the Synod would be cast predominantly in pastoral and missionary directions. Thus, according to him the synod represented a joining of forces directed toward listening “together to the Word of God so as to discern how the Spirit and the Church desire to respond to the gift of the Incarnate Word, through love for the Scriptures and the proclamation of the Kingdom of God to all humanity.” Paul the Apostle helped him express [what it means] “... to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge” (Eph 3:18-19).

The objective was outlined in the *Working Document*: “strengthen the practice of encountering the Word of God as the source of life” (Working Document 4). This “strengthening” would be the bearer of a great power of renewal in the Church. Therefore, rather than theoretical debate, it is necessary to focus on “an attitude of listening,” as *Dei Verbum* proposed in its first paragraph. Those who “hear it” will proclaim it: “Hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with faith...” (DV 1). In the past, the noetic dimension of truths to be believed was preferred, but now we have begun to understand the revelation of God as “personal communication.” Since

then we have started to speak – and with always greater vehemence – of the living encounter and dialogue between the God who calls and the person who responds.

Just the same, even though this was understood theologically, it has not been the approach in the context of evangelization, of theological research and biblical exegesis.

In fact, it was noted that the Church suffers from a certain «separation... between biblical scholars and pastors and everyday people of the Christian community » (WD 7a). The model of personal communication on the part of God seems not to have sufficiently penetrated the consciousness of the men and women of the Church. The Cardinal recommended: “The Synod should propose concrete solutions to bridge the lacunae and find a remedy for the ignorance of the Scriptures which adds to today's difficulties in evangelization.” The challenge of transmitting the faith with the Word of God is great today. But this Word has the power to “rejuvenate the Church and to incite new hope in view of the mission.”

In his careful analysis and evaluation of the journey that preceded the Synod, the Reporter General called attention to the Church's need to rediscover what was already expressed during the [Second Vatican] Council. In the liturgy it is Christ who is "present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church" (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 7).

We cannot insist enough on the pastoral implications of this solemn council assertion. We are a Church “at the service of the Word and He who speaks it.” In the liturgy, “God speaks to us less to teach than to communicate Himself.” From this flows the serious duty that involves us men and women with ministerial responsibilities. What consequences for Biblical hermeneutics, for our celebrations, homilies and sermons and other celebrations, should arise from the rediscovery of this original place of the Word? The assembly that is not centered on the Word is impoverished and simply a social group. This problem cannot be confronted only by a revision of studies. It urges us, as Church, to re-evaluate the need for the contemplation of the Scriptures.

In fact, given the need to reconsider our contemplative relationship with the Scriptures, during the process of preparation for the Synod, the felicitous memory of *Lectio Divina* strongly emerged. It promotes a climate of love and reciprocity between the reader/praying community and the Word.

In this assiduous reading, God can be “listened to,” because it is He who “speaks.” And the prayer which follows is the assent of the one who wants to receive his word. An intimate, spousal dialogue is initiated with the Lord. And the people of our time suffer from a sad incapacity to listen to the voice of God. In the words of Benedict XVI, “If this practice is promoted efficiently, it will bear a new spiritual spring to the Church.” He presents the rediscovery of the riches of the *prayerful reading (lectura orante)* as a

great contribution to the formation of the disciples and the Christian community. There emerged the desire that “the Synod would encourage the search for new strategies, simple and attractive, adaptable to the whole of the Christian people or to particular categories of faithful, to develop the taste and the practice of continuous reading of the Word of God, communitarian as well as personal.”

A very delicate subject, with serious consequences for the life of the Church, has been the motive of debate for some time and requires ulterior reflection, and that is the relationship between spirituality, exegesis and theology. Biblical hermeneutics is a complex reality. Even more so if in this area of biblical knowledge relationships of great reciprocity are not cultivated. There have already been tensions. But there have also been beautiful experiences of dialogue. Much progress still has to be made in favoring a comprehensive interpretation of Scripture. Everyone is concerned with the same subject, the Word of God, but in diverse and complementary perspectives. To help in overcoming the difficulties in this area, the Synod must promote the recovery of the canonical approach to the Scriptures. In addition, it is time to recommend and promote a synthesis of biblical theology which favors global comprehension. The theological and exegetical methods, in the process of interpretation, must reflect on the interdependence between the “letter,” the Spirit and the faith. There could be many new expressions of the foundational phrase: “The study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology” (DV 24).

### **3 – America and its hunger for the Word of God**

(Cardinal Oscar Maradiaga’s report on the ecclesial situation of the Americas)

The first Bible arrived in America with Christopher Columbus. He had with his belongings. And he read it out loud during his journeys, to “placate the furious waves.” The first bishop of Mexico City arrived in 1528. His explicit goal was to spread the Word of God to everyone. The Franciscans had similar goals. The three councils of Lima (1551 to 1583) made a superb presentation of the Gospel to the illiterate people.

That seed did not die with the passing of centuries. But Christianity reached America at the time of the Reformation, when the Bible lost its privileged place in the Catholic Church. Biblical texts were replaced by catechism and doctrine which both lack the taste of the Bible. In North America the faith arrived with the English immigrants, with the strong force of the reform. These characteristics were problematic and marked the history of our Church for centuries.

There were General Assemblies of the Latin American Episcopate. At Medellin (1968), in the midst of an effervescence of great political and historical interest and with the rise of the theology of liberation, the Church proposed that pastoral action be founded on the strength of Sacred Scripture (6.13, 14.14). In Puebla (1979), there was already a greater

familiarity with Scripture. The *Comunità Ecclesiali di Base* were very important means of spreading the biblical experience. Now it was said that the Bible “is the soul of evangelization” (372), the “fount of catechesis” (981, 1001). And with regard to pastoral choices there was insistence on the importance of listening, studying, celebrating and proclaiming the Word of God and witnessing to it (1305).

There was a powerful prophetic force that brought “situations of sin” to light and led people to personal conversion. An enormous advance was made by insisting “not so much on the interpretation of the Bible as the interpretation of life in the light of the Bible.” The reflection groups that gathered around the Word, the biblical circles, the celebrations of the Word in the communities fostered a great strength of cohesiveness.

The Conference of Santo Domingo (1992) coincided with the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the beginning of evangelization in the New World. There were three objectives:

- to celebrate Jesus Christ, that is the faith and message of the crucified and resurrected Lord,
- to carry on and develop the guidelines of Medellin and Puebla,
- to define new strategies of evangelization for the coming years, responding to the challenges of the times.

The political reality of the Latin American republics was diverse, passing from various forms of dictatorship to more democratic political regimes. “Socialism” collapsed and the neoliberalism of an Anglo-Saxon type was promoted. The violence of drug trafficking increased, with the connivance of various forms of guerrilla warfare. The phenomenon of urbanization was growing steadily. Pentecostal religious groups were on the increase. In this context of new evangelization only “fidelity to the Word of God” (n. 27) would have a renewing power. And this must be characterized by three principle elements:

- explicit reference to the Word of God,
- the central role of the laity
- animation of the community

Finally [the meeting at] Aparecida came about in 2007. The theme itself of the Conference had deep biblical roots: “Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ so that our people may have life in Him.” And this theme wove throughout the text. The same method – see-judge-act – was maintained. But now there were new nuances where the to see was reinvigorated with the primacy of the Word (77); to judge with the centrality of the Word (134-140); and to act was inspired by personal and communitarian

*prayerful reading* (331). The whole text is woven with a deep biblical texture, based on important foundational objectives:

- the biblical animation of all pastoral action and the *prayerful reading* as a fundamental part of the personal encounter with Jesus Christ. We believe we are entering into a new stage with regard to the relationship between the Word and the evangelization of our America.
- rediscovery of the urgency of a representation of Jesus Christ that is typically Kerygmatic. We must insist on the participation of believers, or better still, emphasize the true journey of discipleship.

On the part of the pastors, we can see an effort to assume the Bible no longer as a separate subject from programs of evangelization. They desire that it be the unifying center of pastoral action. On the part of the faithful, there is much lacking but also a great hunger for the Word of God. This provokes questions and responsibility, but also hope in all those who are called to the announcement and mystogogy of the Word. In addition to Biblical education, our people are searching for an understanding that is more hermeneutical than exegetical; for an experience of life and encounter between the Biblical person and the person of today. Many initiatives have already been carried out and/or are in progress; there are various centers of study, publications, events and organizations oriented toward the popular reading of the Bible.

Just the same, there are still difficulties. The conditions of poverty and illiteracy in various contexts are still very problematic. Also, there is a separation between exegesis and the ecclesial communities; between exegesis and dogmatic theology; between exegesis and pastoral ministry. Strong influence is exercised by the interpretations of Bible fundamentalists (for example, the theology of prosperity), that confuse people by raising false expectations or magic religious beliefs. Thus, there is a great need for deepening the knowledge of the Word of God and the content of faith. This need is not for a simple understanding of the content of the faith, but much more. It must be “an experience of faith.” There is an urgent need to help our communities grow in a process of Christian initiation, starting from the *kerygma*. Guided by the Word of God, this can promote a real and effective personal encounter with Jesus Christ. All of this is foreseen as a journey of great demands, but also of profound hopes.

#### **4 – Proposals of the Synod of Bishops from the American Continent**

**Card. Francis Eugene George, Archbishop of Chicago:** there is need for a conversion of imagination in those to whom the Word of God is proclaimed and those who interpret it. This is a duty of the Pastors. The Word of God is not yet an influencing presence in the hearts and minds of our people.

**Bishop Gerald Frederick Kicanas, Bishop of Tucson, Vice President of the US Episcopal Conference:** After the Pauline Year we have the year of the Word. The Word has the power to change the life of persons and give them meaning. But today's preaching, often lacks flavor, becomes theory, loses inspiration and leaves the listener empty. We must listen to the laity. Therefore, this too is why a Year of the Word has been suggested, to qualify and give vitality to our preaching, especially the homily. We need to rediscover the catechetical potential of the homily, so that our laity become ferment in the world.

**Bishop Donald William Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, United States:** emphasized the opportunities offered by homilies and catechetical encounters for renewing the sense of union with Christ and his Word. Individualism as a mentality and culture, associated with minimum knowledge of the Word, presents great challenges for our Church today. The homily is a precious time for opening the hearts of our faithful to the Word of God. It is the best moment for meeting the living person of Jesus Christ within an authentic ecclesial experience.

**Bishop Raymond Saint-Gelais, Bishop of Nicolet, Canada:** The Word of God resounds in the Scriptures. But it goes beyond the book. It is more a person who directs than a text to study. God opens a living dialogue with humanity. So too the Word opens to us unexpected horizons of truth and meaning for every generation. Thus it is fundamental to perceive the great possibility that the homily has for introducing the assembly into the mystery that God manifests to them in real life.

**Bishop Joseph Luc André Bouchard, Bishop of Saint Paul, Canada:** the people of God must be educated to discover the broad horizon of the Word of God. But there is a separation between scholars and pastors and between ordinary people and the Christian community. It is necessary to help people toward a reading of the Scriptures "with the Church.

**Bishop Terrence Thomas Prendergast, Archbishop of Ottawa, Canada:** expressed his concern for the loss of trust in many Catholics with respect to the Scriptures as an instrument for truly transmitting God's revelation, especially in the face of the difficulty many have with the Old Testament. He proposed that the Synod evaluate to what degree this is also due to the influence of modern biblical studies on preaching. He therefore recommended attention to the spiritual sense of Scripture.

**Bishop Donald Peter Faber, Bishop of London, Canada:** People hunger for God. Just the same, one of the principle obstacles for establishing a living relationship with Jesus Christ is the formalism that has characterized a good part of parochial life. It is time to explain the methods that promote a personal encounter with Christ through Scripture. He proposed the *prayerful reading* of the Word in such a way that through the power of the Spirit persons encounter the Lord.

**D. Félix Lázaro Martínez, Bishop of Ponce, Puerto Rico:** The relationship between Scripture, tradition and teaching would be enriched by a greater sharing between theologians and exegetes. It is the People of God who suffer the consequences of the dichotomy [between them]. It would be very valuable for the Church if the faithful understood the relation between Scripture and Credo. This also presupposes spirituality, which is born from the Word and in the Word. What is needed is a spirit of listening to the Word, so as to respond in faith. The pathway: *prayerful reading* and lively, communicative liturgies.

**D. Norbert Klemens Strotmann, Bishop of Chosica, Perú:** We must broaden our perspectives. We have much reflection, much fundamental theology and little pastoral theology. We have difficulties that arise from our ecclesiastical patterns and contexts. It is necessary to better know the cultures and communities entrusted to us. We know our theology, our theories, very well... but we have great difficulty in dialogue with the world, with cultures and with diversity. We think too much starting from ourselves, from the Church. We also need an external vantage point.

**D. Rodrigues José Miguel Gómez, Bishop di Libano-Honda, Colombia:** The human being is essentially dialogical. In the depths of our being there is an ontological dialogical dynamic. Our personal existence is above all that of listeners. And the person rediscovers his/her fundamental dignity in listening to the Word of God. Thus it is necessary to establish suitable criteria for a true hermeneutic of the revealed Word. This can help us avoid the danger of modern relativism.

**D. Filippo Santoro, Bishop of Petrópolis, Brazil:** In a culture where the ephemeral seems to have primacy, we must ask ourselves if there is something that can completely fulfill the needs of the human heart. And there is another important question: if it is true, what is the method? The Word made flesh indicates the content and method of salvation: the encounter with the person of Jesus Christ which can reawaken fascination in them. Examples: Andrew, Peter, Zaccheus, the Samaritan woman, and others after the resurrection. Therefore, it is not necessary to multiply extraordinary ministries which also create more bureaucracy. It is much better to encourage everything that, through the action of the Holy Spirit, brings about the encounter with Jesus (both hierarchical and charismatic gifts).

**D. Orlando Romero Cabrera, Bishop of Canelones, Uruguay:** In the Bible, God comes to meet the Church as the God of the Word. The Church is challenged to be a Teacher of listening to the same Spirit who inspired the Word. She must be the inspiration of all pastoral life. Therefore, biblical animation of pastoral action and the journey of the *Lectio Divina* must be presented as the principle means that make the Gospel live in the disciples. This latter, *Lectio Divina*, has brought about important fruits of evangelization and intimacy with the Word in various dioceses. Many bishops

have testified with enthusiasm to the great vigor and renewal inspired among the agents of evangelization.

**D. Emmanuel Lafont, Bishop of Cayenne, French Guiana:** He was educated in Biblical studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, but he testified that it was the poor who convinced him even more of the power of the Word. From his experience, he affirmed that the church must read Scripture with the poor. He also proposed that in this Synod the Church grow in trust with respect to the way in which the little ones and the laity in general welcome the Word. We should not be afraid of some mistaken way of reading Scripture. We should fear more the risk that they do not read it at all. And that the many precautions of the hierarchy may end up removing their passion for the Word.

**D. Gavilán Velasques Juam Battista, Bishop of Coronel Oviedo, Paraguay and D. Giove de Lima Junior, Archbishop of Ribeirão Preto, Brazil:** In today's culture, it seems difficult to learn how "to listen." And the people of God are "hungry to listen to the Word of God." As pastors, we have the duty of helping our people to "listen" in particular to the Word incarnate, Jesus Christ. If it proves necessary, it would be worth it to "abandon the out-dated structures that no longer transmit the Faith" (DAP 365). With the Word, people can regain hope and peace. It is urgent for us as Church to take advantage of the little groups of persons who strengthen each other reciprocally through their listening to the Word of God and find support in it for their daily lives, for the civil and social demands they live with.

**D. Héctor Miguel Cabrejos Vidarte, Archbishop of Trujillo, President of the Episcopal Conference of Perú, D. Raimundo Damasceno of Assisi, Archbishop of Aparecida, in Brazil, D. René Osvaldo Rebolledo Salinas, Bishop of Osorno, Chile; D. Javier Augusto Del Río Alba, Archbishop of Arequipa, in Perú:** The Church suffers from an insufficient transmission of the Word in our celebrations. Among others, one of the principle causes is the lack of consistent biblical formation in seminaries and theological institutes. A good knowledge of Sacred Scripture guarantees good preaching. It is essential that our preaching be a communication of the living Word of God. As the word expresses, the aim of the homily is to generate communion with God. Thus, besides theological competence, a solid biblical spirituality is indispensable, especially the *Lectio Divina*. In this way the future priest can come to know God through the living fount of his word. If he has made a good journey in the *Lectio Divina*, he will be well disposed toward Biblical animation in the pastoral ministry when he is ordained.

**D. Santiago Jaime Silva Retamales, Auxiliary Bishop of Valparaíso, Chile; D. Valmor Oliveira de Azevedo, Archbishop of Belo Horizonte, Brazil; D. Armendaris Faustino Jimenez, Bishop of Matamoros, Mexico, D. Ruy Rendon Leal, Bishop-Prelate of El Salto, Mexico:** We must consider three main criteria for the Christian reading of the Bible: a) the "thirst for God," for which Biblical animation of

pastoral ministry is a suitable response. b) “Sons of God, disciples of Jesus.” Here there is urgent need for a growing biblical spirituality which offers the experience of the love of God. c) The Family of God. Living and creative unity centered on the Word is a great missionary witness. In all of this, the Spirit of God raises up priests and laity for kerygmatic proclamation. It also moves the Church to go in search of fallen away Catholics. On the other hand, if many Christians leave our Church, among the many reasons is perhaps a lack of a strict bond between the mystery celebrated and the mystery witnessed, between the Word announced and listened to and the Word that bears fruit. Many brothers and sisters who have left our Church have found in other confessions the “performance” that we are lacking.

**D. Julio César Terán Dutari, Bishop of Ibarra, Ecuador, D. Enrique Díaz Díaz, Auxiliary Bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas, in Mexico, D. Ricardo Ernesto Centellas Guzmán, Auxiliary Bishop of Potosí, Bolivia:** In Latin America the theology of liberation was born. There were errors, there were dangers for which the Magisterium was bound to intervene. But it also encouraged the theologians who desired that the Sacred Scriptures would enlighten new pathways that the Word of God wants to open. A “communitarian reading” of Scripture must not be lacking in order to face the reality of sin and of grace that pervade our continent. Theological reflection can contribute notably to creating or recuperating the hope of our poor. It is necessary to be aware of the many voices and many faces of the poverty which disfigures our people. Above all, in the case of indigenous cultures, very little has been done to understand their culture and its significance. Until this happens, it will be very difficult for Scripture to be a “living language, written in their cultures and in their lives.” Without the courage to change, the sad reality of having many baptized and few evangelized will remain.

**D. Gesù Rodrigues Peres, Archbishop of Sucre, Bolivia; D. Rixen Eugenio Lambert, Bishop of Goiás, Brazil; D. Luiz Urbano, Bishop of Catamarca, Argentina:** In different ways, these three spoke about the reciprocity that exists between the Bible and catechesis. There is a growing awareness and acceptance of Scripture as the primary font of catechesis. Through Scripture, catechesis can perceive how God is working today. From Medellín on, the importance of the “Biblical apostolate” has grown for diffusing the Word of God through Bible groups. In Aparecida we were recommended to recover the dream of a biblical, kerygmatic and mystagogic catechesis. We must follow once again the path and catechumenal model of catechesis, accompanied by beginning exercises of *Prayerful Reading* for those being catechized. In this way, starting already from catechetical formation, our people can draw near to the person of Jesus Christ.

This is not the place for an analysis of all the interventions. But these indicate important developments in the life of the Church. There are some important indicators here: it is necessary to overcome the restrictive concept of the Word as a book. The

“performatory” character of Sacred Scripture, an element of ample repercussions since the beginning of the Church, is fundamental for becoming aware that in the Word the disciples find themselves with the very person of Jesus. With the Word contained in the Scriptures, today’s disciples can experience a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, with the same salvific truth of those who met him on the roads of Palestine. Therefore, as an evangelizing Church we must promote, encourage and stimulate the Prayerful Reading of the Word, according to a variety of methods. We are a Church that must learn to “hear the voice of the Word.” A new dawn is about to break forth for the Church. It is a precious opportunity for “Pauline publications and communications.”

Another problem that surfaced frequently during the Synod was the necessary approach to and reciprocity between exegesis, theology, spirituality and pastoral action. We can add to this problem the call for an improved biblical qualification for our priests and those who work in pastoral action. Exegesis without theology and spirituality would be just ancient religious literature. Theology without the Word would be a theory “without a soul.” Spirituality without Scripture and without Theology runs the serious risk of subjectivism. Those who communicate and/or publish would provide a great service to the Church by making better use of the themes of “biblical theology” and spirituality of a biblical nature. In addition, there is urgent need for studies and publications in the field of biblical hermeneutics.

If our preaching does not have a kerygmatic depth, if our celebrations are not “configured” mystagogically, if our catechesis does not adopt the catechetical style and expressions, if our homilies are not imbued with living experiences of the Spirit present in the Word, our proclamation will certainly be void of “fascination.” Our initiatives might have many ideas about Jesus, many doctrinal affirmations, many formulas and moral truths, but they will not necessarily communicate faith experiences. Courses, reflection and experiences, under this aspect, can and must be shared and diffused.

With regard to pastoral renewal, where we are very lacking, one proposal that could perhaps include all our programs and projections as a continental Church, could be that of “biblical animation of our entire pastoral ministry.” The dialogue between all the evangelizers will be deeply fruitful and creative: it will be a Biblical fecundity. In addition, according to Pope Benedict XVI, this is also the best way to face some of the pastoral problems reported during the synod, for example those tied to the proliferation of the sects that divulge a distorted reading and exploitation of the Sacred Scripture. For this reason, I am taking the liberty to present a reflection on the potential and significance of “biblical animation of pastoral action.” This is a subject that has important repercussions for the future of our evangelization.

## **5 – Biblical animation of pastoral action**

Anyone who reads attentively the Document of Aparecida is surprised by some courageous suggestions that the Church proposes. We will need much time, patience

and perseverance in order to integrate these intuitions into our ecclesial life, which are at the same time very rich in the genuine characteristics lived by the Christians of the early Church. When I composed this section, my desire was to emphasize the pertinent themes that recur frequently, such as: “personal encounter with Christ,” “pastoral conversion,” “knowledge of the Word,” “the desire of the disciples of Jesus to nourish themselves with ‘the Bread of the Word’”... The list could be longer. These particulars are intended to remind us that we have problems and possibilities, without which the Church runs the risk of seriously deforming her identity as disciple and missionary.

At the same time, much has been said on the fact that humanity is undergoing a serious process of cultural transformation. This process already bears many names. For simplicity’s sake, we will only mention what has already been said: the so-called epochal change. This phenomenon is impossible to measure. Neither can it be stopped. Its consequences give rise to new surprises and perplexities every day. In the midst of all this turmoil, almost everything gives the impression that we are moving toward an epic passage from the Christian reality to that of diaspora. There are many elements that suggest that, in terms of evangelization, we have many similarities to the ways and situations of early Christianity. All this urges the missionary disciples of our time to seek better ways of “transmitting the faith.” After all, transmission of faith in Jesus Christ is the foundational reason for all evangelization.

The first Christians did not speak of the biblical animation of pastoral action. But their evangelization was profoundly biblical, fully impregnated with biblical experiences and revelations. In announcing the person of Jesus Christ, the risen Savior, all the hopes of the Old Testament were brought to light. This is how it was in apostolic times. It is sufficient to look at Pauline thought, or the preaching in the Acts of the Apostles. And when the Gospel received a written formulation, almost all of it was colored by the words of the evangelists and apostles. It is enough to think of the first catechetical writings (the *Didaché*), the reflections of Origen, the planting of the first roots of the *Lectio Divina*, and at the fertile theology of the Fathers. The Bible, or better, the Word, created motivation that gave them courage, sustained a strong perseverance and transformed the meaning of their lives. This is because in harmony with the Word, their way of thinking, of planning, of acting and convincing was entirely imbued with the transforming, generative power of their encounter with the Lord through the Word. They were “biblically animated” evangelizers. Very animated.

Now, biblical animation of pastoral action is a theme which has returned to the limelight in these times. It is interesting to note the meaning of this word from its etymology. This will help us imagine what should be emphasized. The Latin word *animus* refers to that interior force, to that spiritual principle which moves and urges from inside toward certain choices and actions. It is like the soul which stirs up dynamics in favor of a cause. The opposite is *dis-animo*, the lack of vigor, of joy, the lack of fascination. The Document of Aparecida (n. 248), in proposing the biblical animation of pastoral action,

associates it with these images: “the fount of evangelization,” the “food, bread of the Word,” the “encounter with the living Jesus Christ.” It is sufficient to look at the underlying images: if the fount dries up, the river will dry up. If food is lacking, the body weakens. If encounters are lacking, friendships end.

Through this etymology, we also understand better the original meaning of the term “pastoral.” Pastoral comes from pastor [shepherd], which in turn is linked with pasture. And thus pasture is gifted with great symbolic power; it is associated with life, serenity and peace. One of the best symbolic portraits of the Old Testament is Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want.” Then figurative expressions emerge such as “repose in green meadows,” “lead to quiet waters,” “restore strength,” “guide in right paths,” “rod and staff” with guaranteed security, “prepare a feast,” “dwell in the house of the Lord.” This is the language of the Old Testament for speaking about good pasture. It is marked by rich experiences of hope (“restore my strength”), a generous and abundant life (“green meadows”), peace (“relief,” “quiet waters”). All fruit of God’s generosity which looks with tenderness on those he chooses. This is the Psalmist’s experience.

On the other hand, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, making use of similar figures, takes a decisive step. He speaks not just of the grace with which God encompasses his own. Jesus goes further: he refers to what He is for his sheep. The John’s Gospel helps us. In chapter 10 there are some stupendous expressions: “I am the Good Shepherd,” whose characteristic is that of giving his life for his sheep (v. 11, 14). His relationship with them is of reciprocal knowledge (v.14): they know the voice of their shepherd (v. 4, 16). Now, if the word “pastoral” come from this terminology, it means that “pastoral [action]” does not refer only to providing religious services. Despite the fact that these are carried out with generosity, every program will have a pastoral character only in the measure that the sheep can hear the loving voice of their shepherd and he can respond to them. And the people of God “have a radar,” that is, they intuit when men and women of the Church are speaking of what “they have heard from the Lord,” or only conveying a religious discourse.

Now I can attempt to add a comment to the phrase “biblical animation of pastoral action.” First, though, I will formulate a premise: biblical animation refers to the spirit, the “animus” generated by the Word. The Word is a “person.” Therefore, we are not talking about “animating” for the sake of ideas or strategies of Jesus; much less studying him. The disciples do not love the person of Jesus simply because they study him. Study is possible even without being disciples. An example could be very helpful in this regard. Who knows an adolescent better: his mother, who truly loves him, or the psychologist who has examined him with all the behavioral sciences ? It is clear that the mother knows him best. She seeks an expert because she loves her son. She does not seek the expert to become capable of loving her son. She and her son probably need the

expert, but it is in love and interpersonal sharing that the adolescent and his mother bring each other to fulfillment. Science does not do this, but only the experience of love.

Returning to “biblical animation of pastoral action,” it could be useful to start by saying what it is not. It is not just one “pastoral program” among others, with its coordinator, staff and schedule of meetings. Despite the fact that this may be necessary, even indispensable, study and formation are not yet the “vital spirit,” and do not necessarily make up the “pastoral” part. So, what is biblical animation? It is a matter of the “spirit” that flows from the Word. The Word is not a totality of ideas, thoughts or concepts about Jesus. The Word that has become Scripture, is the bearer of the very person of Jesus. It is something like a girl who, upon receiving a letter from her lover, kisses it. She does not kiss the paper or some sentences. She is referring her kiss to the loved one. We could say the same thing about relationship with Jesus through his Word present in the Bible. By means of the biblical word, friendship with him is possible. Through the biblical word, we cultivate affection, encounter, attentive silence before him, obedience to him – always with gratitude and trust.

In his beautiful post-synodal exhortation, Benedict XVI referred explicitly to biblical animation of pastoral activity (n.73). He explains that this is not a overlay or another special event based on the Bible. No one can speak in a convincing way about a person without having met him. Otherwise, it would be simply speaking about what others have said. It would only be information. And no one can evangelize by offering information about Jesus. In order to transmit the faith, to announce the person of Jesus, it is necessary to have found him; it is necessary to have experienced him; it is indispensable to let oneself be found by him and to live the fascination of this encounter which can never leave us “indifferent.” There will always be some kind of reaction/response. Some Gospel personages can help us here: Nicodemus (Jn 3:1-21), the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-12), Zaccheus (Luke 19: 1-10) and Paul: they were never the same [after meeting Jesus]. They became “pastoral agents” deeply marked by their encounter with the Lord.

Therefore biblical pastoral animation does not mean articulating new formats, new plans and organisms, new organizational systems for the parish and diocese. More than anything, and before every other action of animation it means that all the agents of evangelization, be it bishops, priests, religious, catechists, extraordinary ministers, coordinators, or administrators of ecclesiastical institutions – all must have an “*aminus*” that is, the interior lymph which originates from meeting him in his Word. And those who find him are joyous in him, speak with him, understand his criteria and values, interpret with him and assume his choices. The agent of biblical pastoral action does not begin by doing something, or having more duties on the agenda. It is not a matter of *doing*. It is a way of being before Jesus Christ and because of Jesus, a new mode of being and relating to others.

This is not intimism. The intimist is seeking his own subjective convenience of a religious or mystic nature. It means intimacy with Jesus. Intimacy creates and deepens relationships, transforms hearts, rebuilds or renews options and moves to action. Intimacy with God brings peace and joy. And it is spread by those who live it. Benedict XVI said this in reference to biblical animation: *[be truly concerned] with fostering a personal encounter with Christ, who gives himself to us in his word. Since “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ,” pastoral outreach will lead to a greater awareness of the person of Christ, who reveals the Father and is the fullness of divine revelation* (Verbum Domini, 73).

What is needed so that our evangelizers may be “biblically enthusiastic”? Fundamentally, this means biblical spirituality. It can be cultivated in various ways. Remember that the Word has “sacramental power” (cf. Verbum Domini 56, 195), that is, it does what it says. The liturgy, celebrated as a true language of the mystery of the person of Jesus, and the *prayerful reading* of the Word are the best possibilities for disciples of today, just as it was at the beginning of the Church: evangelization in a biblically inspired way.

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