



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION**

Hall of the Popes

Thursday, 23 April 2009

Your Eminence,

Your Excellency,

Dear Members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission,

I am pleased to welcome you once again at the end of your annual Plenary Assembly. I thank Cardinal William Levada for his greeting and for his concise presentation of the theme that has been the object of attentive reflection at your meeting. You have gathered once again to study a very important topic: *Inspiration and Truth of the Bible*. This subject not only concerns theology, but the Church herself, because the life and mission of the Church are necessarily based on the word of God, which is the soul of theology and at the same time the inspiration of all Christian life. The topic you have addressed furthermore responds to a concern that I have very much at heart, because the interpretation of Sacred Scripture is of capital importance for the Christian faith and for the life of the Church.

As you have mentioned, Cardinal President, in his Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* Pope Leo XIII offered Catholic exegetes new encouragement and new directives on the subject of inspiration, truth and biblical hermeneutics. Later, Pius XII in his Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, gathered and completed the preceding teaching and urged Catholic exegetes to find solutions in full agreement with the Church's doctrine, duly taking into account the positive contributions of the new methods of interpretation which had developed in the meantime. The vigorous impetus that these two Pontiffs gave to biblical studies, as you also said, was fully confirmed and developed in the Second Vatican Council, so that the entire Church has benefited and is benefitting from it. In particular, the Conciliar Constitution *Dei Verbum* still illumines the work of Catholic exegetes today and invites Pastors and faithful to be more regularly nourished at the table of the word of God. In

this regard the Council recalls first of all that God is the Author of Sacred Scripture: "The divinely revealed realities, which are contained and presented in the text of Sacred Scripture, have been written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For Holy Mother Church relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the Books of the Old and the New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit they have God as their author, and have been handed on as such to the Church herself" (*Dei Verbum*, n. 11). Therefore since all that the inspired authors or hagiographers state is to be considered as said by the Holy Spirit, the invisible and transcendent Author, it must consequently be acknowledged that "the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures" (*ibid.*, n. 11).

From the correct presentation of the divine inspiration and truth of Sacred Scripture certain norms derive that directly concern its interpretation. The Constitution *Dei Verbum* itself, after stating that God is the author of the Bible, reminds us that in Sacred Scripture God speaks to man in a human fashion and this divine-human synergy is very important: God really speaks to men and women in a human way. For a correct interpretation of Sacred Scripture it is therefore necessary to seek attentively what the hagiographers have truly wished to state and what it has pleased God to express in human words. "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" (*Dei Verbum*, n. 13). Moreover, these indications, very necessary for a correct historical and literary interpretation as the primary dimension of all exegesis, require a connection with the premises of the teaching on the inspiration and truth of Sacred Scripture. In fact, since Scripture is inspired, there is a supreme principle for its correct interpretation without which the sacred writings would remain a dead letter of the past alone: Sacred Scripture "must be read and interpreted with its divine authorship in mind" (*ibid.*, n. 12).

In this regard, the Second Vatican Council points out three criteria that always apply for an interpretation of Sacred Scripture in conformity with the Spirit that inspired it. First of all it is essential to pay great attention to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture: only in its unity is it Scripture. Indeed, however different the books of which it is composed may be, Sacred Scripture is one by virtue of the unity of God's plan whose centre and heart is Jesus Christ (cf. Lk 24: 25-27; Lk 24: 44-46). Secondly, Scripture must be interpreted in the context of the living tradition of the whole Church. According to a statement of Origen: "*Sacra Scriptura principalius est in corde Ecclesiae quam in materialibus instrumentis scripta*", that is, "Sacred Scripture is written in the heart of the Church before being written on material instruments". Indeed, in her Tradition the Church bears the living memory of the Word of God and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her its interpretation according to the spiritual meaning (cf. Origen, *Homiliae in Leviticum*, 5,5). As a third criterion, it is necessary to pay attention to the analogy of the faith, that is to the consistence of the individual truths of faith with one another and with the overall plan of the Revelation and the fullness of the divine economy contained in it.

The task of researchers who study Sacred Scripture with different methods is to contribute in accordance with the above-mentioned principles to the deepest possible knowledge and explanation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture. The scientific study of the sacred texts is important but is not sufficient in itself because it would respect only the human dimension. To respect the coherence of the Church's faith, the Catholic exegete must be attentive to perceiving the Word of God in these texts, within the faith of the Church herself. If this indispensable reference point is missing, the exegetical research would be incomplete, losing sight of its principal goal, and risk being reduced to a purely literary interpretation in which the true Author God no longer appears. Furthermore, the interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures cannot only be an individual scientific effort but must always be compared with, inserted in and authenticated by the living Tradition of the Church. This rule is decisive to explain the correct relationship between exegesis and the Magisterium of the Church. The Catholic exegete does not only feel that he or she belongs to the scientific community, but also and above all to the community of believers of all times. In reality these texts were not given to individual researchers or to the scientific community, "to satisfy their curiosity or to provide them with material for study and research" (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*, eb 566). The texts inspired by God were entrusted in the first place to the community of believers, to Christ's Church, to nourish the life of faith and to guide the life of charity. Respect for this purpose conditions the validity and efficacy of biblical hermeneutics. The Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* recalled this fundamental truth and noted that, far from hindering biblical research, respect for this norm encourages authentic progress. I would say, a rationalistic hermeneutic of faith corresponds more closely with the reality of this text than a rationalistic hermeneutic that does not know God.

Being faithful to the Church means, in fact, fitting into the current of the great Tradition. Under the guidance of the Magisterium, Tradition has recognized the canonical writings as a word addressed by God to his People, and it has never ceased to meditate upon them and to discover their inexhaustible riches. The Second Vatican Council reasserted this very clearly: "all that has been said about the manner of interpreting Scripture is ultimately subject to the judgment of the Church which exercises the divinely conferred commission and ministry of watching over and interpreting the Word of God" (*Dei Verbum*, n. 12). As the above-mentioned Dogmatic Constitution reminds us, an inseparable unity exists between Sacred Scripture and Tradition, because both come from the same source: "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal. Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the Apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. He transmits it to the successors of the Apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound and spread it abroad by their preaching. Thus it comes about that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone. Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal feelings of devotion and reverence" (*Dei Verbum*, n. 9). As we

know, this word "*pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia*" was created by St Basil and then absorbed into Gratian's Decree, through which it entered the Council of Trent and then the Second Vatican Council. It expresses precisely this inter-penetration between Scripture and Tradition. The ecclesial context alone enables Sacred Scripture to be understood as an authentic Word of God which makes itself the guide, norm and rule for the life of the Church and the spiritual growth of believers. As I have said, this is in no way an obstacle to a serious and scientific interpretation but furthermore gives access to the additional dimensions of Christ that are inaccessible to a merely literary analysis, which remains incapable of grasping by itself the overall meaning that has guided the Tradition of the entire People of God down the centuries.

Dear Members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, I would like to end my talk by expressing to you all my personal gratitude and encouragement. I thank you warmly for the demanding work you do at the service of the Word of God and of the Church through research, teaching and the publication of your studies. To this I add my encouragement for the ground that has yet to be covered. In a world in which scientific research is assuming ever greater importance in numerous fields, it is indispensable that exegetical science attain a good level. It is one of the aspects of the inculturation of the faith that is part of the Church's mission, in harmony with acceptance of the mystery of the Incarnation.

Dear brothers and sisters, may the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate and the divine Teacher who opened the minds of his disciples to an understanding of the Scriptures (cf. Lk 24: 45), guide and sustain you in your reflection. May the Virgin Mary, model of docility and obedience to the Word of God, teach you to accept ever better the inexhaustible riches of Sacred Scripture, not only through intellectual research but also in your lives as believers, so that your work and your action may contribute to making the light of Sacred Scripture shine ever brighter before the faithful.

As I assure you of my prayerful support in your efforts, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you, as a pledge of divine favours.

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