

THE BIBLICAL PASTORAL MINISTRY AND THE LAITY

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Introduction

A story is told of four students who were arguing about the best translated version of the Bible. One said, "I like the Jerusalem Bible, it is very Catholic." Another said, "I prefer the Revised Standard Version because comparatively its translation is good for academic studies." The third said, "I would go in for the Good News Bible. The language is friendly and easy to understand." The fourth student retorted, "Well, I prefer my mother's translation. She has translated the Bible into her life."

Quoting portions of the writings of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, Pope Benedict XVI in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God writes, "While in the Church we greatly venerate the Sacred Scriptures, the Christian faith is not a 'religion of the word of the book': Christianity is the 'religion of the Word of God', not of a written and mute word, but of the incarnate and living Word" (*Verbum Domini*, 7). From this perspective, we can say that the ultimate goal of the **Biblical Pastoral Ministry (BPM)** or what is also referred to as the **Biblical Apostolate** is primarily to create an enabling environment and to facilitate the process for an encounter with the Word of God. In that encounter, the Word comes to live in us and we in turn become alive in the Word.

1. Dynamics of the Biblical Pastoral Ministry

In seeking to understand the BPM, with particular reference to the Laity, a scripture text that is worth pondering upon is Acts 8:26-40. It is the story of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch. A portion of the text reads:

Now an Ethiopian had been on pilgrimage to Jerusalem; he was a eunuch and an officer at the court of the kandake, or queen, of Ethiopia; he was her chief treasurer. He was now on his way home; and as he sat in his chariot he was reading the prophet Isaiah. The Spirit said to Philip, 'Go up and join that chariot.' When Philip ran up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How could I, unless I have someone to guide me?' So he urged Philip to get in and sit by his side...

Starting, therefore, with this text of scripture, Philip proceeded to explain the good news of Jesus to him. Further along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'Look, is some water; is there anything to prevent my being baptised?' He ordered the chariot to stop, then Philip and the eunuch both went down into the water and he baptised him. But after they had come up out of the water again Philip was taken away by the Spirit of the Lord, and the eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. Philip appeared in Azotus and continued his journey, proclaiming the good news in every town as far as Caesarea.

2. Availability and Accessibility of the Bible

In the above text, one can observe that the eunuch had access to a portion of the Bible. The document *Dei Verbum* makes it clear that easy access to the Bible should be provided for all (DV 22). A major task of the BPM is to make the Bible, either in part or whole, by means of the print or electronic media, available and accessible to the people of God.

One of the ground-breaking achievements of the 20th century which has spilled over to the 21st century is the possibility of producing and distributing the Bible in various forms. For example, there

have been efforts to translate the Bible into languages of modern readers and listeners, understandable by a target group and readily accessible. Languages that were almost unaccounted for in historical books have come alive, thanks to the translation of the Bible into those languages.

Creative transmission of portions of the Bible can also be seen in writings on t-shirts, stickers, banners, cups etc. It is not uncommon to see in some parts of Africa and Asia, scripture-texts boldly written on moving vehicles.

With advancement in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), accessibility to the Bible is taking on a new dimension. With an ear piece inserted in a little phone, a passenger in a bus or a taxi can choose to listen to portions of the Bible during the course of a journey. The social media is also buzzing, offering various opportunities to individuals and groups to receive and send out biblical materials. For example, a banker or sales-girl, during break time, can easily pull out a smart phone from the pocket and access reflections on the Bible via apps like WhatsApp, Facebook etc.

Having said this, we must quickly add that there are thousands of people who still do not have access to the Bible. The inequality between the rich and the poor is not exclusive to income but also inclusive of accessibility to the Bible. While there are people who have the luxury of different versions of the Bible on their shelves, others cannot boast of one personal Bible in a language that they can understand. In a similar vein, the electronically literate persons are able to access Biblical materials online while those who have no basic knowledge or access to ICT are deprived of such possibility. Interestingly, the old adage still holds true: 'familiarity breeds contempt.' Often those with so many possibilities of accessing the Bible take it for granted. This is the reason why every Christian must get involved in the Biblical Pastoral Ministry and not leave it in the hands of some few "experts".

3. Formation in the Bible

It is not enough to have access to the Bible or bible-related materials. One needs to be formed in the Bible. In explaining the text to the eunuch, Philip led the man through a process of formation in the Word of God and brought him to an appreciable level of understanding of what he was reading. To be formed is to be transformed in order to have a certain character. A biblically formed person is one who has the values of the Bible ingrained in his/her character. There are various stages in biblical formation. They can be summarised under the following headings: **Bible Reading, Bible Study and Bible Sharing**. In practice, there is no real watertight distinction among these three aspects of biblical formation. They dovetail into each other and in fact, it is even advisable, in most cases, to treat all the three as a whole. However, for the purpose of deepening, we will look at each of them one by one.

3.1 Bible Reading

St. Augustine recounts how he was commanded, "tolle e lege" or "take and read it". The reading of the Bible in this sense is not a mere activity of the mind. Rather, it is a dialogue between the author, text and reader and oriented towards meditation on the Word of God. It is geared towards understanding a given text within a given context and imbibing the fruit therein for fruitful living.

3.1.1 Lectio Divina (divine reading): This is a traditional and effective way of reading the Bible. It is regarded as the Church's oldest way of prayerful reading the Bible. It can be done either on an individual or communal level. In *Lectio Divina*, a text of Sacred Scripture is treated reverently as the Word of God and at the promptings of the Spirit, it leads to meditation, prayer and contemplation.

There are four traditional moments in this sacred exercise:

- A. **Lectio** (Reading): This is the act of reading a text of the Bible.
- B. **Meditatio** (Meditation): After reading, one "ruminates" or ponder over the text.
- C. **Oratio** (Prayer): Inspired by the text one speaks to God in prayer.

D. **Contemplatio** (Contemplation): This is what some describe as, “He looks at me and I look at him”. It is a loving gaze of a heart fixed on God and a savouring of the Divine presence.

3.1.2 Continuous Reading: This is another important dimension of reading the Bible. Here, a person chooses to read some chapters of the Bible continuously, perhaps on a daily basis. For example, one may choose to start from the Book of Genesis, and then, chapter by chapter, read the entire Book. When the whole Book has been read, one continues with the next Book in the Bible – Exodus. When this is done perseveringly, a person ends up reading the whole Bible over a period of time. The advantage of continuous reading of the Bible is that it helps one to understand the core message of the Bible and to avoid fundamentalism. Whether one reads a portion or whole of a book in the Bible, emphasis should always be placed on the unity of the Bible, allowing one text of the Bible to interpret the other – “*Sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*”, i.e. Sacred Scripture is its own interpreter”.

3.1.3 Attentive Reading: In attentive reading of the Bible, the reader does not succumb to gullibility. On the contrary, he/she is critical and asks pertinent questions concerning a biblical text aimed at understanding the text better. An attentive reader is one who has the eyes of an investigator, taking note of every little piece of information given. An attentive reader would read the same text over and over again and sometimes compare different translations. He/she approaches scriptural texts with questions like, Who? What? Where? When? How? Why? In doing so, some observations are jotted down.

3.2 Bible Study

Attentive reading of the Bible would necessarily lead to Bible Study. In making a statement on the subject of the interpretation of the Bible in the Church, the Pontifical Biblical Commission writes, “The Bible itself bears witness that its interpretation can be a difficult matter. Alongside texts that are perfectly clear, it contains passages of some obscurity...Readers today, in order to appropriate the words and deeds of which the Bible speaks, have to project themselves back almost twenty or thirty centuries – a process which always creates difficulty. Furthermore, because of the progress made in the human sciences, questions of interpretation have become more complex in modern times” (*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Introduction).

Bible Study can take a formal or informal dimension. When a person enrolls in a school or program to pursue biblical studies, it often has a formal character and may conclude with an award of a certificate. A Bible seminar can also serve as a context to formally study the Bible. However, there are many informal ways by which we can study the Bible. For example, just as the eunuch asked Philip a question with regard to the text that he was reading, we too can seek clarification from those who have acquired some knowledge in matters pertaining to the interpretation of the Bible. The use of Bible commentaries and dictionaries is also helpful. There are also many Bibles today with study editions. Generally, these editions have a lot of footnotes to explain very difficult portions of the Bible. The challenge in this sphere, however, is that there are many people who offer themselves as “Philip” and seek to explain the Bible to others but they do so in ways that deform their listeners. They purport to give an interpretation of the Word to the seeker but unfortunately, some of these interpretations are at variance with the tradition of biblical interpretation in the Church. Consequently, the danger of biblical fundamentalism continues to loom in many parts of the world. Moreover, some of the Biblical commentaries are very technical and difficult to understand, making the encounter with the Word of God an unpleasant experience for some.

3.3 Bible Sharing

In a very broad sense, Bible sharing is an objective sharing of the Word of God from a subjective perspective. It is objective in so far as it does not rob the biblical text of its intrinsic core value and message as the Word of God; and it is subjective in the sense that it is personal to the one sharing. In sum, when an individual shares any portion of a Bible text that has touched him/her on a personal

intimate level with a group of persons, he/she is engaged in Bible sharing. In sharing, the person is strengthened by the Word and at the same time edifies his/her listeners.

There are many ways of doing Bible sharing. For our purposes here, I would like to reproduce three of the methods (cf. *SVD Vademecum*, Appendix II, p. 396ff):

3.3.1 Lumko Seven- Step Method (South Africa)

- i. We invite the Lord. Will someone, please invite Jesus in a prayer?
- ii. We read the text.
- iii. We pick out words and meditate on them. Each one reads them aloud twice.
- iv. We keep silence for.....minutes and allow God to speak to us.
- v. We share what we have heard in our hearts.
- vi. We discuss any task which our group is called to do.
 - a) Report on previous task
 - b) Which new task has to be done? Who is doing what and when?
- vii. We pray together simultaneously. We end with a prayer/hymn which we all know.

3.3.2 The Vigan Method (Philippines)

Opening Prayer or Song

First Step

- *Reading the text*: One member reads it aloud.
- *Silence* for about three minutes. Each chooses a word, phrase or verse which strikes personally.
- *Sharing* of the word, phrase or verse only.

Second Step

- *Reading*: Another member reads the same text aloud.
- *Silence* for about five minutes. Each one listens intently to God's personal message to him/her.
- *Sharing of the Word for me with the others*: The group members share what they have heard in their hearts, trying to use only the first person singular (I, me, my).

Third Step – The Word demands a Response.

- *Reading*: After all have shared, another member reads the text aloud for a third time.
- *Silence and personal answer to the Word*: In silence each one tries to find an answer to the personal Word of God, for instance, expressing trust if the Word was a promise.
- *Sharing of the personal prayer response*: Each one expresses aloud his/her answer to the Word, so that it may be confirmed through the "Amen" of the others.

Conclusion: A prayer of praise/thanks, a song, or the Lord's Prayer is said.

3.3.3 A Latin American Method (Carlos Mesters)

At the beginning of the meeting

- Pray for the light of the Holy Spirit.
- Check if everyone has completed their assignment from the last meeting.

A. Starting from today's reality

- Verify that the chosen theme is really appropriate today.
- Use specifically chosen questions to deepen the conversation.

B. Studying and meditating on the text

- Read the text.
- Study the text:
 - a. Do a close reading of the text (literary level).
 - b. Look at the situation of the text's community (historical level).
 - c. Look for the message of the text (theological level).

C. Celebrating the Word

- Share in a spirit of thanksgiving the insights and energy gained.
- Articulate the commitment discovered and made during the study.
- Sing or pray an appropriate psalm-other prayers can be added.

Prepare the next meeting

- Choose the theme.
- Choose the text and prepare the questions.
- Distribute assignments.

The above methods of doing Bible Sharing help in deepening one's encounter with the Word of God.

4. Celebration of the Word

The breaking of the Word led to the celebration of baptism of the eunuch. There was a movement from the "head" to the "heart". In the same vein, formation in the Word must lead to a celebration of the Word.

The principal loci for the celebration of the Word are the Sacraments of the Church. In all the seven Sacraments of the Church, the Word of God plays a central role. The sacraments flow from the Bible and the grace of the sacraments nourishes biblical living. It is no coincidence that in the Holy Mass, for example, the Liturgy of the Word leads to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. In a liturgical assembly, the **reading** of the Bible takes on a **liturgical** character. This is often followed by a homily or some other form of reflection on the scriptural text. The Church makes available liturgical readings for each day of the liturgical year.

The Word of God is also celebrated outside the sacraments. In fact, this is highly encouraged. In reflecting upon the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God, Pope Benedict XVI writes, "The Synod Fathers also recommended celebrations of the word of God on pilgrimages, special feasts, popular missions, spiritual retreats and special days of penance, reparation or pardon. The various expressions of popular piety, albeit not liturgical acts and not to be confused with liturgical celebrations, should nonetheless be inspired by the latter and above all, give due space to the proclamation and hearing of God's Word" (*Verbum Domini*, 65). The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments also emphasise that "popular piety can find in the Word of God an inexhaustible source of inspiration, insuperable models of prayer and fruitful points for reflection" (*Directory of Popular Piety and the Liturgy, Principles and Guidelines*, 87). Enthronement of the Word, biblio-play and biblio-music are all various ways of celebrating the Word.

5. Transformation

In the text under consideration, we are told that after the encounter with the Word, which was explained by Philip, and after having been baptised, the eunuch "...went on his way rejoicing." The joy he experienced is a mark of a person who had been affected by the Word. Something changed in him and one can infer that he would go and share his new life with his family and those among whom he lived with. An encounter with the Word of God must lead to transformation.

One of the fundamental reasons why the Bible stands out as the best-selling book of all times is that it gives a narration of the lives of individuals and groups transformed by an encounter with the Word of

God, and by prayerfully pondering over these stories, our own lives are transformed. Among basic goals of the Biblical Pastoral Ministry belongs to engender active diffusion of biblical prayer. A deep spirituality must flow from an encounter with the Word.

It is true that the Bible serves as a resource material for academic studies and some seek higher degrees in that regard. However, for a good number of us, we go to the Bible to understand our lives and to find meaning in whatever situation we may find ourselves. "One cannot faithfully read Sacred Scripture without being convinced of the need to share the love of God and the power of the Word with others... A life devoted to the Biblical Word leads to conversion. For we are called to move from fear and false self-assurance to a profound trust in God. We are also called to move beyond our own limitations to others" (*In dialogue with the Word*, No. 3, p. 47).

Conclusion

The rapid spread of the message of salvation and the subsequent growth of Christianity in the early Church can be attributed to the fact that everyone was willing to share the Word of God. In some parts of our Christian communities today, there are many who do not feel empowered enough to make the Word of God the centre of their personal lives. The Biblical Pastoral Ministry seeks to bring the treasure of the Word to them and to make every one of us a stakeholder in the transmission of the Bible from one person to the other, and from one generation to the next. There is a growing need for a greater number of well-formed lay servants of the Word, too. The essential steps for an effective Biblical Apostolate can be summarised in the following slogan – "Read, pray, share, love and live the Bible." It is the way every one of us can get on. For the Biblical Pastoral Ministry is also your mission, my mission and our mission.

QUESTIONS FOR DEEPENING

1. How often do I personally read the Bible? Do I take delight in telling others the "new" thing I have discovered in the Bible?
2. Do I involve myself in some form of Bible Sharing on a regular basis with others?
3. Am I developing a biblical spirituality? Are the choices I make in life animated by the Word of God?
4. Do I have a fundamental openness to participate in Bible-related formation programmes?
5. What steps can I take to help make the Bible available and accessible to others?