

# Catholic Interpretation of Scripture

*It is very important for catechists to understand how Catholics read the Bible, and how this differs from the way other Christians may use and interpret scripture, so they can help students develop a basic sense of the ways Scripture is understood and used in the Catholic Church, which they can carry into adulthood.*

*In 1993, the Pontifical Biblical Commission produced the document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church", excerpts from which follow. Included are the section on fundamentalist interpretation and the entire section on characteristics of Catholic interpretation.*

*Because fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible is so prevalent in the American culture today, it is important to define, especially for older students, the nature and pitfalls of that sort of interpretation. To help the catechist understand this fully, the entire section on fundamentalist interpretation is reproduced here.*

*The major principles about scriptural interpretation which all Catholic catechists should pass on to students are these:*

Any interpretation of the Bible that relies on the text alone, without reference to its context within the whole of scripture, to the culture and historical background at the time it was written, to the audience for which the text was originally intended, to the genre of literature the text represents, to the probable intent of the author, to what the text says about Christ, and to the ways the Church has used the text, is "fundamentalist" and is not an authentic Catholic interpretation. Catholic interpretation includes all of the above and more.

To help catechists understand fully why this is true, we have included in the pages that follow the text from the document that details the differences between fundamentalist and Catholic *exegesis* (interpretation of text).

**CATECHIST CERTIFICATION NOTE:** Studying individually or as a group and providing a written report on this document to your principal or director of religious education can be credited toward fulfilling the certification requirement for "Knowledge" hours.

## From "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church"

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### II.- F. Fundamentalist Interpretation

Fundamentalist interpretation starts from the principle that the Bible, being the Word of God, inspired and free from error, should be read and interpreted literally in all its details. But by "literal interpretation" it understands a naively literalist interpretation, one, that is to say, which excludes every effort at understanding the Bible that

takes account of its historical origins and development. It is opposed, therefore, to the use of the historical-critical method, as indeed to the use of any other scientific method for the interpretation of Scripture.

The fundamentalist interpretation had its origin at the time of the Reformation, arising out of a concern for fidelity to the literal meaning of Scripture. After the century of the Enlightenment it emerged in Protestantism as a bulwark against liberal exegesis.

The actual term *fundamentalist* is connected directly with the American Biblical Congress held at Niagara, N.Y., in 1895. At this meeting, conservative Protestant exegetes defined "five points of fundamentalism": the verbal inerrancy of Scripture, the divinity of Christ, his virginal birth, the doctrine of vicarious expiation and the bodily resurrection at the time of the second coming of Christ. As the fundamentalist way of reading the Bible spread to other parts of the world, it gave rise to other ways of interpretation, equally "literalist," in Europe, Asia, Africa and South America. As the 20th century comes to an end, this kind of interpretation is winning more and more adherents, in religious groups and sects, as also among Catholics.

Fundamentalism is right to insist on the divine inspiration of the Bible, the inerrancy of the word of God and other biblical truths included in its five fundamental points. But its way of presenting these truths is rooted in an ideology which is not biblical, whatever the proponents of this approach might say. For it demands an unshakable adherence to rigid doctrinal points of view and imposes, as the only source of teaching for Christian life and salvation, a reading of the Bible which rejects all questioning and any kind of critical research.

The basic problem with fundamentalist interpretation of this kind is that, refusing to take into account the historical character of biblical revelation, it makes itself incapable of accepting the full truth of the incarnation itself. As regards relationships with God, fundamentalism seeks to escape any closeness of the divine and the human. It refuses to admit that the inspired word of God has been expressed in human language and that this word has been expressed, under divine inspiration, by human authors possessed of limited capacities and resources. For this reason, it tends to treat the biblical text as if it had been dictated word for word by the Spirit. It fails to recognize that the word of God has been formulated in language and expression conditioned by various periods. It pays no attention to the literary forms and to the human ways of thinking to be found in the biblical texts, many of which are the result of a process extending over long periods of time and bearing the mark of very diverse historical situations.

Fundamentalism also places undue stress upon the inerrancy of certain details in the biblical texts, especially in what concerns historical events or supposedly scientific truth. It often historicizes material which from the start never claimed to be historical. It considers historical everything that is reported or recounted with verbs in the past tense, failing to take the necessary account of the possibility of symbolic or figurative meaning.

Fundamentalism often shows a tendency to ignore or to deny the problems presented by the biblical text in its original Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek form. It is often narrowly bound to one fixed translation, whether old or present-day. By the same token it fails to take account of the "rereadings" (*relectures*) of certain texts which are found within the Bible itself.

In what concerns the Gospels, fundamentalism does not take into account the development of the Gospel tradition, but naively confuses the final stage of this tradition (what the evangelists have written) with the initial (the words and deeds of the historical Jesus). At the same time fundamentalism neglects an important fact: The way in which the first Christian communities themselves understood the impact produced by Jesus of Nazareth and his message. But it is precisely there that we find a witness to the apostolic origin of the Christian faith and its direct expression. Fundamentalism thus misrepresents the call voiced by the Gospel itself.

Fundamentalism likewise tends to adopt very narrow points of view. It accepts the literal reality of an ancient, out-of-date cosmology simply because it is found expressed in the Bible; this blocks any dialogue with a broader way of seeing the relationship between culture and faith. Its relying upon a non-critical reading of certain texts of the Bible serves to reinforce political ideas and social attitudes that are marked by prejudices--racism, for example--quite contrary to the Christian Gospel.

Finally, in its attachment to the principle "Scripture alone," fundamentalism separates the interpretation of the Bible from the tradition, which, guided by the Spirit, has authentically developed in union with Scripture in the heart of the community of faith. It fails to realize that the New Testament took form within the Christian church and that it is the Holy Scripture of this church, the existence of which preceded the composition of the texts. Because of this, fundamentalism is often anti-church, it considers of little importance the creeds, the doctrines and liturgical practices which have become part of church tradition, as well as the teaching function of the church itself. It presents itself as a form of private interpretation which does not acknowledge that the church is founded on the Bible and draws its life and inspiration from Scripture.

The fundamentalist approach is dangerous, for it is attractive to people who look to the Bible for ready answers to the problems of life. It can deceive these people, offering them interpretations that are pious but illusory, instead of telling them that the Bible does not necessarily contain an immediate answer to each and every problem. Without saying as much in so many words, fundamentalism actually invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide. It injects into life a false certitude, for it unwittingly confuses the divine substance of the biblical message with what are in fact its human limitations.

### III. CHARACTERISTICS OF CATHOLIC INTERPRETATION

Catholic exegesis does not claim any particular scientific method as its own. It recognizes that one of the aspects of biblical texts is that they are the work of human authors, who employed both their own capacities for expression and the means which their age and social context put at their disposal. Consequently Catholic exegesis freely makes use of the scientific methods and approaches which allow a better grasp of the meaning of texts in their linguistic, literary, sociocultural, religious and historical contexts, while explaining them as well through studying their sources and attending to the personality of each author (cf. *Divino Afflante Spiritu: Ench. Bibl.* 557). Catholic exegesis actively contributes to the development of new methods and to the progress of research.

What characterizes Catholic exegesis is that it deliberately places itself within the living tradition of the church, whose first concern is fidelity to the revelation attested by the Bible. Modern hermeneutics has made clear, as we have noted, the impossibility of interpreting a text without starting from a "pre-understanding" of one type or another.

Catholic exegetes approach the biblical text with a pre- understanding which holds closely together modern scientific culture and the religious tradition emanating from Israel and from the early Christian community. Their interpretation stands thereby in continuity with a dynamic pattern of interpretation that is found within the Bible itself and continues in the life of the church. This dynamic pattern corresponds to the requirement that there be a lived affinity between the interpreter and the object, an affinity which constitutes, in fact, one of the conditions that makes the entire exegetical enterprise possible.

All pre-understanding, however, brings dangers with it. As regards Catholic exegesis, the risk is that of attributing to biblical texts a meaning which they do not contain but which is the product of a later development within the tradition. The exegete must beware of such a danger.

## A. Interpretation in the Biblical Tradition

The texts of the Bible are the expression of religious traditions which existed before them. The mode of their connection with these traditions is different in each case, with the creativity of the authors shown in various degrees. In the course of time, multiple traditions have flowed together little by little to form one great common tradition. The Bible is a privileged expression of this process: It has itself contributed to the process and continues to have controlling influence upon it.

The subject, "interpretation in the biblical tradition," can be approached in very many ways. The expression can be taken to include the manner in which the Bible interprets fundamental human experiences or the particular events of the history of Israel, or again the manner in which the biblical texts make use of their sources, written or oral, some of which may well come from other religions or cultures--through a process of reinterpretation. But our subject is the interpretation of the Bible; we do not want to treat here these very broad questions but simply to make some observations about the interpretation of biblical texts that occurs within the Bible itself.

### 1. Rereadings (*Relectures*)

One thing that gives the Bible an inner unity, unique of its kind, is the fact that later biblical writings often depend upon earlier ones. These more recent writings allude to older ones, create "rereadings" (*relectures*) which develop new aspects of meaning, sometimes quite different from the original sense. A text may also make explicit reference to older passages, whether it is to deepen their meaning or to make known their fulfillment.

Thus it is that the inheritance of the land, promised by God to Abraham for his offspring (Gn. 15:7,18), becomes entrance into the sanctuary of God (Ex. 15:17), a participation in God's "rest" (Ps. 132:7-8) reserved for those who truly have faith (Ps. 95:8-11; Heb. 3:7-4:11) and, finally, entrance into the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 6:12, 18-20), "the eternal inheritance" (Heb. 9: 15).

The prophecy of Nathan, which promised David a "house," that is a dynastic succession, "secure forever" (2 Sm. 7:12-16), is recalled in a number of rephrasings (2 Sm. 23:5; 1 Kgs. 2:4; 3:6; 1 Chr. 17:11-14), arising especially out of times of distress (Ps. 89:20-38), not without significant changes; it is continued by other prophecies (Ps. 2:7-8; 110: 1,4; Am. 9: 11; Is. 7: 13-14; Jer. 23:56, etc.), some of which announce the return of the kingdom of David itself (Hos 3:5, Jer. 30:9, Ez. 34:24, 37:24-25; cf. Mk. 11:10). The promised kingdom becomes universal (Ps. 2:8; Dn. 2:35, 44; 7:14; cf. Mt. 28:18). It brings to fullness the vocation of human beings (Gn. 1:28; Ps. 8:6-9; Wis. 9:2-3; 10:2).

The prophecy of Jeremiah concerning the 70 years of chastisement incurred by Jerusalem and Juda (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10) is recalled in 2 Chr. 25:20-23 which affirms that this punishment has actually occurred. Nonetheless, much later, the author of Daniel returns to reflect upon it once more, convinced that this word of God still conceals a hidden meaning that could throw light upon the situation of his own day (Dn. 9:24-27).

The basic affirmation of the retributive justice of God, rewarding the good and punishing the evil (Ps. 1:1-6; 112:1-10; Lv. 26:3-33; etc.), flies in the face of much immediate experience, which often fails to bear it out. In the face of this, Scripture allows strong voices of protestation and argument to be heard (Ps. 44; Jb. 10:1- 7; 13:3-28; 23-24), as little by little it plumbs more profoundly the full depths of the mystery (Ps. 37; Jb. 38-42; Is. 53; Wis. 3-5).

### 2. Relationships Between the Old Testament and the New

Intertextual relationships become extremely dense in the writings of the New Testament, thoroughly imbued as it is with the Old Testament through both multiple allusion and explicit citation. The authors of the New Testament accorded to the Old Testament the value of divine revelation. They proclaimed that this revelation found its fulfillment in the life, in the teaching and above all in the death and resurrection of Jesus, source of pardon and of everlasting life. "Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures* and was buried; he was

raised on the third day *according to the Scriptures* and appeared" (1 Cor. 15:3-5): Such is the center and core of the apostolic preaching (1 Cor. 15:11).

As always, the relationship between Scripture and the events which bring it to fulfillment is not one of simple material correspondence. On the contrary, there is mutual illumination and a progress that is dialectic: What becomes clear is that Scripture reveals the meaning of events and that events reveal the meaning of Scripture, that is, they require that certain aspects of the received interpretation be set aside and a new interpretation adopted.

Right from the start of his public ministry, Jesus adopted a personal and original stance different from the accepted interpretation of his age, that "of the scribes and Pharisees" (Mt. 5:20). There is ample evidence of this: The antitheses of his Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:21-48); his sovereign freedom with respect to Sabbath observance (Mk. 2:27-28 and parallels); his way of relativizing the precepts of ritual purity (Mk. 7: 1-23 and parallels); on the other hand, the radicality of his demand in other areas (Mt. 10:2-12 and parallels; 10:17-27 and parallels), and, above all, his attitude of welcome to "the tax-collectors and sinners" (Mk. 2: 15-17 and parallels). All this was in no sense the result of a personal whim to challenge the established order. On the contrary, it represented a most profound fidelity to the will of God expressed in Scripture (cf. Mt. 5:17; 9:13; Mk. 7:8-13 and parallels; 10:5-9 and parallels).

Jesus' death and resurrection pushed to the very limit the interpretative development he had begun, provoking on certain points a complete break with the past, alongside unforeseen new openings. The death of the Messiah, "king of the Jews" (Mk. 15:26 and parallels), prompted a transformation of the purely earthly interpretation of the royal psalms and messianic prophecies. The resurrection and heavenly glorification of Jesus as Son of God lent these texts a fullness of meaning previously unimaginable. The result was that some expressions which had seemed to be hyperbole had now to be taken literally. They came to be seen as divine preparations to express the glory of Christ Jesus, for Jesus is truly "Lord" (Ps. 110:1), in the fullest sense of the word (Acts 2:36; Phil. 2: 1011; Heb. 1:10-12); he is Son of God (Ps. 2:7; Mk. 14:62; Rom. 1:3-4), God with God (Ps. 45:7; Heb. 1:8; Jn. 1:1; 20:28); "his reign will have no end" (Lk. 1:32-33; cf. 1 Chr. 17: 11- 14; Ps. 45:7; Heb. 1:8) and he is at the same time "priest forever" (Ps. 110:4; Heb. 5:6-10; 7:23-24).

It is in the light of the events of Easter that the authors of the New Testament read anew the Scriptures of the Old. The Holy Spirit, sent by the glorified Christ (cf. Jn. 15:26; 16:7), led them to discover the spiritual sense. While this meant that they came to stress more than ever the prophetic value of the Old Testament, it also had the effect of relativizing very considerably its value as a system of salvation. This second point of view, which already appears in the Gospels (cf. Mt. 11:11-13 and parallels; 12:41-42 and parallels; Jn. 4:12-14; 5:37; 6:32), emerges strongly in certain Pauline letters as well as in the Letter to the Hebrews. Paul and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews show that the Torah itself, insofar as it is revelation, announces its own proper end as a legal system (cf. Gal. 2:15-5:1; Rom. 3:20-21; 6:14; Heb. 7:11-19; 10:8-9). It follows that the pagans who adhere to faith in Christ need not be obliged to observe all the precepts of biblical law, from now on reduced in its entirety simply to the status of a legal code of a particular people. But in the Old Testament as the word of God they have to find the spiritual sustenance that will assist them to discover the full dimensions of the paschal mystery which now governs their lives (cf. Lk. 24:25-27, 44-45; Rom. 1: 1- 2).

All this serves to show that within the one Christian Bible the relationships that exist between the New and the Old Testament are quite complex. When it is a question of the use of particular texts, the authors of the New Testament naturally have recourse to the ideas and procedures for interpretation current in their time. To require them to conform to modern scientific methods would be anachronistic. Rather, it is for the exegete to acquire a knowledge of ancient techniques of exegesis so as to be able to interpret correctly the way in which a Scriptural author has used them. On the other hand, it remains true that the exegete need not put absolute value in something which simply reflects limited human understanding.

Finally, it is worth adding that within the New Testament, as already within the Old, one can see the juxtaposing of different perspectives that sit sometimes in tension with one another: For example, regarding the status of Jesus (Jn. 8:29; 16:32 and Mk. 15:34) or the value of the Mosaic Law (Mt. 5:17-19 and Rom. 6:14) or the necessity of works for justification (Jas. 2:24 and Rom. 3:28; Eph. 2:8-9). One of the characteristics of the Bible is precisely the absence of a sense of systematization and the presence, on the contrary, of things held in dynamic tension. The Bible is a repository of many ways of interpreting the same events and reflecting upon the same problems. In itself it urges us to avoid excessive simplification and narrowness of spirit.

### *3. Some Conclusions*

From what has just been said one can conclude that the Bible contains numerous indications and suggestions relating to the art of interpretation. In fact, from its very inception the Bible has been itself a work of interpretation. Its texts were recognized by the communities of the Former Covenant and by those of the apostolic age as the genuine expression of the common faith. It is in accordance with the interpretative work of these communities and together with it that the texts were accepted as sacred Scripture (thus, e.g. the Song of Songs was recognized as sacred Scripture when applied to the relation between God and Israel). In the course of the Bible's formation, the writings of which it consists were in many cases reworked and reinterpreted so as to make them respond to new situations previously unknown.

The way in which sacred Scripture reveals its own interpretation of texts suggests the following observations: Sacred Scripture has come into existence on the basis of a consensus in the believing communities recognizing in the texts the expression of revealed faith. This means that, for the living faith of the ecclesial communities, the interpretation of Scripture should itself be a source of consensus on essential matters.

Granted that the expression of faith, such as it is found in the sacred Scripture acknowledged by all, has had to renew itself continually in order to meet new situations, which explains the "rereadings" of many of the biblical texts, the interpretation of the Bible should likewise involve an aspect of creativity; it ought also to confront new questions so as to respond to them out of the Bible.

Granted that tensions can exist in the relationship between various texts of sacred Scripture, interpretation must necessarily show a certain pluralism. No single interpretation can exhaust the meaning of the whole, which is a symphony of many voices. Thus the interpretation of one particular text has to avoid seeking to dominate at the expense of others.

Sacred Scripture is in dialogue with communities of believers: It has come from their traditions of faith. Its texts have been developed in relation to these traditions and have contributed, reciprocally, to the development of the traditions. It follows that interpretation of Scripture takes place in the heart of the church: in its plurality and its unity, and within its tradition of faith.

Faith traditions formed the living context for the literary activity of the authors of sacred Scripture. Their insertion into this context also involved a sharing in both the liturgical and external life of the communities, in their intellectual world, in their culture and in the ups and downs of their shared history. In like manner, the interpretation of sacred Scripture requires full participation on the part of exegetes in the life and faith of the believing community of their own time.

Dialogue with Scripture in its entirety, which means dialogue with the understanding of the faith prevailing in earlier times, must be matched by a dialogue with the generation of today. Such dialogue will mean establishing a relationship of continuity. It will also involve acknowledging differences. Hence the interpretation of Scripture involves a work of sifting and setting aside; it stands in continuity with earlier exegetical traditions, many elements of which it preserves and makes its own; but in other matters it will go its own way, seeking to make further progress.

## **B. Interpretation in the Tradition of the Church**

The church, as the people of God, is aware that it is helped by the Holy Spirit in its understanding and interpretation of Scripture. The first disciples of Jesus knew that they did not have the capacity right away to understand the full reality of what they had received in all its aspects. As they persevered in their life as a community, they experienced an ever-deepening and progressive clarification of the revelation they had received. They recognized in this the influence and the action of "the Spirit of truth," which Christ had promised them to guide them to the fullness of the truth (Jn. 16:12-13). Likewise the church today journeys onward, sustained by the promise of Christ: "The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, which the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will make you recall all that I have said to you" (Jn. 14:26).

### *1. Formation of the Canon*

Guided by the Holy Spirit and in the light of the living tradition which it has received, the church has discerned the writings which should be regarded as sacred Scripture in the sense that, "having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God for author and have been handed on as such to the church" (*Dei Verbum*, 11) and contain "that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" (*ibid.*).

The discernment of a "canon" of sacred Scripture was the result of a long process. The communities of the Old Covenant (ranging from particular groups, such as those connected with prophetic circles or the priesthood to the people as a whole) recognized in a certain number of texts the word of God capable of arousing their faith and providing guidance for daily life; they received these texts as a patrimony to be preserved and handed on. In this way these texts ceased to be merely the expression of a particular author's inspiration; they became the common property of the whole people of God. The New Testament attests its own reverence for these sacred texts, received as a precious heritage passed on by the Jewish people. It regards these texts as "sacred Scripture" (Rom. 1:2), "inspired" by the Spirit of God (2 Tm 3:16; cf. 2 Pt. 1:20-21), which "can never be annulled" (Jn 10:35).

To these texts, which form "the Old Testament" (cf. 2 Cor. 3:14), the church has closely associated other writings: first those in which it recognized the authentic witness, coming from the apostles (cf. Lk. 1:2; 1 Jn. 1:1-3) and guaranteed by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Pt. 1:12), concerning "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1) and, second, the instructions given by the apostles themselves and other disciples for the building up of the community of believers. This double series of writings subsequently came to be known as "the New Testament."

Many factors played a part in this process: the conviction that Jesus--and the apostles along with him--had recognized the Old Testament as inspired Scripture and that the paschal mystery is its true fulfillment; the conviction that the writings of the New Testament were a genuine reflection of the apostolic preaching (which does not imply that they were all composed by the apostles themselves); the recognition of their conformity with the rule of faith and of their use in the Christian liturgy; finally, the experience of their affinity with the ecclesial life of the communities and of their potential for sustaining this life.

In discerning the canon of Scripture, the church was also discerning and defining her own identity. Henceforth Scripture was to function as a mirror in which the church could continually rediscover her identity and assess, century after century, the way in which she constantly responds to the Gospel and equips herself to be an apt vehicle of its transmission (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 7). This confers on the canonical writings a salvific and theological value completely different from that attaching to other ancient texts. The latter may throw much light on the origins of the faith. But they can never substitute for the authority of the writings held to be canonical and thus fundamental for the understanding of the Christian faith.

## 2. Patristic Exegesis

From earliest times it has been understood that the same Holy Spirit, who moved the authors of the New Testament to put in writing the message of salvation (*Dei Verbum*, 7; 18), likewise provided the church with continual assistance for the interpretation of its inspired writings (cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 3 24.1; cf. 3.1.1; 4 33 8; Origen, *De Princ.*, 2.7.2; Tertullian, *De Praescr.*, 22).

The fathers of the church, who had a particular role in the process of the formation of the canon, likewise have a foundational role in relation to the living tradition which unceasingly accompanies and guides the church's reading and interpretation of Scripture (cf. *Providentissimus: Ench. Bibl.* 110- 111; *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 28-30: *Ench. Bibl.* 554; *Dei Verbum*, 23; PCB, *Instr. de Evang. Histor.*, 1). Within the broader current of the great tradition, the particular contribution of patristic exegesis consists in this: to have drawn out from the totality of Scripture the basic orientations which shaped the doctrinal tradition of the church and to have provided a rich theological teaching for the instruction and spiritual sustenance of the faithful.

The fathers of the church placed a high value upon the reading of Scripture and its interpretation. This can be seen, first of all, in works directly linked to the understanding of Scripture, such as homilies and commentaries. But it is also evident in works of controversy and theology, where appeal is made to Scripture in support of the main argument.

For the fathers the chief occasion for reading the Bible is in church, in the course of the liturgy. This is why the interpretations they provide are always of a theological and pastoral nature, touching upon relationship with God, so as to be helpful both for the community and the individual believer.

The fathers look upon the Bible above all as the Book of God, the single work of a single author. This does not mean, however, that they reduce the human authors to nothing more than passive instruments; they are quite capable, also, of according to a particular book its own specific purpose. But their type of approach pays scant attention to the historical development of revelation. Many fathers of the church present the "Logos," the Word of God, as author of the Old Testament and in this way insist that all Scripture has a Christological meaning.

Setting aside certain exegetes of the School of Antioch (Theodore of Mopsuestia, in particular), the fathers felt themselves at liberty to take a sentence out of its context in order to bring out some revealed truth which they found expressed within it. In apologetic directed against Jewish positions or in theological dispute with other theologians, they did not hesitate to rely on this kind of interpretation.

Their chief concern being to live from the Bible in communion with their brothers and sisters, the fathers were usually content to use the text of the Bible current in their own context. What led Origen to take a systematic interest in the Hebrew Bible was a concern to conduct arguments with Jews from texts which the latter found acceptable. Thus, in his praise for the *hebraica veritas*, St. Jerome appears, in this respect, a somewhat untypical figure.

As a way of eliminating the scandal which particular passages of the Bible might provide for certain Christians, not to mention pagan adversaries of Christianity, the fathers had recourse fairly frequently to the allegorical method. But they rarely abandoned the literalness and historicity of texts. The fathers' recourse to allegory transcends for the most part a simple adaptation to the allegorical method in use among pagan authors.

Recourse to allegory stems also from the conviction that the Bible, as God's book, was given by God to his people, the church. In principle, there is nothing in it which is to be set aside as out of date or completely lacking meaning. God is constantly speaking to his Christian people a message that is ever relevant for their time. In their explanations of the Bible, the fathers mix and weave together typological and allegorical

interpretations in a virtually inextricable way. But they do so always for a pastoral and pedagogical purpose, convinced that everything that has been written has been written for our instruction (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11).

Convinced that they are dealing with the Book of God and therefore with something of inexhaustible meaning, the fathers hold that any particular passage is open to any particular interpretation on an allegorical basis. But they also consider that others are free to offer something else, provided only that what is offered respects the analogy of faith.

The allegorical interpretation of Scripture so characteristic of patristic exegesis runs the risk of being something of an embarrassment to people today. But the experience of the church expressed in this exegesis makes a contribution that is always useful (cf. *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 31-32; *Dei Verbum*, 23). The fathers of the church teach to read the Bible theologically, within the heart of a living tradition, with an authentic Christian spirit.

### *3. Roles of Various Members of the Church in Interpretation*

The Scriptures, as given to the church, are the communal treasure of the entire body of believers: "Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, entrusted to the church. Holding fast to this deposit, the entire holy people, united with its pastors, remains steadfastly faithful to the teaching of the apostles" (*Dei Verbum*, 10; cf. also 21). It is true that the familiarity with the text of Scripture has been more notable among the faithful at some periods of the church's history than in others. But Scripture has been at the forefront of all the important moments of renewal in the life of the church, from the monastic movement of the early centuries to the recent era of the Second Vatican Council.

This same council teaches that all the baptized, when they bring their faith in Christ to the celebration of the eucharist, recognize the presence of Christ also in his word, "for it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the church" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7). To this hearing of the word, they bring that "sense of the faith" (*sensus fidei*) which characterizes the entire people (of God)... For by this sense of faith aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the people of God, guided by the sacred magisterium which it faithfully follows, accepts not a human word but the very Word of God (cf. 1 Thes. 2: 13). It holds fast unerringly to the faith once delivered to the saints (cf. Jude 3), it penetrates it more deeply with accurate insight and applies it more thoroughly to Christian life" (*Lumen Gentium*, 12).

Thus all the members of the church have a role in the interpretation of Scripture. In the exercise of their pastoral ministry, *bishops*, as successors of the apostles, are the first witnesses and guarantors of the living tradition within which Scripture is interpreted in every age. "Enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they have the task of guarding faithfully the word of God, of explaining it and through their preaching making it more widely known" (*Dei Verbum*, 9; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 25). As co-workers with the bishops, priests have as their primary duty the proclamation of the word (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4). They are gifted with a particular charism for the interpretation of Scripture, when, transmitting not their own ideas but the word of God, they apply the eternal truth of the Gospel to the concrete circumstances of daily life (*ibid.*). It belongs to priests and to *deacons*, especially when they administer the sacraments, to make clear the unity constituted by word and sacrament in the ministry of the church.

As those who preside at the eucharistic community and as educators in the faith, the ministers of the word have as their principal task not simply to impart instruction, but also to assist the faithful to understand and discern what the word of God is saying to them in their hearts when they hear and reflect upon the Scriptures. Thus the *local church* as a whole, on the pattern of Israel, the people of God (Ex. 19:5-6), becomes a community which knows that it is addressed by God (cf. Jn. 6:45), a community that listens eagerly to the word with faith, love and docility (Dt. 6:4-6). Granted that they remain ever united in faith and love with the wider body of the church, such truly listening communities become in their own context vigorous sources of evangelization and of

dialogue, as well as agents for social change (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 57-58; CDF, "Instruction Concerning Christian Freedom and Liberation," 69-70).

The Spirit is, assuredly, also given to *individual Christians*, so that their hearts can "burn within them" (Lk. 24:32) as they pray and prayerfully study the Scripture within the context of their own personal lives. This is why the Second Vatican Council insisted that access to Scripture be facilitated in every possible way (*Dei Verbum*, 22; 25). This kind of reading, it should be noted, is never completely private, for the believer always reads and interprets Scripture within the faith of the church and then brings back to the community the fruit of that reading for the enrichment of the common faith.

The entire biblical tradition and, in a particular way, the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels indicates as privileged hearers of the word of God those whom the world considers *people of lowly status*. Jesus acknowledged that things hidden from the wise and learned have been revealed to the simple (Mt. 11:25, Lk. 10:21) and that the kingdom of God belongs to those who make themselves like little children (Mk. 10: 14 and parallels).

Likewise, Jesus proclaimed: "Blessed are you poor, because the kingdom of God is yours" (Lk. 6:20; cf. Mt. 5:3). One of the signs of the Messianic era is the proclamation of the good news to the poor (Lk. 4:18; 7:22; Mt. 11:5, cf. CDF, "Instruction Concerning Christian Freedom and Liberation," 47-48). Those who in their powerlessness and lack of human resources find themselves forced to put their trust in God alone and in his justice have a capacity for hearing and interpreting the word of God which should be taken into account by the whole church, it demands a response on the social level as well.

Recognizing the diversity of gifts and functions which the Spirit places at the service of the community, especially the gift of teaching (1 Cor. 12:28-30; Rom. 12:6-7; Eph. 4:11-16), the church expresses its esteem for those who display a particular ability to contribute to the building up of the body of Christ through their expertise in interpreting Scripture (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 4648: *Ench. Bibl.* 564-565; *Dei Verbum*, 23; PCB, "Instruction Concerning the Historical Truth of the Gospels," Intro.). Although their labors did not always receive in the past the encouragement that is given them today, *exegetes* who offer their learning as a service to the church find that they are part of a rich tradition which stretches from the first centuries, with Origen and Jerome, up to more recent times, with Pere Lagrange and others, and continues right up to our time. In particular, the discovery of the literal sense of Scripture, upon which there is now so much insistence, requires the combined efforts of those who have expertise in the fields of ancient languages, of history and culture, of textual criticism and the analysis of literary forms, and who know how to make good use of the methods of scientific criticism.

Beyond this attention to the text in its original historical context, the church depends on exegetes, animated by the same Spirit as inspired Scripture, to ensure that "there be as great a number of servants of the word of God as possible capable of effectively providing the people of God with the nourishment of the Scriptures" (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 24; 53-55: *Ench. Bibl.*, 551, 567; *Dei Verbum*, 23; Paul VI, *Sedula Cura* [1971]). A particular cause for satisfaction in our times is the growing number of *women exegetes*; they frequently contribute new and penetrating insights to the interpretation of Scripture and rediscover features which had been forgotten.

If, as noted above, the Scriptures belong to the entire church and are part of "the heritage of the faith," which all, pastors and faithful, "preserve, profess and put into practice in a communal effort," it nevertheless remains true that "responsibility for authentically interpreting the word of God, as transmitted by Scripture and tradition, has been entrusted solely to the living magisterium of the church, which exercises its authority in the name of Jesus Christ" (*Dei Verbum*, 10).

Thus, in the last resort it is the magisterium which has the responsibility of guaranteeing the authenticity of interpretation and, should the occasion arise, of pointing out instances where any particular interpretation is incompatible with the authentic Gospel. It discharges this function within the *koinonia* of the body, expressing

officially the faith of the church, as a service to the church; to this end it consults theologians, exegetes and other experts, whose legitimate liberty it recognizes and with whom it remains united by reciprocal relationship in the common goal of "preserving the people of God in the truth which sets them free" (CDF, "Instruction Concerning the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian," 21).

### C. The Task of the Exegete

The task of Catholic exegetes embraces many aspects. It is an ecclesial task, for it consists in the study and explanation of holy Scripture in a way that makes all its riches available to pastors and the faithful. But it is at the same time a work of scholarship, which places the Catholic exegete in contact with non-Catholic colleagues and with many areas of scholarly research. Moreover, this task includes at the same time both research and teaching. And each of these normally leads to publication.

#### 1. Principal Guidelines

In devoting themselves to their task, Catholic exegetes have to pay due account to the *historical character* of biblical revelation. For the two testaments express in human words bearing the stamp of their time the historical revelation communicated by God in various ways concerning himself and his plan of salvation. Consequently, exegetes have to make use of the historical-critical method. They cannot, however, accord to it a sole validity. All methods pertaining to the interpretation of texts are entitled to make their contribution to the exegesis of the Bible.

In their work of interpretation Catholic exegetes must never forget that what they are interpreting is the *word of God*. Their common task is not finished when they have simply determined sources, defined forms or explained literary procedures. They arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the biblical text as God's word for today. To this end they must take into consideration the various hermeneutical perspectives which help toward grasping the contemporary meaning of the biblical message and which make it responsive to the needs of those who read Scripture today.

Exegetes should also explain the Christological, canonical and ecclesial meanings of the biblical texts.

The *Christological* significance of biblical texts is not always evident, it must be made clear whenever possible. Although Christ established the New Covenant in his blood, the books of the First Covenant have not lost their value. Assumed into the proclamation of the Gospel, they acquire and display their full meaning in the "mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3:4); they shed light upon multiple aspects of this mystery, while in turn being illuminated by it themselves. These writings, in fact, served to prepare the people of God for his coming (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 14-16).

Although each book of the Bible was written with its own particular end in view and has its own specific meaning, it takes on a deeper meaning when it becomes part of the *canon* as a whole. The exegetical task includes therefore bringing out the truth of Augustine's dictum: "*Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet, et in Novo Vetus patet*" ("The New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old becomes clear in the New") (cf. *Quaest. in Hept.*, 2, 73: Collected Works of Latin Church Writers, 28, III, 3, p. 141).

Exegetes have also to explain the relationship that exists between the Bible and the *church*. The Bible came into existence within believing communities. In it the faith of Israel found expression, later that of the early Christian communities. United to the living tradition which preceded it, which accompanies it and is nourished by it (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 21), the Bible is the privileged means which God uses yet again in our own day to shape the building up and the growth of the church as the people of God. This ecclesial dimension necessarily involves an openness to ecumenism. Moreover, since the Bible tells of God's offer of salvation to all people, the exegetical task necessarily includes a universal dimension. This means taking account of other religions and of the hopes and fears of the world of today.

## 2. Research

The exegetical task is far too large to be successfully pursued by individual scholars working alone. It calls for a division of labor, especially in "research," which demands specialists in different fields. Interdisciplinary collaboration will help overcome any limitations that specialization may tend to produce.

It is very important for the good of the entire church, as well as for its influence in the modern world, that a sufficient number of well-prepared persons be committed to research in the various fields of exegetical study. In their concern for the more immediate needs of the ministry, bishops and religious superiors are often tempted not to take sufficiently seriously the responsibility incumbent upon them to make provision for this fundamental need. But a lack in this area exposes the church to serious harm, for pastors and the faithful then run the risk of being at the mercy of an exegetical scholarship which is alien to the church and lacks relationship to the life of faith.

In stating that "the study of sacred Scripture" should be "as it were the soul of theology" (*Dei Verbum*, 24), the Second Vatican Council has indicated the crucial importance of exegetical research. By the same token, the council has also implicitly reminded Catholic exegetes that their research has an essential relationship to theology, their awareness of which must also be evident.

## 3. Teaching

The declaration of the council made equally clear the fundamental role which belongs to the teaching of exegesis in the faculties of theology, the seminaries and the religious houses of studies. It is obvious that the level of these studies will not be the same in all cases. It is desirable that the teaching of exegesis be carried out by both men and women. More technical in university faculties, this teaching will have a more directly pastoral orientation in seminaries. But it can never be without an intellectual dimension that is truly serious. To proceed otherwise would be to show disrespect toward the word of God.

Professors of exegesis should communicate to their students a profound appreciation of sacred Scripture, showing how it deserves the kind of attentive and objective study which will allow a better appreciation of its literary, historical, social and theological value. They cannot rest content simply with the conveying of a series of facts to be passively absorbed, but should give a genuine introduction to exegetical method, explaining the principal steps, so that students will be in a position to exercise their own personal judgment.

Given the limited time at a teacher's disposal, it is appropriate to make use of two alternative modes of teaching: on the one hand, a synthetic exposition to introduce the student to the study of whole books of the Bible, omitting no important area of the Old or New Testament; on the other hand, in-depth analyses of certain well-chosen texts, which will provide at the same time an introduction to the practice of exegesis. In either case, care must be taken to avoid a one-sided approach that would restrict itself, on the one hand, to a spiritual commentary empty of historical- critical grounding or, on the other, to a historical-critical commentary lacking doctrinal or spiritual content (cf. *Divino Afflante Spiritu: Ench. Bibl.* 551-552, PCB, *De Sacra Scriptura Recte Docenda: Ench. Bibl.* 598). Teaching should at one and the same time show forth the historical roots of the biblical writings, the way in which they constitute the personal word of the heavenly Father addressing his children with love (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 21) and their indispensable role in the pastoral ministry (cf. 2 Tm. 3, 16).

## 4. Publications

As the fruit of research and a complement to teaching, publications play a highly important role in the advancement and spread of exegetical work. Beyond printed texts, publication today embraces other more powerful and more rapid means of communication (radio, television, other electronic media); it is very advantageous to know how to make use of these things.

For those engaged in research, publication at a high academic level is the principal means of dialogue, discussion and cooperation. Through it, Catholic exegesis can interact with other centers of exegetical research as well as with the scholarly world in general.

There is another form of publication, more short-term in nature, 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. In this area, the need to make the biblical message something real for today is ever more obvious. This requires that exegetes take into consideration the reasonable demands of educated and cultured persons of our time, clearly distinguishing for their benefit what in the Bible is to be regarded as secondary detail conditioned by a particular age, what must be interpreted as the language of myth and what is to be regarded as the true historical and inspired meaning. The biblical writings were not composed in modern language nor in the style of the 20th century. The forms of expression and literary genres employed in the Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek text must be made meaningful to men and women of today, who otherwise would be tempted to lose all interest in the Bible or else to interpret it in a simplistic way that is literalist or simply fanciful.

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 more and more light 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.

#### **D. Relationship With Other Theological Disciplines**

Being itself a theological discipline, "*fides quaerens intellectum*," exegesis has close and complex relationships with other fields of theological learning. On the one hand, systematic theology has an influence upon the presuppositions with which exegetes approach biblical texts. On the other hand, exegesis provides the other theological disciplines with data fundamental for their operation. There is, accordingly, a relationship of dialogue between exegesis and the other branches of theology, granted always a mutual respect for that which is specific to each.

##### *1. Theology and Presuppositions Regarding Biblical Texts*

Exegetes necessarily bring certain presuppositions (Fr., *precomprehension*) to biblical writings. In the case of the Catholic exegete, it is a question of presuppositions based on the certainties of faith: The Bible is a text inspired by God, entrusted to the church for the nurturing of faith and guidance of the Christian life. These certainties of faith do not come to an exegete in an unrefined, raw state, but only as developed in the ecclesial community through the process of theological reflection. The reflection undertaken by systematic theologians upon the inspiration of Scripture and the function it serves in the life of the church provides in this way direction for exegetical research.

But correspondingly, the work of exegetes on the inspired texts provides them with an experience which systematic theologians should take into account as they seek to explain more clearly the theology of Scriptural inspiration and the interpretation of the Bible within the church. Exegesis creates, in particular, a more lively and precise awareness of the historical character of biblical inspiration. It shows that the process of inspiration is historical, not only because it took place over the course of the history of Israel and of the early church, but also because it came about through the agency of human beings, all of them conditioned by their time and all, under the guidance of the Spirit, playing an active role in the life of the people of God.

Moreover, theology's affirmation of the strict relationship between inspired Scripture and tradition has been both confirmed and made more precise through the advance of exegetical study, which has led exegetes to pay increasing attention to the influence upon texts of the life-setting (*Sitz im Leben*) out of which they were formed.

### 2. Exegesis and Systematic Theology

Without being the sole *locus theologicus*, sacred Scripture provides the privileged foundation of theological studies. In order to interpret Scripture with scholarly accuracy and precision, theologians need the work of exegetes. From their side, exegetes must orientate their research in such fashion that "the study of sacred Scripture" can be in reality "as it were the soul of theology" (*Dei Verbum*, 24). To achieve this, they ought pay particular attention to the religious content of the biblical writings.

Exegetes can help systematic theologians avoid two extremes: on the one hand, a dualism, which would completely separate a doctrinal truth from its linguistic expression, as though the latter were of no importance; on the other hand, a fundamentalism, which, confusing the human and the divine, would consider even the contingent features of human discourse to be revealed truth.

To avoid these two extremes, it is necessary to make distinctions without at the same time making separations--thus to accept a continuing tension. The word of God finds expression in the work of human authors. The thought and the words belong at one and the same time both to God and to human beings, in such a way that the whole Bible comes at once from God and from the inspired human author. This does not mean, however, that God has given the historical conditioning of the message a value which is absolute. It is open both to interpretation and to being brought up to date--which means being detached, to some extent, from its historical conditioning in the past and being transplanted into the historical conditioning of the present. The exegete performs the groundwork for this operation, which the systematic theologian continues by taking into account the other *loci theologici* which contribute to the development of dogma.

### 3. Exegesis and Moral Theology

Similar observations can be made regarding the relationship between exegesis and moral theology. The Bible closely links many instructions about proper conduct--commandments, prohibitions, legal prescriptions, prophetic exhortations and accusations, counsels of wisdom, and so forth--to the stories concerning the history of salvation. One of the tasks of exegesis consists in preparing the way for the work of moralists by assessing the significance of this wealth of material.

This task is not simple, for often the biblical texts are not concerned to distinguish universal moral principles from particular prescriptions of ritual purity and legal ordinances. All is mixed together. On the other hand, the Bible reflects a considerable moral development, which finds its completion in the New Testament. It is not sufficient therefore that the Old Testament should indicate a certain moral position (e.g. the practice of slavery or of divorce, or that of extermination in the case of war) for this position to continue to have validity. One has to undertake a process of discernment. This will review the issue in the light of the progress in moral understanding and sensitivity that has occurred over the years.

The writings of the Old Testament contain certain "imperfect and provisional" elements (*Dei Verbum*, 15), which the divine pedagogy could not eliminate right away. The New Testament itself is not easy to interpret in the area of morality, for it often makes use of imagery, frequently in a way that is paradoxical or even provocative; moreover, in the New Testament area the relationship between Christians and the Jewish Law is the subject of sharp controversy.

Moral theologians therefore have a right to put to exegetes many questions which will stimulate exegetical research. In many cases the response may be that no biblical text explicitly addresses the problem proposed. But even when such is the case, the witness of the Bible, taken within the framework of the forceful dynamic

that governs it as a whole, will certainly indicate a fruitful direction to follow. On the most important points the moral principles of the Decalogue remain basic. The Old Testament already contains the principles and the values which require conduct in full conformity with the dignity of the human person, created "in the image of God" (Gn. 1:27). Through the revelation of God's love that comes in Christ, the New Testament sheds the fullest light upon these principles and values.

#### *4. Differing Points of View and Necessary Interaction*

In its 1988 document on the interpretation of theological truths, the International Theological Commission recalled that a conflict has broken out in recent times between exegesis and dogmatic theology; it then notes the positive contribution modern exegesis has made to systematic theology ("The Interpretation of Theological Truths," 1988, C.I, 2). To be more precise, it should be said that the conflict was provoked by liberal exegesis. There was no conflict in a generalized sense between Catholic exegesis and dogmatic theology, but only some instances of strong tension. It remains true, however, that tension can degenerate into conflict when, from one side or the other, differing points of view, quite legitimate in themselves, become hardened to such an extent that they become in fact irreconcilable opposites.

The points of view of both disciplines are in fact different and rightly so. The primary task of the exegete is to determine as accurately as possible the meaning of biblical texts in their own proper context, that is, first of all, in their particular literary and historical context and then in the context of the wider canon of Scripture. In the course of carrying out this task, the exegete expounds the theological meaning of texts when such a meaning is present. This paves the way for a relationship of continuity between exegesis and further theological reflection. But the point of view is not the same, for the work of the exegete is fundamentally historical and descriptive and restricts itself to the interpretation of the Bible.

Theologians as such have a role that is more speculative and more systematic in nature. For this reason, they are really interested only in certain texts and aspects of the Bible and deal, besides, with much other data which is not biblical--patristic writings, conciliar definitions, other documents of the magisterium, the liturgy--as well as systems of philosophy and the cultural, social and political situation of the contemporary world. Their task is not simply to interpret the Bible; their aim is to present an understanding of the Christian faith that bears the mark of a full reflection upon all its aspects and especially that of its crucial relationship to human existence.

Because of its speculative and systematic orientation, theology has often yielded to the temptation to consider the Bible as a store of *dicta probantia* serving to confirm doctrinal theses. In recent times theologians have become more keenly conscious of the importance of the literary and historical context for the correct interpretation of ancient texts, and they are much more ready to work in collaboration with exegetes.

Inasmuch as it is the word of God set in writing, the Bible has a richness of meaning that no one systematic theology can ever completely capture or confine. One of the principal functions of the Bible is to mount serious challenges to theological systems and to draw attention constantly to the existence of important aspects of divine revelation and human reality which have at times been forgotten or neglected in efforts at systematic reflection. The renewal that has taken place in exegetical methodology can make its own contribution to awareness in these areas.

In a corresponding way, exegesis should allow itself to be informed by theological research. This will prompt it to put important questions to texts and so discover their full meaning and richness. The critical study of the Bible cannot isolate itself from theological research, nor from spiritual experience and the discernment of the church. Exegesis produces its best results when it is carried out in the context of the living faith of the Christian community, which is directed toward the salvation of the entire world.