



in 1993, which pointed out the severe limitations of reading the Bible from a fundamentalist viewpoint. This teaching is coupled with a warning against 'sects' that promote such distortion of scripture (73) and oppose Catholic teaching. Some may find this warning a bit harsh, but it is neither new nor unrealistic. Pastorally, some Catholics have been seduced by simplistic, naïve and fanciful interpretations of scripture that betray the incarnational foundation of the Word of God and obscure its truth.

6. Biblical translation

A sixth element is a remarkable section on the delicate task of biblical translation. The exhortation encourages ecumenical translations of the Bible (46) and, in a nuanced fashion, promotes professional translations of the Bible that are sensitive to various languages and cultures, calling for more trained translators. The text quotes the Pontifical Biblical Commission and says: 'A translation, of course, is always more than a simple transcription of the original texts. The passage from one language to another necessarily involves a change of cultural context: concepts are not identical and symbols have a different meaning, for they come up against other traditions of thought and other ways of life' (115).

Given recent controversies over liturgical translations and the forthcoming revised sacramentary, especially in the English-speaking world, these words are remarkably refreshing and are consistent with earlier theories of biblical translation.

7. Continuity with Church tradition

Finally, a seventh aspect of the exhortation is its obvious continuity with earlier magisterial teachings on the Bible and the larger Church tradition. The document explicitly calls to mind the 'crescendo' of Catholic appreciation of the Bible as the Word of God that began with Pope Leo XIII and his 1893 encyclical, *Providentissimus Deus*, proceeded with Pius XII's 1943 ground-breaking encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, and

culminated in the Second Vatican Council's profound constitution, *Dei Verbum* (1965). Noticeably absent in this trajectory, from the perspective of the history of Catholic teaching on the bible, are certain other magisterial documents that attempted to 'turned back the clock' on Catholic scripture study, especially with regard to historical-critical methods. This absence, given Pope Benedict XVI's well-known preference for a hermeneutic of continuity in Catholic thought, is note-worthy. The emphasis is on a modern approach that balances both scientific and spiritual readings of the Bible.

Future Agenda

That the Holy Father does not intend this text as the 'final word' on matters biblical is evident in two ways. First, several times in different contexts the document calls for further study of certain issues, such as the very meaning of the expression 'word of God' (7), the relationship between Mariology and the theology of the word (27), a deepening of the understanding of *Dei Verbum's* teaching that scripture is 'the soul of theology' (47), the possibility of producing a 'Directory on Homiletics' to aid preachers (60), and establishing centres to promote biblical studies (75).

A most important call for future study surrounds the highly complex topic of the inter-relationship between sacred scripture, Church tradition and the *magisterium*. Indeed, one of the propositions of the synod had called for a study of this highly technical area, along with the question of inspiration. It is well known that Vatican II did not resolve these issues. Perhaps wisely, the apostolic exhortation mentions these realities explicitly (17-18), but it avoids any detailed explanations or clarifications. Instead, the exhortation calls for further study in ways that could advance theological understanding and enrich the faith life of people (19). This is a clarion call to professional exegetes and theologians to turn their attention to these themes in the service of the Church. □

Dear Brothers in Ministry

On the feast of Saint Jerome last year (30th September) Pope Benedict issued an **Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini - The Word of the Lord***, following the Synod of Bishops on Sacred Scripture held in October 2008.

It is an important document for many reasons, not the least being that "the priest is first of all a *minister of the word of God*" (80). The deeper his understanding of the word, the more profound is his closeness to the person of Jesus and to those in his care. The Exhortation is his contemporary link with Vatican II's majestic Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* on Divine Revelation. Both belong to each other; both are indispensable resources. With the Exhortation speaking of Liturgy as "the privileged setting for the Word of God" (52), and with its observations about homiletics, it is too important not to be read prayerfully and be witnessed to courageously.

The January/February 2011 edition of *The Pastoral Review* (Vol. 7, Issue 1) from the U.K. contained an article on the Exhortation by **Rev. Ronald D. Witherup**, the Superior General of the Sulpicians, entitled "*Deo Gratias for Verbum Domini: Benedict XVI's teaching on the Word of God.*" In it, Fr Witherup identifies seven distinctive emphases or major teachings of the Exhortation. They are included in this *Information Bulletin*.

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With personal best wishes,

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Office for Clergy Life & Ministry

OUTLINE: The Exhortation has five sections:

- The Introduction (1-5);
- The Word of God (Part I, 6-49);
- The Word in the Church (Part II, 50-89);
- The Word in the World (Part III, 90-120);
- The Conclusion.

SEVEN MAJOR TEACHINGS (by R. Witherup):

1. Personalistic View of Revelation

One of the most prevalent features of the exhortation is the personalistic view of the Word of God. From the very beginning, the Christological and Trinitarian orientation is evident. For Catholics the Word of God is not simply a description of the Bible, a sacred text, which we use for instruction and inspiration; the Word is first and foremost a living revelation, a communication from God in the Word-made-flesh, his Son Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

Thus the exhortation has a consistent reference to the incarnational reality of the Word, recognizing by analogy that just as Christ is both God and man, so the Bible is God's Word expressed in human words. With regular reference to John 1, 1-18, the Pope emphasizes the Word as an incarnational outreach from God to human beings. This personalistic view of revelation is characteristic of *Dei Verbum* itself and holds the key to Benedict's insistence to maintain the connection between the Church's liturgy, especially the Eucharist, and the Bible.

2. Balance in scientific and spiritual interpretation

Some may be surprised to find that there is no severe criticism of the historical-critical method, the collection of modern scientific methods scholars have used for decades to explore the sacred scriptures. On the contrary, in keeping with earlier Church teachings, the Holy Father commends the

contributions of this approach and thanks scholars (exegetes and theologians), and specifically the Pontifical Biblical Commission, for their fine work (31). He repeats the dictum that the historical-critical method is 'indispensable' (32) and that one must begin the study of scripture with the literal sense (37).

On the other hand, one notes immediately the balance called for in exegesis. The Pope recalls that prior Church teachings, especially the encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII and Pius XII, had called for avoiding any dichotomy between scientific and spiritual interpretation, something he has drawn attention to on other occasions. Thus, while acknowledging the importance of scientific study of the Bible, the Pope calls on scholars to exercise their expertise in the context of a faith perspective and the Church's rightful insistence that the Word of God is a living word, a theme that appears again and again in the text.

3. Pastoral tone

The third feature is the pastoral tone of the exhortation. This same tone was evident in the synod's preparatory materials and especially in the 55 propositions. By means of his teaching the Holy Father clearly wants Catholics to appreciate the importance of the Word of God in their contemporary lives. He does not conceive of the Bible as simply an ancient text or a historical artifact. He encourages every family to have a Bible and to read it regularly (84-85). He also exhorts people to study the Bible as a way of preparing for the liturgy, especially the Sunday lectionary readings, which since Vatican II offered such a rich menu of biblical texts for reflection (57). The pastoral aspect appears also in the strong recommendation for good training of men and women as lectors (58), though he sidesteps one of the synod propositions that urged consideration

of allowing women to be formally installed in the ministry of lectors. The topic is not mentioned.

Other pastoral emphases include encouraging the appreciation of silence in the liturgy and when reading the Word (66), promoting hymns that are biblically based, with a nod toward traditional Gregorian chant (70), encouragement for artists to use inspiration from the Bible (112), finding ways to help the visually and hearing impaired to appreciate the Word better (71), promoting better biblically-based homilies that avoid abstraction (59), and fostering social justice and human rights (100-101).

4. *Lectio Divina*

Not surprisingly, a fourth aspect of this exhortation is its invitation to *lectio divina*, the ancient tradition of prayerful meditation on the scriptures. As he has made clear elsewhere, and as was evident in the synod's preparatory materials, this is a favourite theme of Benedict XVI. He clearly believes that more prayerful and spiritual reading of scripture will enhance both our appreciation of the Bible and our participation in the Church's liturgical life (86). At one point, the exhortation actually outlines a method in *lectio divina*, which may be termed the 'classic' monastic method (87). The Pope describes the process in five steps, using traditional Latin terms: *lectio* (careful reading), *meditatio* (reflection), *oratio* (prayer), *contemplatio* (contemplating God's message), *actio* (putting the Word into action).

5. Warning against fundamentalism

As a fifth element, despite the document's generally positive tone and avoidance of outright condemnation, the exhortation warns about the dangers of fundamentalist biblical interpretation which 'actually represents a betrayal of both the literal and spiritual sense, and opens the way to various forms of manipulation ...' (44). This is in line with the Pontifical Biblical Commission's own teaching in

