

# The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church - Catholic Interpretation (1993) (*excerpts*)

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by The Pontifical Biblical Commission

## 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 develop-

ment 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.

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### 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:

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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.

### *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.

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**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).

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