

## Item #15 (Learning from Vatican II)

This was originally Entry #6 in “James Swetnam’s Close Readings”. It is re-presented without change.

*[On April 19, 1989, the Pontifical Biblical Institute observed the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation. A number of faculty members were asked to make some remarks on the occasion. The text of my remarks follows. On re-reading them recently I think they are not inappropriate for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Institute. “Close readings” do not occur in a vacuum. The following reflections are meant to situate my own “close readings” in the larger life of the Biblical Institute which helped bring them to be. This entry has never been published and thus does not figure in my bibliography.]*

Every so often at the Biblicum it behooves us to stop thinking of exams, of equivalences in academic requisites, of paradigms, of adversaries, of grades, of term papers and to reflect on more fundamental aspects of our endeavors. We should reflect every so often on our life of Biblical scholarship in relation to the underlying factors which will remain long after the minutiae of passing importance will have disappeared, minutiae that will be recalled only with difficulty.

In order to speak of the more fundamental aspects of our academic life in relation to the Bible we would do well to reflect on the experience of some of our former students and professors. Some of them played significant roles in the Second Council of the Vatican. I am thinking of such persons as Bernard Jan Alfrink, Augustin Bea, Franz König, Joseph Frings, Achilles Lienart and many archbishops and bishops and others who took part in its debates and helped write its documents. These alumni and professors ended their scholarly work of students and teachers here at the Biblical Institute without having been programmed, so to speak, for taking part in an ecumenical council. But they were persons who had been educated to approach Sacred Scripture in a critical way. This education did not lead them to take this or that restricted view of the Church. Rather, it served them as an instrument for looking at the Church in its totality; it helped them have a balanced view of the Church as a whole and of her place in the world. Having been educated at the Biblical Institute they were accustomed to look in the Bible in the context of the Tradition of the Church. They were immersed in history. They had the ability, so much desired by the founder of the Biblical Institute, St. Pius X, to make use of means for deepening our knowledge of the sacred texts as Catholic scholars. And thus they were able to rise quickly to whatever challenge divine providence placed before them.

The Pontifical Biblical Institute was founded in 1909 by St. Pius X as a reply to “Modernism”. Modernism was a challenge to the Church arising from scholarly disciplines connected with history. The measures taken by Pius X in his condemnation of Modernism could not reply in a positive way to that challenge, as Pius well knew. What was needed was a group of persons educated and skilled in history, especially in those historical disciplines which touched on Sacred Scripture. Thus was the Biblicum born.

In the first decades of the Biblicum’s existence its main work was the education of persons competent to interpret Sacred Scripture with a critical eye. After approximately thirty-five years from its foundation the time was ripe for the application of criticism (above all as regards the use of the original languages of Scripture for purposes of translation) to the pastoral use of the Bible. Thus came to be the encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* of Pius XII in 1943. And thus came to be, in part, the circumstances which prepared the way for the Second Council of the Vatican, the

council in which history entered the Church in a decisive way.

We are gradually emerging from the crisis created by the entrance of history and of historical thinking as regards the Church. But the crisis is not yet over. And what is even more important, the possibilities for positive good created by the council only now are beginning to play a decisive role in the life of the Church. I am thinking obviously about Sacred Scripture and about the pastoral use of the Bible in the everyday life of Catholics around the world. We are only at the beginning of a new chapter in the adventure of the story of God's People. Only God knows how the chapter will end. But we can venture a guess about what will be needed by those whom God will use in the future because we know what was needed by those whom God used in the past: 1) a practiced knowledge of the critical use of Sacred Scripture; 2) loyalty to the tradition of the Church; 3) docility to the movements of the Spirit.

These three factors—a critical sense, loyalty, docility—are essential for every Catholic scholar in every period of the People of God. We can already see how these three factors will enter into the life of Catholic scholars in the near future: 1) a practiced knowledge of the critical use of Sacred Scripture in order to help believers of various faith traditions (for example, fundamentalist Protestants and Muslims) to see that reason is not an enemy in the search for God's will in holy writ; 2) loyalty to the tradition of the Church in order to help the People of God to maintain a firm belief in Jesus Christ as the unique source of salvation (for example, in the presence of the venerable religions of Asia); 3) docility to the movements of the Spirit to help the People of God become the persons God wants them to become.

But all this begins here and now, in the halls of the Biblicum itself. Here and now we are called on to prepare ourselves to live these three factors of critical sense, of loyalty, of docility. It is precisely in this context that we should think of the aspect which is the most profound of all that we do as Catholic Scripture scholars. In everything we do we should avoid the atmosphere of ideology. We are not technicians at the service of holy ideas. We are above all persons under the guidance of faith in a living God who is Three in One. All that we do as students and scholars of the Bible should be done with faith in God's call to this marvelous adventure. And all our relations with others should be informed with that *koinônia* and that *diakônia* which are unequivocal signs of the Christian life. Only if we are consistent in our living of the Gospel can we be effective in our study and teaching of the Gospel. **(17 October 2008)**