

Item #17 (Reflections on the Pastoral Use of Scripture in the Catholic Church in the Context of Contemporary Exegesis)

This Item was Entry #12 on my previous website, “James Swetnam’s Close Readings).

This is the text of the article referred to in §205. (§ **205.** James Swetnam, S.J., Article: “Reflections on the Pastoral Use of Scripture in the Catholic Church in the Context of Contemporary Exegesis”, *Bulletin Dei Verbum* 82/83 [2007] 33-34.) It was written as a private communication for the eyes of the director of the Catholic Biblical Federation, Alexander M. Schweitzer, but he apparently found it useful enough to warrant publication in the Federation’s bulletin *Dei Verbum*. Since it is directly relevant to many questions touched on in the synod of bishops held in Rome in October of 2008 I reproduce it here. (It should be noted here that in addition to my academic background in Scripture as teacher, editor, administrator, and author, I also have extensive experience in the pastoral use of Scripture. I have been the official representative of the Pontifical Biblical Institute for the Catholic Biblical Federation since 1987. The CBF is the official organization of the Roman Catholic Church for the pastoral use of the Bible. In addition, as can be seen from my *Curriculum Vitae*, I have directed The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola in a variety of places. In these retreats I have always made particular use of Scripture. In addition, I have made many presentations of *Lectio Divina*, have contributed to a website for homilies, and have given thousands of homilies myself in a variety of languages and in a variety of places.)

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That there is a gap between the pastoral use of Scripture in the Catholic Church and contemporary scholarly exegesis is fairly clear. This article is an attempt to address in summary terms the problem posed by this gap on the supposition that such a gap is not desirable: it harms both the pastoral use of Scripture and scholarly exegesis.

On one side is the stance of persons desirous of coming to fruitful terms with contemporary scholarly understanding of Scripture in the context of Catholic pastoral ministry. Such persons normally do not have much academic preparation. They are not usually hostile to contemporary scholarly work in Scripture (most of them don’t know much about it), but they are diffident about their own ability to make use of what scholarly work they know of in any significant way. They do at times make use of the results of such scholarship, but they have no way of assessing independently the value of such results. Inasmuch as contemporary scholarly work in Scripture has yielded a variety of results, their use of such work accordingly varies considerably.

On the other side of the gap is the stance of the exegete who has been academically prepared for work in contemporary biblical scholarship. Very often such scholars do have pastoral concerns and many make effective use of their academic expertise. But even with such scholars there is often the lingering concern that when all is said and done pastoral use of the Bible and the academic study of the Bible are two different approaches which should be carefully kept apart in the interest of academic integrity.

There is a fundamental problem here, or least so it seems to this writer. The problem is how to establish a unity of approach between the academic understanding of the Bible and the pastoral understanding of the Bible. For it seems to the present writer that such a unity is necessary if the Bible is to be used as God wishes it to be used in the contemporary world. Without such unity the pastoral use of the Bible would be deprived of the immense gifts which the academic understanding of the Bible has bestowed on believers in the past two hundred years or so, especially in the domains of philology and literary analysis. On the academic side, without such unity the scholarly approach to the Bible would be handicapped by remaining cut off from the contemporary world of those who believe precisely as believers and remain locked in a self-sufficient and neutral irrelevance, not to say self-sufficient sterility, which keeps perpetuating itself to the delight of academics and not many more. Two elements would seem to be necessary for the establishment of such unity.

The first element necessary for the establishment of a unity of approach between the academic understanding of the Bible and the pastoral understanding of the Bible is the recognition that in the Catholic view both understandings should be based on a faith commitment in the tradition of the Catholic Church. Such a faith commitment should undergird any Catholic approach to the academic understanding of the Bible (cf. the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 12), and any Catholic approach to the pastoral use of the Bible (cf. *DV* 23).

The second element necessary for the establishment of a fundamental unity of approach between the academic understanding of the Bible and the pastoral understanding of the Bible is the recognition that in the Catholic view both understandings should be based on the religious message being made by the biblical text (i.e., of God speaking to His people), so that prayer or a mind-set of prayer fittingly accompanies the reading of the Scriptures (cf. *DV* 13; cf. also the encyclical of Pius XII, *Divino afflante Spiritu* 24). (Would it be a betrayal of the Council's thought and the thought of Pius XII to say that this prayerful attitude is appropriate for a scholarly reading of the

Bible as well as a pastoral reading?) In the case of any given passage, the scholar should be able to single out the religious point or points being made. Using this religious point or points as a bridge, the one using scripture pastorally should then be able to show the relevance of the point or points for the contemporary scene.

If the above two elements were universally kept in mind by both academicians and pastoral workers, the gap between the scholarly approach to Scripture and the pastoral use of Scripture would be eliminated or greatly reduced.

This is the theory. In practice it is difficult to see these two steps being put into practice universally, even though as a matter of fact there are many Catholic scholars and Catholic pastoral workers who today offer excellent faith-oriented presentations of God's Word according to the mind of the Church.

From the standpoint of academia, Catholic scholars are much concerned that their academic autonomy be respected, and any explicit resort to an appeal to the teaching authority of the Church with regard to interpreting Scripture is resented by many if not by most such scholars. Concern for the religious message of a text is less resisted, but is easily lost in the mass of other perspectives usually available to a scholar in his or her exegetical presentations. Further, there is the lingering suspicion that all the results of modern scholarly research will be undervalued by being considered subordinate to ecclesiastical obscurantism.

From the standpoint of homiletics, catechetics, etc., Catholic pastors; will continue to have an inferiority complex with regard to exegesis, being reluctant to devote as much time as they should to trying to understand what Catholic biblical scholarship is all about. And it may be added, by being confused if they should try to do so. Especially in view of the fact that not all scholarship explicitly explains religious exegetical points easy to assimilate. And such pastoral workers are not always eager to make explicit to those whose lives they touch the underlying importance of religious faith: various forms of injustice, for example, often make for easier material to wax eloquent on, it is often just too tempting to take a quick glance at a text and then proceed to comment on "what strikes me". Presumed relevance tends to govern the meaning of a text, whereas, of course, the meaning of the text exegetically assessed should always be the basis for assessing relevance.

In practice what one may hope for is an increase in numbers of Catholic scripture scholars not averse to making explicit their Catholic faith with regard to exegesis. (Such a stance would be facilitated immensely if all Scripture scholars were expected to make explicit their own presuppositions which they bring to the interpretation of the

Bible, Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Calvinist, Baptist, secularist, atheist, etc.). In such a context the scholar who explicitly holds that faith is the basis for his or her work should not feel obliged to minimize in the slightest the results of scholarly biblical research. But in view of their prior faith commitment explicitly recognized they should put such research in a different perspective. Their faith is seeking understanding, their understanding is not seeking faith. And scholars not averse to making explicit the religious point of each organic section of scripture they study so that a bridge may be made between their research and pastoral application.

And one may hope for pastoral workers not reluctant to insist on the faith-dimension as the basis for the religious assimilation of God's Word. And for pastoral workers more assiduously concerned to base their use of Scripture on the point or points being made in the passages they are concerned with.

A certain amount of tension between the pastoral approach to the Bible and the academic approach is, of course, inherent in the respective approaches and this tension is to be respected. Properly appreciated, it can lead to improved exegesis and improved pastoral ministry. But the two approaches should not be allowed to be antagonistic to each other, for with mutual antagonism academic exegesis does not remain true to the intrinsic pastoral dimension of the Bible, and the pastoral dimension of the Bible does not remain true to the implied obligation to understand as best as possible God's inspired word.

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This topic of the relation between the academic approach to the Bible and the pastoral approach offers the occasion to present the views of Pope Benedict XVI on the basic principles that should govern the interpretation of Scripture. They are based on the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Word of God, *Dei Verbum*, and were given on October 14, 2008, at the opening of the synod of bishops held in Rome beginning on that date. The remarks are written with Benedict's customary concision, clarity and insight and I would like my contribution above to be interpreted in the larger context which they provide. (The translation is the one given on the official Vatican web site.)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Working on my book on Jesus has provided ample occasion to see what good can come from modern exegesis, but also for recognizing the problems and risks. *Dei Verbum*, n. 12 offers two methodological guidelines for suitable exegetical work. Firstly, it confirms the

necessity of using the historical-critical method, of which it briefly describes the essential elements. This necessity is the result of the Christian principle formulated in Jn 1: 14, “*Verbum caro factum est*”. Historical fact is a constituent dimension of the Christian faith. The history of salvation is not mythology but rather true history, and is therefore to be studied alongside serious historical research methods.

Nevertheless, this history has another dimension, that of divine action. *Dei Verbum*, consequentially, speaks of a second methodological level necessary for the correct interpretation of the words that are simultaneously human words and the divine Word. The Council says, according to a fundamental rule of interpretation for literary text, that Scripture is to be interpreted in the same spirit in which it was written. There are therefore three fundamental methodological elements that contribute to taking proper account of the divine, pneumatological dimensions of the Bible. One must 1) interpret the text taking into consideration the unity of all of Scripture. Today this is called canonical exegesis; at the time of the Council this term did not yet exist, but the Council expressed the same thing: it is necessary to take into account the unity of the entirety of Scripture; 2) one must also take into account the living tradition of the entire Church; and finally 3) it is necessary to observe the analogy of faith. Only where the two methodological levels, both historical-critical and theological, are observed can one speak of theological exegesis of an exegesis adequate to this Book. While at the first level, academic exegetical work is currently being done to an extremely high standard and provides us real help, the same cannot be said of the other level. Often this second level, the level consisting of the three theological elements mentioned in *Dei Verbum*, appear almost absent. And this has rather grave consequences.

The first consequence of the absence of this second methodological level is that the Bible becomes solely a history book. Moral consequences can be drawn from it, history can be learned from it, but the Book as such speaks of history alone and exegesis is no longer truly theological but instead becomes purely historiographical, literary history. This is the first consequence: the Bible remains in the past, speaks only of the past. The second consequence is even graver: where the hermeneutics of faith explained in *Dei Verbum* disappear, another type of hermeneutics will appear by necessity, a hermeneutics that is secularist, positivist, the key fundamental of which is the conviction that the Divine does not appear in human history. According to this hermeneutics, when there seems to be a divine element, the source of that impression must be explained, thus reducing everything to the human element. As a result, it is the grounds for interpretations that deny the historicity of divine elements. Today the exegetical “mainstream” in Germany, for example, denies that the Lord instituted the Holy Eucharist and says that Jesus’ corpse remained in the tomb. The Resurrection in this view would not have

been a historical event but a theological view. This happens because the hermeneutics of faith is missing: the profane philosophical hermeneutics is affirmed instead, which deny the possibility of the entrance and presence of the Divine in history. The result of the absence of the second methodological level is what has created a profound fissure between scientific exegesis and *Lectio divina*. From precisely this point there sometimes also arises a sort of perplexity in regard to the preparation of homilies. When exegesis is not theological, Scripture cannot be the soul of theology, and vice versa: when theology is not essentially Scriptural interpretation within the Church, then this theology no longer has a foundation.

Therefore for the life and mission of the Church, for the future of faith, it is absolutely necessary to overcome this dualism between exegesis and theology. Biblical theology and systematic theology are two dimensions of one reality, which we call theology. Thus it seems desirable to me that one of the *propositions* treats of the necessity of keeping in mind within exegesis the two methodological levels mentioned in *Dei Verbum*, n. 12, where it speaks of the need to develop not only a historical but also a theological exegesis. It will therefore be crucial to expand formation of future exegetes in this sense, so as to truly open the treasures of Scripture to today's world and to all of us.