



## The year of the Word of God – An overview

*Pope Francis enriched the liturgy with a "Day of the Word of God", celebrated every third Sunday of the year. In this way, he wishes "to increase in the People of God the familiarity with Sacred Scripture." For "not knowing the Scriptures means not knowing Christ" as the great Bible translator Jerome says. With his translation of the Bible into the popular Latin of his time 1600 years ago, he wanted to make the Scriptures accessible to ordinary people. His jubilee inspired the Catholic Biblical Confederation to celebrate a whole year of the Word of God.*

*The Year of the Bible has an important ecumenical dimension. Like Hieronymus, Martin Luther wanted with his translation of the Bible into German to give the Word of God back to Christians who no longer understood Latin. The fact that his intention led to a schism in the Church is one of the great tragedies of Church history. With the Constitution "Dei Verbum", the Second Vatican Council wanted to place Scripture again at the centre of the Catholic Church and encourage Catholics to rediscover the Bible.*

*With these Lenten meditations we want to show the different dimensions of the Word of God and help our readers to deepen their understanding of the "dynamic and spiritual character" of the Bible.*

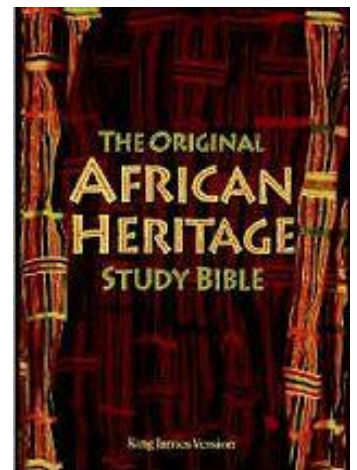
### Texts

- The celebration of the Sunday of the Word of God has an ecumenical value, since the Scriptures point out, for those who listen, the path to authentic and firm unity...The Bible is the book of the People of God, which, in listening to Scripture, comes from dispersion and division to unity.  
Pope Francis, MP - Motu Proprio Aperuit Illis 3.4
- The relationship between the Risen Lord, the community of believers and sacred Scripture is essential to our identity as Christians... Without the Lord who opens our minds to them, it is impossible to understand the Scriptures in depth. MP 1
- The role of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures is primordial. Without the work of the Spirit, there would always be a risk of remaining limited to the written text alone. This would open the way to a fundamentalist reading, which needs to be avoided. MP 9

### Learning from Africa

African Christians are much closer to the world of the Bible through their traditional cultures and their way of life than Europeans, who are shaped by the secular, rationalist thinking of the Enlightenment and do not have an direct access to the images and symbols of the Bible. It is sometimes astonishing how people who can hardly read and write find completely new and deep dimensions in biblical texts. The churches in Africa could make an important contribution to rediscover, beyond an academic, intellectual exegesis, the meaning of the Word of God for the concrete realities of life of individuals and communities.

The danger for African Christians is rather to lose the deeper meaning of biblical texts through a literal and fundamentalist reading of the Bible, especially the Old Testament. For most people in Africa religion is part of their lives. That is why biblical texts can be easily misused to legitimize political claims to power, social injustice and personal interests. Sometimes the Bible is also used like a kind of "fetish" to underpin magical ideas.



### To think about

- How much space do I give to a meditative reading of Scripture (Lectio Divina) in my life?
- As a community, do we let the Word of God guide us in our decisions?

## The creative power of God's Word

*The word is powerful and does what it says. It has the power to change people and communities. In the lives of many saints it was a word of Scripture that touched them deeply and was the beginning of their vocation. Religious communities often express their mission and charism with a quotation from the Bible. The writings of the Jewish and Christian Bible have changed whole societies and created new civilizations, although this is always a slow and never complete process. The Bible is and remains the foundation of the "Christian Occident" and is still formative in our secular society, although most contemporaries are not aware of it.*

*If we engage with the Word of God, it can become a source of strength for us, "a lamp for our path" and a comfort in dark times. Not only is Holy Scripture inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit inspires those who read it attentively and faithfully. The Word of God inspires us to look at the world from a new perspective and see it as a daily gift of God's love. It gives us orientation when we have to take decisions. It challenges us to think creatively and to dare to do new things.*

### Texts

- For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.. Is 55,11-12
- God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. Gen 1,3  
Jesus said: 'I will; be... clean'. And straightway his leprosy was cleansed. Mt 8:3

### Learning from Africa

The Bible describes the creation of the world in all its beauty came into existence through a word of God: "Let there be... and there was... and he saw it was good." It is man who brings disorder and chaos into the world: into the family (Cain and Abel, Gen 4), into society (The Tower of Babel, Gen 11) and into the relationship with nature, which becomes man's enemy (The Flood, Gen 6-9). Many African traditions know similar myths about creation and the fall of humanity. God withdraws from the world and leaves people to themselves and the power of threatening spirits.

The life- threatening environmental catastrophes force us to rethink our relationship to nature and to see ourselves not as masters and users of nature, but as part of God's creation and to recognize that all living have their uniqueness, dignity and beauty and are signs of the tender love of the Creator. (cf. Pope Francis, Laudato Si 84-86; 102-106)

We can learn much from "primitive peoples" who still live in harmony with nature. In traditional communities "it is a moral code not to take more from nature than is needed... Earth, forests, rivers and wind and other natural objects are traditionally considered both natural and divine". (Ogungbeni)



### Food for thought

- *When in my life have I experienced the power and wisdom of the Word of God?*
- *What are the passages of Scripture that give us inspiration, direction and hope to meet the great challenges of our world and our Church?*

## Word and Eucharist

***"Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness." (Mt 9:35) The life of the Church also needs both: proclamation through the word and confirmation of the message through sacramental signs. This unity broke up in the Reformation. The Protestant, especially the Reformed churches, accepted "only Scripture". In response, the Catholic Church overemphasized the sacrament and kept Sacred Scripture away from the laity, considered as too dangerous for them. The ecumenical movement and the Vatican Council were concerned to restore the balance and unity of word and sign, especially in the Eucharist.***

### Texts

- For the disciples at Emmaus Jesus "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures... When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him". Lk 24,30 This scene clearly demonstrates the unbreakable bond between sacred Scripture and the Eucharist. Pope Francis, MP – Motu Proprio Aperuit Illis 6.8
- The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body. *Dei Verbum* 21
- As Christians, we are a single people, making our pilgrim way through history, sustained by the Lord, present in our midst, who speaks to us and nourishes us. MP 8
- It is important, that in the Eucharistic celebration the sacred text be enthroned, in order to focus the attention of the assembly on the normative value of God's word. MP 3



### Learning from Africa

In African religions rituals play a major role. Since their traditional "priests" often used foreign languages in their rituals, the first generations of Christians in Africa had no problem to celebrate Mass in Latin. The decision of the Council to allow the celebration of the liturgy in the native languages triggered a tremendous creative dynamic. Within a few decades, all ethnic groups developed their own lively church music, in which traditional instruments and liturgical dance, which express their deepest emotions, found their place. At important occasions, in the beginning of the Eucharist the Bible is often carried into the church in a solemn procession with dancing and drumming and given a place of honour. When Africans come to Europe and go to Sunday services, they find our liturgy cold, joyless and boring. In contrast, Europeans who attend African masses are touched by the enthusiasm and vitality of the liturgy. What is meaningful to people in one culture cannot be simply transferred to another. But don't we also need to find new ways to express the Gospel message in the culture, language and symbolism of our time?

### Food for thought

- How creative are we in our communities when we celebrate our daily liturgy? What images, texts, songs and symbols speak to us today?
- In the future, it will be increasingly difficult for religious communities to find a priest for the Eucharist. What does this mean for communities and parishes without priests?



## Word and Life

***Throughout the whole Bible runs the demand not only to hear the Word of God but to live it and to make it a guide for our daily decisions. Our faith, which is based on the Word of Scripture, wants to be lived. Faith without the works is dead.***

***If the Church today is in a crisis of credibility, it has to do with the gap between teaching and practice. It was not only the abuse scandal that revealed some blatant contradictions between Christian morals and church practice. We lose our credibility when we take a vow of poverty and have a luxurious lifestyle; when we preach social justice and pay our workers badly; when we demand solidarity from society and do not realize it ourselves in the church.***

### Texts

- The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.  
Heb. 4,12
- What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. James 2, 14-17.26
- Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you? Lc 6,46
- I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.  
Lc 11,9

### Learning from Africa

African theologians point out that the central value in traditional cultures is "life". Good is what sustains life, bad is what threatens it. Passing on life is the most important task. Services, especially in Pentecostal churches, address the daily problems of life. God is expected to intervene in natural disasters, solve financial problems and drive out evil spirits that are the cause of physical and mental illness.



In the so-called "Prosperity Churches" these expectations are often shamelessly abused for the self-enrichment of pastors. There is also a magical belief that rituals you can protect yourself against evil spirits or even manipulate God.

In our secularized societies, even Christians often no longer expect God to intervene in their lives. But when God is no longer relevant to our daily lives, then we don't need him anymore. We can learn from African Christians to start any activity with prayer and to place our plans, and even our small worries and needs before God while leaving him the freedom to answer us when and where and how he wants.

### Food for thought

- Do we still really expect God to intervene in our lives? What place does the prayer of intercession have in my life?
- Where is the discrepancy between our faith and concrete action in our personal and community life?

## The bible and social and ecological justice

***Justice is a key word in the Bible. All books speak of God's justice and mercy. God is just, a just judge and God is on the side of the poor who are treated unjustly. God demands the same from his people and from his children. They, too, should act justly and have a heart for the victims of injustice. The purpose of the Mosaic law is to maintain justice in society. Where injustice prevails, the prophets denounce unjust conditions in the name of God and demand justice for those treated unjustly. The Messiah is expected to restore a kingdom of justice. For Jesus, "the most important thing in the law... is justice, mercy and faithfulness. Mt 23:23***

***In today's world it is urgent to sharpen out sense for generational justice and accept our responsibility for the people who come after us. With our wasteful lifestyle we are destroying the basis of life for the future of mankind. We live at the expense of future generations.***

### Texts

- Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. Ps 89:15
- Listening to the Scriptures to practice mercy: this is a great challenge for our lives. The Word of God is able to open our eyes so that we can get out of the individualism that leads to suffocation and sterility. To do this, it opens the way for us to live together and in solidarity. Motu Proprio, Aperuit Illis 13
- Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous... anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God. 1 John 3:7, 10
- What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?... Our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes. Laudato Si 160.161

### Learning from Africa



One of the most beautiful representations of this responsibility for future generations are the Makonde trees of life in Tanzania. The generations are closely linked to each other. They express an awareness that what we are, we owe to our ancestors and that our most important task is to pass on what we have received to our children.

Christian communities in Africa ask spontaneously what relevance biblical texts have for their concrete lives. In many countries, human rights violations and political oppression, social inequality and corruption, exploitation and sexual violence are commonplace. The Bible offers an alternative vision of a society characterized by mutual respect, solidarity and peace.

Christians who have had traumatic experiences in ethnic conflicts and civil wars often find in the Bible comfort and strength in their struggle for survival. The bible gives them a vision of hope for a better tomorrow. Some Gospel texts inspired people, who have been victims of grave injustices, to find the strength to reconcile with their enemies.

### Food for thought

- ***What contribution do we make through a frugal lifestyle to leave to the next generation a world worth living in?***
- ***Do we have the courage to stand up against injustices in society and in the Church?***

## Studying - Reading – Sharing God's Word

*Texts of Scripture can have various levels of meaning. There is not the one universal interpretation. How individuals and communities interpret a biblical text depends greatly on their life situation and their cultural background. There are several ways to approach biblical texts:*

- In **Bible study** one wants to better understand what the author wanted to say with the text at that time and in what historical context it was written. Footnotes and exegetical commentaries are helpful.
- When reading of the Bible in prayerful way, which is called **Lectio Divina**, I ask myself what God wants to tell me through this text at this moment of my life.
- In **Bible sharing** we read a text of Scripture together, everyone says what touches him or her particularly in the text and what it means for them. In the end we ask ourselves how the Word challenges us as a community to act. The richness and complexity of the Word of God can be experienced, because in the same text each individual sees and hears something different that is relevant for him/her right now. The contribution of each individual is not discussed or criticized, but simply accepted by all as a gift and a source of inspiration.

### Texts

- The word (of God) has as many aspects as those who study it. The Lord has coloured his word with diverse beauties, so that those who study it can contemplate what stirs them.  
Ephraim, zitiert in Papst Franziskus, MP – Motu Proprio Aperuit Illis 2
- When sacred Scripture is read in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written, it remains ever new... The sacred text as a whole serves a prophetic function regarding not the future but the present of whoever is nourished by this word. MP 12



### Learning from Africa

One of the most important pastoral decisions of the African Church was the orientation to group the Christians of the huge parishes of East and Central Africa into small communities. A dozen or more families meet regularly to pray together, share a biblical text and address practical questions and problems. In this way the Bible becomes the centre of their community.

In these communities Christians can freely exchange ideas without priests, who are often shaped by Western theology and philosophy through their seminary training. When lay people share about the Word of God among themselves, it is a unique opportunity to understand a biblical text from their culture and their daily reality and ask themselves what the message means for their own life and for their community.

Biblical stories can also be a starting point to talk about current and delicate issues. Genesis 38 raises questions about sexual violence against women; the prophet Amos denounces the abuse of power and corruption; the creation stories in Gen 1 and 2 remind us of our responsibility for the environment.

cf. LS 65-75

### Suggestions for reading and sharing biblical texts

„Lectio Divina“ (and also bible sharing) consists of reading God's word in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us. In the presence of God, during a recollected reading of the text, it is good to ask, for example: “Lord, what does this text say to me? What is it about my life that you want to change by this text? What troubles me about this text? Why am I not interested in this? Or perhaps: What do I find pleasant in this text? What is it about this word that moves me? What attracts me? Why does it attract me?” When we make an effort to listen to the Lord, temptations usually arise. One of them is simply to feel troubled or burdened, and to turn away. Another common temptation is to think about what the text means for other people, and so avoid applying it to our own life. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 153