

THE PLENARY AND THE WORD OF GOD: A PROPOSAL

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1. Christian tradition, from its very beginnings, depends upon the inspired revelation that comes from the Word of God, both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures. The great Councils that determined the articulation of the Christian faith, from Nicea (325 CE) to Constantinople II (680 CE) were determined by the interpretation of Scripture and the great Patristic and Liturgical traditions, also founded upon the Word of God.
2. For obvious reasons (e.g., the exclusive nature of Western Christianity and the struggle with the European princes) a more authority-based, legal understanding of Christianity emerged that eventually led to the Reformation. The Protestant traditions returned to the Word (not without problems), and the Roman tradition affirmed the importance of Tradition.
3. This situation led to an almost Scripture-less Catholic Church from the time of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) till the insistence of Vatican II that the Word of God return to the centre of Catholic life and practice (*Sacrosanctam Concilium* in 1963 and *Dei Verbum* in 1965). What emerged at Vatican II was the product of the Magisterial teaching of Pope Leo XIII (*Providentissimus Deus* in 1893) and Pius XII (*Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943). The Word of God must be studied and taught in such a way that it provides the inspiration for the life and practices of the Church.
4. Since the Council, the Magisterium has insisted that such must be the case: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), the 2008 Synod of Bishops with the theme “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church,” the post-Synodal Exhortation of Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (2010), Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013, esp. paras. 110-175), his dedication of the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time to the honouring of the Word of God, accompanied by his recent powerful insistence of the crucial role of the Word in his little-known *Scripturae Sacrae Affectus* (2020: *Devotion to Sacred Scripture*). He laments: “Credible interpreters and translators of our own tradition are in short supply.” He cites St Jerome (in whose honour this letter was written): “Read the divine Scriptures constantly; never let the sacred volume fall from your hands.”
5. This significant aspect of the Catholic Church’s contemporary Magisterium has not been taken into account in the preparation for the Plenary. The *Instrumentum Laboris* (*Continuing the Journey*) regularly and rightly asks for “Gospel values,” Gospel life-style,” etc. But how many Australian Catholics have any formation in the appreciation of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? Where do these “Gospel” principles come from, if not the unknown Four Gospels?
6. **Proposal.** That the Plenary direct the Episcopal Conference to establish and finance a national program for the biblical formation of all active Catholics. It should be kept simple. The current Sunday Lectionary, with its Years A, B, and C, dedicated to Matthew, Mark and Luke – enriched by John on special occasions – should be its focus. The following aspects of its implementation should be considered by the Plenary, and subsequently by the Bishops’ Conference:

- a. The program should be directed to the entire Catholic community, from its Episcopacy to the simplest believer.
- b. It should be overseen and animated by a national committee. Members need not be experts but have a passion for the delivery of the program.
- c. It should be Diocese and Parish based, with Parish Priests (or their delegate) attending to a “core group” animating the Parish.
- d. The program will necessitate a formation program for those who will play leadership roles.
- e. Given the long existence of Catholic theological and biblical centres of expertise in every State (seminaries, CTC, CIS, BCT, etc.), and the nationwide presence of a Faculty of Theology at Australian Catholic University, there are significant numbers of potential “leaders” for this program who have already been trained. They could provide a significant resource.
- f. The program, formation of personnel, resources, etc., should be entirely funded by the Episcopal Conference, following the directives of the universal Magisterium of the Catholic Church (see above, paras 1-5).
- g. In support of a national program that uses the Sunday text, week by week, as its focus, it should be accompanied by the excellent resource provided by Garratt Publications (Mulgrave), the *Friendly Guide* series. Every active Catholic should have a copy in hand. If necessary, this resource should be funded by the Bishops’ Conference. A general introduction to the New Testament, and guides through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are already available. Once the three-year cycle has been completed ... start again, broadening the curriculum, each three years.

I submitted this proposal for the Parish gathering at St John the Baptist, Clifton Hill, Victoria, as we began the journey toward the Plenary. Enthusiastically accepted there, it was not incorporated in any way into the subsequent “themes.” Thus, despite the regular reference to “Gospel” in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, no attention is drawn to the only “given” that can animate the renewal of Catholic faith and practice. Encouraged by leading Melbourne Catholics, aware that this submission does not fit into established “protocol,” I am resubmitting it in a more developed form. We must carefully avoid the danger described by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* 35:

The biggest problem is when the message we preach then seems identified with those secondary aspects which, *important as they are*, do not in and of themselves convey the heart of Christ’s message. We need to be realistic and not assume that our audience understands the full background to what we are saying or is capable of relating what we say to the very heart of the Gospel which gives it meaning, beauty, and attractiveness (Stress mine).

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