

Bishops' Institute for the Biblical Apostolate, BIBA II

Statements and Propositions

"But how then are they to call on him if they have not come to believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard of him? And how will they hear of him unless there is a preacher for them? And how will there be preachers if they are not sent?"(Rom. 10:14-15a, JB)

With these challenging words from St. Paul in mind, we 16 bishops from 10 different Asian countries have come together for the Second Bishops' Institute for the Biblical Apostolate (BIBA II). In this major event, some 18 priests, religious and lay women have assisted us in our discernment and in understanding our distinct role as servants of the Word. The presence of the representatives of the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) led by its President, Bishop Wilhelm Egger has also lent great support to this institute. The 35 participants of BIBA II met at MAJODI Centre, Plentong, Johor, Malaysia, March 1-5, 1999.

On the eve of the Third Millennium, the intense preparation for the great Jubilee of the year 2000 cannot leave us unmoved but do our task in renewing and strengthening our Church's true witness to the Word of God for the life of the world.

Under the auspices of the FABC Office of Evangelization, BIBA II takes up the call of the Fathers in the 1998 Special Synod of Bishops of Asia on the need for intense and integral biblical pastoral formation of the various members of the Church. As bishops who take the lead in the renewal of the Church, we continue to work at an integral formation in our biblical pastoral ministry through this institute.

Within those days of togetherness, we touched on various themes of importance for our own formation and the formation of those entrusted to us. We studied more closely the fourfold sense of the Scriptures and the different elements in evaluating the methods for the biblical apostolate. A lecture and a panel of discussants noted the need for a formation program in the seminary that is responsive to the call to become effective servants of the Word. There is also an equal and urgent desire for a meaningful formation program for our lay animators.

We are convinced of the centrality of the Word of God to the Church's life and consider the biblical apostolate as an integral part of her ministry. All members of the Church ought to be enthusiastic about and actively involved in the biblical apostolate. Enthusiasm about the biblical apostolate can come about only through a solid formation

in the Bible that leads to a genuine biblical spirituality. Among the many areas for intensive renewal and formation, BIBA II proposes on two key areas, namely the seminary formation and the formation of the lay animators in the biblical apostolate.

I. Seminary Formation in the Biblical Apostolate

We propose that:

1. A comprehensive formation in the Bible be given in the seminary in which the Bible is taught and lived as the Word of God and source of life to lead students to an encounter with Christ and motivate them to share Him with others. A suggested process is given in the appendix.
2. The above proposal will be effectively implemented only if seminary Scripture lecturers understand and accept it. Thus:
 - a) A symposium be organized in which these lecturers could:
 - i. share with one another their experiences as Scripture lecturers;
 - ii. reflect on the emerging approaches of reading the Bible in Asia;
 - iii. sharpen their skills to help students to actualize and inculturate God's Word, particularly in the Biblical Apostolate
 - b) a build-up to this symposium be worked out within two years:
 - i. through the presentation of BIBA II's proposal for deliberation and acceptance – at the national level, then the regional level and finally the FABC level;
 - ii. all three activities proposed in a) above are experienced – also at the national level, then the regional level and finally the FABC level.
3. In general, priests who have finished their Licentiate or Doctorate are immediately assigned to the seminary as formators without adequate formation for seminary work. This has a serious drawback, especially with regard to forming seminarians in genuine biblical spirituality.

Thus, a Formation Institute for Seminary Faculty be set up in Asia where among other matters pertaining to formation, the centrality of the Word of God to the life of seminarians and their future ministry is fostered through a training of:

- a. Scripture lecturers in actualizing and inculturating God's Word;
 - b. Theology lecturers in appreciating better the Bible as the "soul" of Theology;
 - c. Spiritual directors in helping seminarians to develop a sound biblical spirituality;
 - d. All lecturers and formators in cooperation and collaboration in their formation work.
 - e.
4. A Biblical Institute be established for Asia which is authorised to grant academic degrees in *Re Biblica*. The programme of studies compares:

- a. prevalent scientific methods of exegesis of the Bible;
- b. Asian approaches in reading and interpreting the Bible;
- c. actualisation and inculturation of the Bible in the Asian context.

II. Formation of Lay Animators in the Biblical Apostolate

“The pressing task of the new evangelization takes place through giving the Bible anew [*riconsegna*] to all the People of God” [*John Paul II to the 43rd General Assembly of the Italian Bishops’ Conference*].

Such is the obvious purpose and meaning of our efforts to promote and enhance the biblical apostolate in all its forms.

To this end all effective means – such as the dissemination of sound but simple biblical introductions and commentaries and the appropriate use of print and electronic media – must be activated to enable the faithful at large to read, pray, share, love and live the Bible.

So great is the people’s hunger for the life-giving Word, and we can only thank and praise God for it, that many fruitful modes of Biblical Apostolate work have been found and are fast winning the hearts of the faithful.

This amazing thrust, in addition to the usual forms of the ministry, promises greatly to help give the Bible back to all the People of God.

Now this development entails today a growing need for an increasing number of well formed lay servants of the Word. Different as each form of Biblical Apostolate work is, with characteristics proper to it, there are, we believe, basic common elements that ought to be discerned and go into all sound formation of lay animators.

Among the main elements are the following:

1. Deep spirituality, born of personal encounter with Christ in the Bible through long participation in actual apostolate group work.
2. Sound grounding in the basic knowledge of the Bible and of the Church’s authentic understanding of it [through the Liturgy, Fathers and Saints, Magisterium, etc.]
3. Nourishment of biblical living by the grace of the sacraments, especially of the Holy Eucharist, and full integration into parish community.
4. Cultivation of non-obtrusive servant leadership, mature self-understanding in faith, and acquisition of basic abilities in group dynamics.
5. Regular updating and training through ad hoc courses and periodic biblical retreats.
6. Close internal consultation and coordination among fellow animators of the same group[s].
7. Willing acceptance and respect of, and effective networking and open collaboration with other groups and forms of Biblical Apostolate.
8. Active diffusion of biblical prayer life and Bible sharing in the family, workplace and community.

We the Bishops, together with our priests, not only should understand and accept, but also personally promote the biblical Apostolate. This we can better accomplish while journeying with the faithful, by profiling among other things, suitable programs and proposing the essentials of a good and serious formation of lay animators in the Ministry of the Word.

Appeal and Prayer

Convinced of the significance and urgency of our propositions, we the bishops in BIBA II strongly appeal that they be taken up in the forthcoming 7th Plenary Assembly of FABC in January 2000. We hope that this institute may render a modest contribution to the 10th Ordinary General Synod of Bishops in October 2000 on the theme of “Bishop: Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World.”

There is much hope for renewal in the Church in Asia. There is vibrant life pulsating in this continent of the young. We are resolved to begin the renewal in ourselves and in our churches. May we the servants of the Word of Life and Hope faithfully fulfill this divine call. With the intercessions of Mary, the handmaid of the Word Incarnate, may the Lord guide us all in our journey towards the next millennium.

APPENDIX: SUGGESTED PROCESS

The goal of the suggested process for biblical formation in the seminary is to help students enter into and build up a personal relationship with Christ through their reading, study and use of the Bible. In order to achieve this goal, the following steps are recommended.

1. Biblical studies are done in different stages:
 - a. Introductory stage:
 - i. Familiarity with one Gospel with a view to getting to know Christ and respond to Him in prayer and in life.
 - ii. Introduction to the larger context of salvation history with a view to seeing Christ as the fulfillment and summit of it.
 - iii. An overview of the Bible together with basic ideas about inspiration, inerrancy and canonicity of the Bible.
 - b. The books of the Bible are presented.
 - i. Familiarity with contents of each book through repeated reading. Main message of each book is explained.
 - ii. Formation of the Pentateuch and Gospels – to give an understanding of oral and written traditions and redaction
 - c. Thematic and exegetical studies.
1. A spiritual-pastoral orientation be given to biblical studies through an experience of actualizations and inculturation. Asian approaches to the Bible could help.

2. All courses in theology should be biblically oriented in as much as the Bible is the 'soul' of theology.
3. The centrality of the Bible as God's Word to seminary life be upheld through the liturgy, spiritual direction, *lectio divina* and *lectio continua*, and pastoral involvement.