

## Introduction to the Bible

St Irenaeus of Lyons (c.140-202) says in the introduction to his Commentary on the Book of Isaiah: “Whoever ignores the scriptures ignores Christ.” St Ephraim the Syriac (c.306-c.373) adds: “God has decorated his Word with many blessings, so that all who study it find their delight... His Word is a tree which nourishes by the fruits that it gives; it is the rock, opened in the desert which has become the source of spiritual drink, for each man, all over the world.” St Caesarius of Arles (c.474-c.542) proclaims: “The Word of God is no less majestic than the Body of Christ; just as we are careful when we receive the Body of Christ, not to let anything fall from our hands, we are also careful that the Word of God is not uprooted from our hearts, when it is addressed to us.”

Christians believe that the Bible is the most important book for them, but Christianity is not a religion of “the book”, but the religion of a Person, Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. The Bible recounts the story of salvation brought about by God in human life; it speaks of the love of God for His people, and it invites us to live a life of love, forgiveness and peace. Moreover, it opens up the possibility of salvation to non-believers, through the means of those witnesses to the Word, who have brought it to every corner of the world and who have preached it to all the nations.

## 1. The Bible is a library made up of 73 books.

The Bible is not a single book but a collection of many books. It can be compared to a library, made up of 73 works: 46 for the Old Testament and 27 for the New Testament. This library consists of several literary genres. Let us name some of them:

- Narratives: these recall the past with the aim of developing a common sense of ancestry. If a man listens to the stories of his grandparents, he becomes more conscious of his family roots.
- Epics: here too the past is recounted, but in order to eulogise its heroes so as to inspire, even if this is at the expense of some detail.
- Codes of the law: these organise the life of the people and help to provide social cohesion.
- Liturgy and celebrations (the “sacrifices”, for example) are an expression of a common way of life, in the same way that any festivity unites the family. Because these celebrations are centred on activities of a religious nature, they illustrate the relationship of unity which exists between man and God.
- Poems, songs and Psalms: these express the prayer of the people, their convictions and their faith.
- Prophecy: these are messages pronounced by God to lead us to the true faith.
- The teachings of the prophets and of the priests: these are in the form of moral prescriptions, parables and narratives.
- Wisdom literature: these are reflections on the grand themes of life, death, love, the origin of evil and of suffering, etc.

The Old Testament has 39 books called protocanonical, which were originally written in Hebrew, and are accepted by all Christians and Jews. It is divided into three parts: The Torah, composed of 5 books, the Prophets (*Nevi'im*), composed of 21 books and the Writings (*Ketuvim*), composed of 13 books.

Most of the deuterocanonical books were originally written in Greek. They also form part of the Old Testament. They were added to the Jewish canon of scripture used by Greek-speaking Jews at a later date. From the sixteenth century, these were considered apocryphal by the Reformers. These books number 7 in total: Tobit, Judith, First Book of Maccabees, Second Book of Maccabees, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch as well as some chapters of Esther and Daniel.

As for the New Testament, it was written in three phases. The first phase is historical. It speaks of the historical Jesus, his birth, his life amongst us and his death and resurrection. The second phase begins after the resurrection. This is the phase of an oral tradition when the first kerygma of the apostles took place, and when the first Christian hymns were composed. Around the year 51 AD, the third phase begins. This is the writing phase, the phase of crystallisation. Why was there a writing phase of the New Testament? There are two reasons for this: Firstly, because much of the historical knowledge of Jesus was being lost; secondly, because the number of preachers around the world was on the increase and this justified the writing of the *memoria apostolorum*, or the “memoirs of the apostles”. Many books were written, but, for the first time in history, thanks to Pope Damasus I in 382, the 27 books of the New Testament were gathered together in one single document. All the subsequent councils confirmed this decision. The Muratori manuscript in the second century (around 180 AD) numbered only 21 books. What do we call all the other books which do not appear on Pope Damasus’s list of 27? They are known as the apocryphal books. They are excluded from the liturgy because they do not contribute to the faith of the believer. Finally, what criteria were applied to decide whether a book was canonical or apocryphal? There were three considerations: 1) apostolic origin; 2) acceptance and usage in the first Christian communities and by the Fathers of the Church; 3) declarations by the Councils of the Church and from ancient manuscripts that these are books which have been inspired by the Holy Spirit and which guide the Church and nourish the Faith. Thus, we can affirm that the holy canonical books of the Catholic Church number 73. Everything else which does not conform to these criteria is known as apocryphal. The canon has been set and the revelation is closed. No other books can be added to the canon.

## **2. The Bible is the principal book of the Church**

“He came to his own domain but his own people did not accept him. But to all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:11-12). The Church is the community of believers in Christ, his people, “his very own”, who live in his permanent presence.

The liturgical celebrations of the Church are considered to be the wellsprings of grace. As we take part in these celebrations, Christ continues his salvific action on behalf of the faithful. This is why we say that the liturgy is the privileged space of the Word of God. There is an intrinsic relationship between the Bible and the Sacraments. This relationship is none other than the unity between what God says and what He does, “because the Word of God is something alive and active” (Heb 4:12). In the Latin Church, all Seven Sacraments include, in their first part, the Liturgy of the Word. The Divine Office and the Liturgy of the Hours are none other than Liturgies of the Word, which recall the prayer practised by Jesus in the synagogue.

The service of the Word of God in the Church is not limited to the liturgical celebrations. The Church proclaims the Word of God to believers and teaches it to them, thereby fulfilling the principal command of Jesus after his resurrection: “Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations... and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you.” (Mt 28:19-20) In this way, whenever the catechism is taught in schools and parishes, believers are formed in their understanding of the Word of God and in how to put it into practice in their lives. During the great ecclesial gatherings such as the Eucharistic Congresses and the World Youth Days, the Church endeavours to explain the Word of God and to give teaching which builds the faith. This is why we can say that the holy scriptures have been, and continue to be, at the heart of the flowering of priestly and religious vocations. As Christ said: “You did not choose me, no, I chose you...” (Jn 15:15-16). Through the practice of *Lectio Divina* and of personal meditation on God’s Word, God continues to inspire many people’s life choices and their status as believers in the world.

### **3. The Bible is the book for committed Christians in the world**

The third part of the apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* calls on Christians to live the Word of God, and to engage in the world, in the following areas:

- The Word of God and politics: the Bible calls on all those who are engaged in the political and social spheres to live their lives in accordance with the Gospel’s message in terms of justice and peace. The Christian politician is duty-bound to take inspiration from the Gospel for their pronouncements and for their political stance.
- The Word of God and the young: the young have a sincere desire to know Christ; thus, the Word of God guides their choices. Their duty is to listen to it with care and attention and to constantly draw from it.
- The Word of God and migrants: migrants have a right to hear the Word of God. There are two categories of migrants: those who come to settle in Christian countries, though they do not know Christ; and those who emigrate from countries which are steeped in Christian traditions, such as the oriental

- ones. Both these groups have a right to participate in the celebration of the Word of God and to receive the teachings of the Christian faith.
- The Word of God and suffering: over the centuries, Jesus has always been close to those who suffer. The Word of God is a healing for their sickness and a balm for their wounds.
  - The Word of God and the poor: charity must be accompanied by the proclamation of the Word. The bread of the Word must be distributed with the ordinary bread and with the material assistance offered to the poor.
  - The Word of God and ecology: the Word of God calls on man to marvel at Creation and to protect the environment. The prayers of the Psalms, for example, are filled with praise and glory for God's creation. Man has a duty to respect the earth.

#### **4. The Bible is a book of art and culture**

The Bible is a cultural treasure. It contains human and philosophical values which have influenced humanity in a positive way. Works of art whose themes and words have been inspired by the Bible abound: music, icons, statues and hymns. These works bring great enjoyment to many people. One only has to step into the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, for example, to be filled with awe at the artistic representation of the Last Judgment.

Likewise, it is striking to see how the Word of God is being spread today via modern means of communication, such as social media, radio, television, the Internet, etc. In this way, a much larger audience is reached. This use of mass media will encourage new ways of teaching the Bible to be developed. These developments may prove to be more effective than the traditional methods of preaching.

The transmission of the Word of God, its translation and diffusion started with the Old Testament, at the time of the reform of Josias (622 BC), then with Ezra and Nehemiah. The first translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, the book used by the Jews in the first century of Christianity, appeared after the Greek civilisation had spread around the Mediterranean. Across the centuries, a great many translations of the Bible were produced. There were so many, in fact, that with the advent of printing in 1450, the first book to be printed was naturally the Bible. Indeed, the Bible is the most translated, printed and distributed book in the world. In saying that, many people are still waiting today for a translation of the Bible in their own language, so that the biblical message can be transmitted to everybody, faithfully.

## Conclusion

The Holy Bible is the final word of God to the Church. No other sacred words may be proclaimed until the Second Coming of Christ, who will utter his last word to judge the living and the dead. Awaiting this return, the Spirit and the Bride shall say: "Maranatha! Come, Lord, Jesus, come!"

The Holy Bible is certainly God's final word, yet Christians today need a new evangelization and a fresh, attentive listening to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit; they need to hear the Bible afresh, seeking new ways to live their Christian faith. This is why his holiness Pope Benedict XVI convened the Synod of Bishops from 7<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> October 2012, in Rome, on the new evangelization and the transmission of the Faith. After the Synod, an important apostolic exhortation was published on this theme.

In conclusion, let us turn to the Holy Virgin Mary – Mother of the Word and Mother of Joy – she who responded in obedience to the Word of the Lord and uttered her "Yes" to the Angel. She was the Mother of Jesus in her flesh; in fact, Jesus said one day that she was also the Mother of His brethren, those who were doing the will of His Father in Heaven: "Anyone who does the will of my Father in Heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother" (Mt 12:50). She followed Him during His public life all the way to the Cross and looked after the Apostles and Disciples until Pentecost and their early missions, earning for herself the blessings proffered by her Son who said: "Still happier those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:28).

