

Synod working document seeks creative response to hunger for Bible

VATICAN CITY - The working document for this fall's Synod of Bishops on the Bible called for a creative pastoral response to a growing hunger among Catholics for the word of God.

The document said the synod should help find ways for Catholics to better understand Scripture and relate it to their everyday lives, including works of justice and charity.

It strongly rejected a fundamentalist approach to the Bible and said a key challenge is to clarify for the faithful the relation of Scripture to science.

The text encouraged the trend among Catholics toward daily Scripture reading. But it said Sunday Mass is where most people encounter Scripture, and it called for better coordination of readings and homilies to underline scriptural content.

The 86-page document, called an "instrumentum laboris," was released at the Vatican June 12. It will serve as a discussion guideline for the Oct. 5-26 synod, which treats the theme: "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church."

Pope Benedict XVI chose the Bible as the topic for the synod, and the working document quotes the pope several times on the importance of Scripture in the life of the faith.

The overall goals of the synod, it said, are to promote greater access to Scripture and a better understanding of it among Catholics. The Bible should not be read casually, it said, but at the same time Scripture must be presented to the faithful in an understandable language.

It pointed to several signs of a renewed interest in Scripture, but said many Catholics don't have the tools needed to understand its passages, especially those of

the Old Testament.

The document, based on responses to a questionnaire sent out to dioceses last year, listed a number of shared expectations for the synod:

- Scripture must be given a higher priority in the church.
- Catholics need to understand that the Bible should always be read with Jesus in mind.
- Urgent attention to Catholics' lack of knowledge and confusion about the truths of the faith concerning Scripture.
- A focus on improved formation for pastors in proclaiming the word of God.
- Promoting a more active role for laity in proclaiming the word of God.
- Better understanding of Scripture as part of the church's mission in spreading "the good news of liberation, consolation and salvation."
- More emphasis on "putting the word of God into practice" in local settings.
- Use of Scripture in improving dialogue with other religions, in particular highlighting Christianity's special bond with the Jewish people.

The document said the synod's theme is timely and that "the need for a pastoral program continually based on the Bible has never been greater."

It cited the rise of Catholic Bible study groups and the growing practice of "lectio divina," or daily Scripture reading, as a sign of the "intense desire to hear the word of God."

But there are obstacles, it said.

"On the personal level, too many of the faithful are reluctant to open the Bible for various reasons, especially because they feel it might be too difficult to understand," it said.

In addition, there seems to be a separation between Catholic biblical scholars and

local church communities, it said.

Bible usage appears to be highest in places where Christianity was more recently established and where Christians are a minority. In the latter case, use of the Bible “is increasingly causing uneasy confrontations” with non-Christians, it said.

The document said many responses to the questionnaire raised the issue of how to best explain to Catholics the “truth” of the Bible. It said the church has to make clear that God inspired the Bible without literally writing it and that these texts require interpretation.

“In fact, inspiration is different from dictation; it leaves the freedom and personal capacity of the writer intact, while enlightening and inspiring both,” it said.

In contrast, it said, fundamentalism “takes refuge in literalism and refuses to take into consideration the historical dimension of biblical revelation.”

This kind of mistaken interpretation, it said, “is winning more and more adherents, even among Catholics.”

“It demands an unshakable adherence to rigid doctrinal points of view and imposes, as the only source of teaching for Christian life and salvation, a reading of the Bible which rejects all questioning and any kind of critical research,” it said.

In the extreme form of sects, it said, fundamentalism isolates Scripture from the “life-giving action of the Spirit.” The sect atrophies, becomes closed and behaves aggressively to those who think differently, it said.

The document said Scripture can and should be a source of dialogue – especially between Christians and Jews, who share many books of the Old Testament. It called for new efforts to eliminate anti-Semitism, citing the Second Vatican Council’s teaching that Jews should not be presented as a people “rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from holy Scriptures.”

Scripture can favor dialogue with Muslims, who venerate Jesus as a prophet and honor Mary, the document said. It can also be a bridge to other religions, it said.

“The Bible is not exclusively for Christians; it is a treasure for all humanity. Through fraternal and personal contact, it can become the source of inspiration for those who do not believe in Christ,” it said.

The document said Catholic preaching should do a better job of enlightening the faithful about Scripture.

“The faithful’s hunger for the word of God is not always receiving an adequate response in the preaching of the church’s pastors, because of a deficiency in seminary preparation or pastoral practice,” it said.

Archbishop Nikola Eterovic, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, said at a press conference to present the working document that the Bible was the most widely translated and distributed book in the world, “but unfortunately, it is not read much.”

He cited a recent poll in Italy, which showed that only 38 percent of Italians had read a passage from the Bible in the last year. This has the potential to lead to a scriptural “illiteracy” even in traditionally Catholic countries, he said.

The archbishop said the way to keep Scripture alive in modern culture is to bring it closer to individual Catholics and make it more personally relevant.

Archbishop Eterovic said Chinese bishops have once again been invited to the synod, and “we are hoping and praying” that they attend. Chinese bishops were not allowed to travel to Rome for previous synods.

He also said an innovation introduced by Pope Benedict at the 2005 synod on the Eucharist would be maintained at this fall’s assembly: a one-hour period of free discussion at the end of each day.

The working document in English is posted on the Vatican Web site at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20080511_instr-labor-xii-assembly_en.html.