

## INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

This is the effort to ascertain the meaning of the Bible intended by its divine and human authors. The Document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC), *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), states the three levels of meaning or senses of the inspired Biblical texts. Understanding of these three senses should be the work of exegetical endeavor that always aims at explaining the texts of the Bible. The three senses of the Bible according to the PBC are the literal, spiritual and the fuller senses.

The *Literal sense* seeks to define the precise meaning of texts as produced by the human authors, but not necessarily in a literal way. In doing this, it is not limited to the exact translation of the original text into one's language, but it entails an effort to understand what the inspired authors *wanted to communicate* to their contemporaries. Hence, to get to the literal sense of the Bible, it is important to have a good knowledge of the use of words, expressions, metaphors, and other figures of speech employed at the time of the writers. In the words of the PBC, "the literal sense of Scripture is that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors. Since it is the fruit of inspiration, this sense is also intended by God, as Principal author." One arrives at this sense by a careful analysis of the text within its literal and historical contexts. Knowledge of the original Biblical languages is indispensable. Dei Verbum adds that we "must search for what meaning the sacred writer, in his own historical situation and in accordance with the condition of his time and culture, intended to express and did in fact express with the help of literary forms that were in use during that time...and the customs that people of that time generally followed in their dealings with one another" (DV n.12).

The *Spiritual sense*, which is another level of meaning of the inspired text, is that sense that the sacred text has when read in the light of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ and the present circumstances of life in the Spirit. According to the PBC, the Spiritual sense of the Bible is that meaning expressed by the Biblical texts when read under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the Paschal Mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it. The promise of perpetuity of Davidic dynasty in 2 Sam 7,12-13 has its spiritual sense in Jesus who is the Son of David and the eternal king.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church delineates three spiritual senses as follows: allegorical, moral or tropological, and anagogical (CCC 117-19). The allegorical sense reveals the mystery of Christ and the New Covenant foreshadowed in the historical realities and institutions of the Old Covenant. We do this by reading the OT in the light of the NT, with the mind that everything finds fulfillment in Jesus Christ. For instance, the Trinity, the Church, Mary, the sacraments. This promotes the virtue of faith. The moral sense reveals the pattern of Christian living foreshadowed in the OT and exemplified in the lives of Jesus and his disciples in the NT. Thus, Bible encourages virtues and discourages vice through commandment and laws and examining the experiences of saints and sinners. This promotes the virtue of charity. Analogical deals with the heavenly and eschatological realities that await us beyond this life. Biblical history becomes the greater realities of heaven for which we strive, and this promote the virtue of hope.

The constituent texts of the Bible are sacred because God is the Principal Author. The human authors in their limitations, especially the limitation of their instrument of communication, that is, the language, do not always convey in depth that meaning intended by God. This meaning intended by God and which the limited human language does not clearly express is the "*Fuller Sense*" (*sensus plenior*) of the Bible. However, we can penetrate this fuller sense when we study the texts which utilize it or in its relationship with the internal development of revelation.

A Biblical text, particularly the NT, can make use of another thereby revealing its fuller meaning. A good example is Matt 1:23 which cites Isa 7:14. The prophet speaks of the *almah* "a young woman" who would conceive and give birth to a child. The fuller meaning of this text is seen in Matthew who uses the Greek word *parthenos* "a virgin." Both texts contain literal meaning but the fuller meaning of the first is seen in the second. Sometimes, the fuller meaning can be revealed in an authentic doctrinal tradition. The definition of the Original Sin during the fifth session of the Council of Trent (1546), for instance, gives the fuller meaning of Paul's teaching in Rom 5:12-21 on the consequences of the sin of Adam for humanity. The next entry will be looking at how the Sacred Tradition interacts with the Sacred Scripture, since the Bible is not only deposit of our Christian faith. This is important to engage the idea of 'sola scriptura.' (Scripture alone and nothing else).