



# The Holy See

---

## **ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II**

### **TO MEMBERS OF THE PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION** 26 April 1979 *Lord Cardinal, Monsignor*

*Secretary, my dear friends,* Five years ago, my venerated predecessor Pope Paul VI wished to address to you his encouragement on the occasion of the first plenary session you held after he had given you new norms of organization in the Motu proprio "Sedula cura". It is also a very special joy for me to receive you in my turn today on the occasion of the first meeting of this new five-year period, and to greet particularly your new members. This is not the moment to dwell on your responsibility to God and the Church; you are well aware of it. In fact, in spite of the growing technicality and complexity of biblical studies, their purpose always remains to open to the Christian people the springs of living water contained in the Scriptures, and the subject which you are studying this year, dealing with the cultural integration of revelation, gives a new testimony of this. The subject you are dealing with is of great importance; it concerns, in fact, the very methodology of biblical revelation in its realization. The term "acculturation", or "inculturation" may well be a neologism, but it expresses very well one of the elements of the great mystery of the Incarnation. As we know, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14); thus, on seeing Jesus Christ, "the carpenter's son" (Mt 13:55), we can contemplate God's own glory (cf. Jn 1:14). Well, the same divine Word had previously become human language, assuming the ways of expression of the different cultures which, from Abraham to the seer of the Apocalypse, offered the adorable mystery of God's salvific love the possibility of becoming accessible and understandable for successive generations, in spite of the multiple diversity of their historical situations. Thus, "in many and various ways" (Heb 1:1), God was in contact with men and, in his benevolent and immense condescension, he dialogued with them through the prophets, the apostles, sacred writers, and above all through the Son of Man. God always communicated his marvels using the language and experience of men. The Mesopotamian cultures, those of Egypt, Canaan, Persia, the Hellenic culture and, for the New Testament, Greco-Roman culture and that of late Judaism, served, day after day, for the revelation of his ineffable mystery of salvation, as your present plenary Session clearly shows. These considerations, however, as you know, bring up the problem of the historical formation of the language of the Bible, which is connected in some way with the changes that took place during the long succession of centuries in the course of which the written word gave birth to the sacred Books. But it is precisely here that there is asserted the paradox of the revealed proclamation and of the more specifically Christian proclamation according to which persons and events that are historically contingent become bearers of a transcendent and absolute message. The clay vessels may break, but the treasure they contain remains complete and incorruptible (cf. 2 Cor 4:7). Just as the redeeming power of God unfolded itself in the weakness of Jesus of Nazareth and his Cross (cf. 2 Cor 13:4), so there is revealed in the fragility of the human word an unsuspected effectiveness which makes it "sharper than any two edged sword" (Heb 4:12). That is why we receive from the first Christian generations the whole of the Canon of Holy Scripture, which has become the point of reference and the norm of the faith and the life of the Church of all times. It falls, of course, to biblical science and to its

hermeneutical methods to establish the distinction between what is obsolete and what must always keep its value. But that is an operation which calls for extremely keen sensitivity, not only on the scientific and theoretical plane, but also and above all on the plane of the Church and of life. Two consequences are derived from all that, which are at once different and complementary. The first concerns the great value of cultures. If the latter, in biblical history, have already been judged capable of being the vehicles of the Word of God, it is because there is inserted in them something very positive, which is already a presence in germ of the divine Logos. Likewise, today, the proclamation of the Church is not afraid of using contemporary cultural expressions: thus they are called, so to speak, through a certain analogy with the humanity of Christ, to participate in the dignity of the divine Word itself. It must be added secondly, however, that there is manifested in this way the purely instrumental character of cultures, which, under the influence of a very marked historical evolution, are subjected to deep changes: "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever" (Is 40:8). To state the relations that exist between the variations of culture and the constant of revelation is precisely the task, a difficult but exalting one, of biblical studies as of the whole life of the Church. In this task you have certainly, beloved Brothers and sons of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, a preponderant part, and you are closely associated with the Magisterium of the Church. That leads me to call your attention particularly to one point. The *Motu proprio* "Sedula cura" specifies, when it deals with the purpose of your Commission, that it must bring the contribution of its work to the Magisterium of the Church. It is my very special wish that your work may be the opportunity to show how the most precise, the most technical research does not remain enclosed within itself, but can be useful for the organs of the Holy See which have to cope with the very difficult problems of evangelization, that is, with the concrete conditions of the integration of the evangelical ferment in new mentalities and cultures. In this perspective, the fundamental obligation of faithfulness to the Magisterium takes on its whole amplitude. "God entrusted Holy Scripture to his Church and not to the private judgment of specialists" (cf. *Motu proprio* "Sedula cura", par. 3). It is a question, in fact, of faithfulness to the spiritual function given by Christ to his Church; it is a question of faithfulness to the mission. Exegetes are among the first servants of the Word of God. I am certain, my dear friends, that your example will manifest eminently the union of the scientific competence that you are recognized by your peers as having and of the sharpened spiritual sense which makes one see in the Scriptures the Word of God entrusted to his Church. May the Lord himself guide your efforts; may the Spirit enlighten you! As for me, telling you of my trust, and of how much the Church relies on you, I willingly give you the Apostolic Blessing. © Copyright 1979 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana