INCULTURATION AND
BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION
The Role of Scripture Professors*

Maria Anicia B. Co, R. V.M.

I feel encouraged and hopeful that a meeting of Catholic Bible professors is taking place here in our country. When I saw the list of Filipinos trained in exegesis, I was impressed. Some of us know each other, others we know only by name. I am happy for this opportunity to meet with other Bible professors and establish a sense of solidarity and fellowship in the service of the Word of God. Many of us, I guess and I hope, are still happily engaged in teaching Scriptures. Some might no longer be teaching because of other responsibilities equally important in the Church or in their particular congregations. Among us is a good number of non-Filipinos whose involvement in the teaching of Scriptures is really laudable. They have stood the test of time and, seasoned as they are, they reflect a wonderful enthusiasm in teaching and communicating the biblical message to different groups of people, in seminaries, schools of theology, houses of formation and other areas.

After completing our Scripture studies, it might have been clear to us what we hoped to be and to accomplish as professors of Scripture. We might have already formulated our vision and mission from the beginning of our ministry. It is possible, however, that we started our ministry without a clear direction. Perhaps it is only through years of faithful ministry that we have gained greater clarity and insight into our role in the Church.

The Role of Bible Professors in the Church

The recent document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC), “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” offers its vision of a Catholic exegete. Based on the principal guidelines stated in this document, a Catholic exegete is one who

- is trained in the historical-critical method;
- knows the various hermeneutical perspectives to help others grasp the meaning of the biblical message for contemporary times;
- can explain the christological, canonical and ecclesial meanings of the biblical texts;
- can explain the relation of the Bible and the Church;
- is respectful of and open to dialogue with other religions; and
- is sensitive to the hopes and fears of the world today.

In effect, the image of a Catholic exegete being proposed is one who is not only proficient and competent in his or her field but also theologically informed, rooted in an ecclesial community, open to dialogue with contemporary culture and people of other faiths.

The PBC document makes this interesting statement:

The exegetical task is far too large to be successfully pursued by individual scholars working alone. It calls for a division of labor, especially in research, which demands specialists in different fields.

A Bible association that we hope to establish is meant to help individual scholars to pursue the exegetical task, not alone but in collaboration with others, especially in responding to the challenges of inculturation and biblical interpretation.
The Contribution Of Bible Professors to Inculturation and Biblical Interpretation

I remember an almost-cynical remark of a Scripture professor who, having taught for thirty years, wondered if any of his student-seminarians ever learned to appreciate the Scripture or at least preach good homilies. For my part, I had an experience of teaching a group of Christian Living teachers who had not gone beyond their catechetical knowledge of the biblical story of creation. Change, indeed, comes very slowly. Transformation is a process that respects its own time. What can be expected of Bible professors in the area of inculturation?

We understand inculturation as the

...intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures.2

Inculturation is the

...deep and mutually enriching encounter between the Gospel and a people with its particular culture and tradition. Inculturation consists not only in the expression of the Gospel and the Christian faith through the cultural medium but includes, as well, experiencing, understanding and appropriating the Gospel through the cultural resources of a people.3

John Paul II says that:

Inculturation must involve the whole people of God, and not just a few experts, since the people reflect the authentic sensus fidei which must never be lost sight of.4

If the Christian community is the starting point, locus and agent of inculturation,5 then this community must be capable of interpreting the Bible in the light of its own particular situation. For this to be done, the community needs to have, on the one hand, a critical understanding of its identity and mission as a faith-community, of the different aspects of its situation or context, as well as present issues
and concerns. On the other hand, the community has to recognize the Bible as a legacy bequeathed to us by our ancestors in the faith and the earliest Christian communities. We need a balance of contextualized and existentialist approaches, on the one hand, and historical-critical exegesis on the other. Our responsibility as Bible professors is to train ourselves and others as mediators and facilitators of inculturation. How do we do this? Principally, in our present area of ministry; secondly, in an engaged task of inculturating the Bible in the Filipino culture, language and context. The process of inculturation can happen whenever we teach in the classrooms and conduct Bible seminars to different groups. What we need is to define and consciously undertake the process of inculturating the biblical message. In this regard, the Bible association can be a venue for dialogue and discussion on the processes and tools of inculturation.

As Bible professors, we can prepare our students to become agents of inculturation by helping them learn the tools of exegesis and hermeneutics. The fruit of Scripture study should be the “empowering of students to do their own interpreting out of their own social location and concerns and to do it responsibly.” In the words of the PBC document, it means educating our students to have a profound appreciation of Scripture, manifested in attentive and objective study, that will allow a better appreciation of its literary, historical, social and theological value and helping them to be in the position to exercise their own personal judgments.

We are very much aware that, at present, we are not only confronted with a plurality of approaches to biblical interpretation but we are also facing innumerable challenges in our society. As Bible professors, we also need to be ethically responsible in our interpretation. It is also our responsibility to make our students aware of the problems involved in reading biblical texts that discriminate against women and how certain readings may reinforce oppression rather than encourage the struggle for liberation.

A venue for dialogue, discussion and cooperation among Bible professors is scholarly publications. For the fruits of exegetical studies to be dispersed widely among our people, there is a need for popular
publications. We can produce books, articles or pamphlets that can easily be understood by and meaningful to a great number of our people. We can also serve as consultants or advisers to groups or centers involved in publishing catechetical materials. The Bible association, hopefully, can be the link between Bible professors and these groups or centers.

As a group of well-prepared persons committed to research in the various fields of exegetical study, we can enhance our contribution to the service of the Church by bonding together rather than working alone as islands in a vast sea of challenges.

Notes


4Redemptoris Missio, 54.


7Dewey, 91.