



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
DURING THE 14th GENERAL CONGREGATION
OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS**

Synod Hall

Tuesday, 14 October 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Working on my book on Jesus has provided ample occasion to see what good can come from modern exegesis, but also for recognizing the problems and risks. *Dei Verbum*, n. 12 offers two methodological guidelines for suitable exegetical work. Firstly, it confirms the necessity of using the historical-critical method, of which it briefly describes the essential elements. This necessity is the result of the Christian principle formulated in Jn 1: 14, "*Verbum caro factum est*". Historical fact is a constituent dimension of the Christian faith. The history of salvation is not mythology but rather true history, and is therefore to be studied alongside serious historical research methods.

Nevertheless, this history has another dimension, that of divine action. *Dei Verbum*, consequentially, speaks of a second methodological level necessary for the correct interpretation of the words that are simultaneously human words and the divine Word. The Council says, according to a fundamental rule of interpretation for literary text, that Scripture is to be interpreted in the same spirit in which it was written. There are therefore three fundamental methodological elements that contribute to taking proper account of the divine, pneumatological dimension of the Bible. One must 1) interpret the text taking into consideration the unity of all of Scripture. Today this is called canonical exegesis; at the time of the Council this term did not yet exist, but the Council expressed the same thing: it is necessary to take into account the unity of the entirety of Scripture; 2) one must also take into account the living tradition of the entire Church; and finally 3) it is necessary to observe the analogy of faith. Only where the two methodological levels, both historical-critical and theological, are observed can one speak of theological exegesis of an exegesis adequate to this Book. While at the first level, academic exegetical work is currently being done to an extremely high standard and provides us real help, the same cannot be said of

the other level. Often this second level, the level consisting of the three theological elements mentioned in *Dei Verbum*, appear almost absent. And this has rather grave consequences.

The first consequence of the absence of this second methodological level is that the Bible becomes solely a history book. Moral consequences can be drawn from it, history can be learned from it, but the Book as such speaks of history alone and exegesis is no longer truly theological but instead becomes purely historiographical, literary history. This is the first consequence: the Bible remains in the past, speaks only of the past. The second consequence is even graver: where the hermeneutics of faith explained in *Dei Verbum* disappear, another type of hermeneutics will appear by necessity a hermeneutics that is secularist, positivist, the key fundamental of which is the conviction that the Divine does not appear in human history. According to this hermeneutics, when there seems to be a divine element, the source of that impression must be explained, thus reducing everything to the human element. As a result, it is the grounds for interpretations that deny the historicity of divine elements. Today the exegetical "mainstream" in Germany, for example, denies that the Lord instituted the Holy Eucharist and says that Jesus' corpse remained in the tomb. The Resurrection in this view would not have been a historical event but a theological view. This happens because the hermeneutics of faith is missing: profane philosophical hermeneutics is affirmed instead, which deny the possibility of the entrance and presence of the Divine in history. The result of the absence of the second methodological level is what has created a profound fissure between scientific exegesis and *Lectio divina*. From precisely this point there sometimes also arises a sort of perplexity in regard to the preparation of homilies. When exegesis is not theological, Scripture cannot be the soul of theology, and vice versa; when theology is not essentially Scriptural interpretation within the Church, then this theology no longer has a foundation.

Therefore for the life and mission of the Church, for the future of faith, it is absolutely necessary to overcome this dualism between exegesis and theology. Biblical theology and systematic theology are two dimensions of one reality, which we call theology. Thus it seems desirable to me that one of the *propositions* treats of the necessity of keeping in mind within exegesis the two methodological levels mentioned in *Dei Verbum*, n. 12, where it speaks of the need to develop not only a historical but also a theological exegesis. It will therefore be crucial to expand formation of future exegetes in this sense, so as to truly open the treasures of Scripture to today's world and to all of us.