

Summary Report of an Ad Hoc Committee of the Catholic Biblical Association of America on Catholic Bible Study Programs

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I. Brief History of the Committee, 2007-2009

At the annual Catholic Biblical Association of America (CBA) meeting in August, 2007 some members of the Association voiced concerns to the General Secretary, Joseph Jensen, O.S.B., about the quality of some Bible study programs that proclaimed themselves “Catholic” and yet seemingly fostered approaches that were more fundamentalist in tone. Another concern was that some programs with perceived problems had strong backing from certain members of the U.S. Catholic hierarchy who, perhaps unwittingly, endorsed these programs as reliable, orthodox, and in conformity to Catholic teaching. In light of this situation, the CBA asked a small cadre of five members to study the question further and to offer a report to the Executive Committee of the CBA. Members of the Committee were: Richard Bautch, Charles Bobertz, Regina Boisclair, Pauline Viviano, and Ronald Witherup. Over a two and a half year period, the Committee accomplished its task and eventually submitted a confidential report to the Executive Committee of the CBA in December 2009.

At the annual meeting in August, 2011, the Executive Committee made a decision to share some of the results of this study by publishing a short report on the CBA website, which was in the process of a total redesign. The following information on the method and criteria used by the Ad Hoc Committee is offered as an aid to others in choosing good quality Catholic Bible study programs.

II. Method and Criteria

Many criteria were found to be useful and pastorally helpful, but sometimes they were deemed to be too subjective. After various drafts and an examination of different kinds of criteria, the following ten principles were adopted by the Ad Hoc Committee as offering the most objective and useful criteria to use when judging the “Catholic” quality of Bible study programs.

Catholic Bible study programs should:

- 1) Be in conformity to major Catholic documents on Scripture, especially *Dei Verbum* (1965), the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2d ed., 1997), the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (2010), and the Pontifical Biblical Commission instructions *On the Historical Truth of the Gospels* (1964), *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2002), and *The Bible and Morality* (2008);
- 2) Be factually accurate;

- 3) Be open to multiple methods of biblical studies and a judicious application of them, including the historical critical methods and patristic interpretations;
- 4) Quote biblical passages or explain them in their context in the Bible;
- 5) Not contradict Catholic doctrine concerning the Bible, its origin and its interpretation;
- 6) Make no claim to be the sole Catholic approach to the Bible;
- 7) Make no claim for a single understanding or theory of biblical inspiration;
- 8) Make no definitive judgments about matters that the Church leaves open-ended (e.g., date and authorship of biblical books);
- 9) Avoid fundamentalist interpretations or improper literal or fanciful interpretations;
- 10) Avoid definitive translations or interpretations of specific passages of the Bible except in the rare instances when the Church has declared a given interpretation as the correct one or has proscribed specific interpretations (e.g., Mark 3:32 on the brothers and sisters of Jesus).

The Ad Hoc Committee was conscious of other criteria that could be used, such as the following:

- up-to-date scholarship;
- application to personal and family life;
- use of inclusive language;
- practical advice on praying the scriptures;
- practical training for group leaders;
- use of discussion questions.

Many of these, among other criteria, have been assembled in a book published in 1994 that evaluated a large number of programs on the basis of such criteria.¹ However, the Committee felt that many of these went beyond the Committee's capacity for evaluation and, to some degree, tended toward a subjective analysis or an evaluation better suited to catechetical experts. Thus, the Committee retained its ten criteria as the standards for evaluation of the "Catholic" quality of Bible study programs.

III. Conclusion

The Committee found that all the programs examined have strengths and weaknesses, and their style or method of Bible study will appeal to different people in diverse ways. There are valid choices that can be made from among the available resources, depending on what might serve a specific parish or group the best. In the end, however, some programs fell short of what the Committee felt was the ideal for a truly Catholic biblical study.

Of utmost importance was the question of methodology. Some "Catholic" Bible study programs seem to call into question the ongoing usefulness or validity of the historical-critical or scientific method(s), which have been used to great effect since the era of Pope Pius XII and his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943). In fact, in Catholic teaching, no one method is considered *the* Catholic method, but one cannot ignore historical-critical study.²

This has also been a hallmark of the teaching of Pope Benedict XVI on biblical studies. He has regularly affirmed that although historical-critical methods are a first step in biblical interpretation, one must move beyond them in order to arrive at the broader truth behind the

biblical teaching. A contemporary Catholic approach to biblical study is expected to avoid a fundamentalist approach,³ which is the one approach singled out by the Pontifical Biblical Commission as seriously flawed. When choosing a Bible program, Catholics should pay close attention to whether the historical-critical method, in accordance with Catholic teaching, is recognized as “indispensable” and is properly integrated into other approaches, something not all programs do equally well.⁴

In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini* (2010), Pope Benedict underlines the ongoing significance of the historical-critical method(s), quoting in part a section of the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1993 document on “Interpretation of the Bible in the Church”:

Before all else, we need to acknowledge the benefits that historical-critical exegesis and other recently-developed methods of textual analysis have brought to the life of the Church. For the Catholic understanding of sacred Scripture, attention to such methods is indispensable, linked as it is to the realism of the Incarnation.... “The historical fact is a constitutive dimension of the Christian faith. The history of salvation is not mythology, but a true history, and it should thus be studied with the methods of serious historical research.” The study of the Bible requires a knowledge of these methods of enquiry and their suitable application. (§32)

A few paragraphs later, using insights from the Fathers of the Synod, the Pope states clearly the need for methodological balance in Catholic biblical study:

The Synod Fathers rightly stated that the positive fruit yielded by the use of modern historical-critical research is undeniable. While today’s academic exegesis, including that of Catholic scholars, is highly competent in the field of historical-critical methodology and its latest developments, it must be said that comparable attention need to be paid to the theological dimension of the biblical texts.... (§34)

The Ad Hoc Committee believed this harmony of historical and theological concerns is what best characterizes Catholic exegesis and should be an identifying feature of solid Catholic Bible study programs.

The Executive Committee of the CBA hopes that this information will, in some measure, be helpful to Catholics who seek professional guidance on the choice of reliable Bible study programs. Until an entity exists, perhaps a combined resource of experts from biblical studies, catechetics, and the U.S. Bishops’ Conference who can give more explicit advice on this matter, the faithful or local parishes are left to their own best judgments on the choice of Bible study materials. One hopes the criteria proposed herein can assist with this task.

¹ See Macrina Scott, OSF, *Picking the “Right” Bible Study Program: Reviews of 150 Recommended Programs, With a listing of the top 15* (Chicago: ACTA Pub., 1994). Many of the favorite programs listed are individual segments or topics of full-blown Bible study programs rather than the whole programs themselves. The Committee restricted itself to whole programs rather than to individual segments.

² *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (§III.) [1993].

³ *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (§I.F.) [1993].

⁴ *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (§I.A.) [1993].