

*Alonso Cano; Christ and Two Followers  
on the Road to Emmaus (1635-50);*

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# LATINOS, THE BIBLE, AND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

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## INTRODUCTION

At the heart of the New Evangelization is presenting the *kerigma* or key Christian proclamation of the Gospel in a compelling way. Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, must be presented anew as Lord and Savior of all, to facilitate a personal relationship with Him and an act of faith in community that shapes, challenges and informs one's everyday life. Yet accompanying this straightforward proclamation is a whole theology about Revelation and the Word of God that the New Evangelization presupposes and on which it relies. That teaching on divine Revelation and Sacred Scripture is one of the most important contributions of the Second Vatican Council. The teaching of *Dei Verbum* has greatly influenced Catholics around the world, yet the full impact of its lessons remains to be appropriated by many, including the large Latino population in the United States that later in this century will account for half of its Catholic population.

In this article I reflect on the reception and non-reception of the teaching of *Dei Verbum* among Latinos and Latinas. I will explore the reception of the Council's teaching about the historical and theological nature of God's Revelation by examining the work of two theologians that touch upon a biblical spirituality: Carlos Mesters of Brazil and Justo González of the United States. Then I would like to consider some recent statistical

information about how Latinos in the U.S. see the Bible and incorporate it into their journeys of discipleship. Lastly, I would like to highlight some aspects of Pope Benedict XVI's teaching on the Word of God that may help those who minister to the Latino community in the United States to appropriate more fully the insights of the Council about Revelation and the Word of God.

## THE RECEPTION OF *DEI VERBUM* AMONG LATINOS

In Latin America, the teaching of the Council on Revelation as an encounter with the living God through the Scriptures was perhaps grasped and shared with the people of God like in no other place in the world thanks to the collaborative work of the bishops, theologians, and the members of the *comunidades eclesiales de base* (CEBs), or small Christian communities. And nowhere more than Brazil has the movement of the CEBs been more numerous and successful in trying to reflect on and live life in light of the Gospel. During the early 1960s and through the 1980s their growth, strongly supported by the Brazilian bishops' conference (CNBB), was unparalleled. By the 1990s the political scientist Scott Mainwaring estimated that there were some 100,000 CEBs in Brazil with 2,000,000 members. Their phenomenal growth, especially during the years of the military dictatorship in Brazil which banned political parties and unions (1964-1985), was in part related to the fact that they became one of the few free spaces available for the popular classes, especially women, to express their political opinions.

Despite the important political role that the CEBs played during the military dictatorship in Brazil, they remained religious entities. Guided by liberation theology, especially by the thought of Leonardo Boff who served as the theological consultant to the CEB office at the CNBB and frequent presenter at their national gatherings, the CEBs were faith communities that sought to bring everyday life in conversation with the Gospel, as well as become local foci of solidarity, Christian liturgical celebration, and action on behalf of justice and human rights. The biblical reflection carried out by these communities and guided by the hermeneutical method of Carmelite Father Carlos Mesters, S.T.D. deserves our attention, for it represents the best of an ongoing biblical ministry of the Latin American Church inspired by Vatican II. Mesters propagated his method for reading the Scriptures in the CEBs in Brazil and throughout the continent through the Center of Biblical Studies (CEBI) of São Leopoldo, Brazil, which he founded in 1979.

Mesters proposes reading the Scriptures following the tripartite method of Jesus which he finds in the Emmaus story (Lk 24:13-35). The first step is to start with reality. Just as Jesus met the downcast disciples on the road to Emmaus, drew close to them, and inquired about what was going on with them, so too with us. We begin by walking together with others and drawing near to the reality in which we live, especially its problems. We help them to take a new look at that reality by asking questions which help them look at it more critically. The second step imitates how Jesus used the Scriptures to illuminate the problems that made the disciples suffer. Jesus used the Scriptures to show the disciples that their history was not out of God's hands. This second step uses the Scriptures to illuminate reality and situate it within the design of God's plan. Jesus showed them how an instrument of torture and death, the Cross, had been transformed by God into a sign of life and hope. Therefore, what had become for the disciples an obstacle in their walk with and toward God became the principal force of their journey, a new light on the way. The third and final step involves opening the eyes of the disciples and setting their hearts on fire. This means

that the disciples are reborn: they themselves experience being raised from the death caused by their fears and doubts, and they return to Jerusalem from where they were fleeing. The Bible itself did not produce such an experience of hope and resurrection, but rather its reading and interpretation in a welcoming community of prayer where bread is blessed, broken, and shared. This third step of Mesters' method involves creating an environment of faith, solidarity, and sharing where the Holy Spirit can work and help us understand Jesus' message and produce in us an experience of resurrection and new life (Jn 14:26, 16:13).

In the United States too, Latinos and Latinas have drawn closer the Word of God in the wake of Vatican II. Justo González, Ph.D., a Cuban-American, Methodist theologian, and pioneer in theological education among Hispanics in the U.S., who with Father Virgilio Elizondo, S.T.D. is widely recognized as one of the founding figures of U.S. Latino Theology, has written about what he calls reading the Bible with Hispanic eyes. Reading the Bible with Hispanic eyes is being aware of one's Hispanic identity and bringing it to the work of biblical interpretation. It also presupposes a commitment to the Latino struggle of salvation and liberation. González questions whether Hispanics are fundamentalists. He prefers to call them pre-critical and naive, and distinguishes this reading of the Bible from a fundamentalist or historical-critical perspective, which focuses on information, versus a study of the Bible for the life lessons it has to offer.

González identifies five paradigms and perspectives that recur frequently in a reading of Scripture with Hispanic eyes in his book *Santa Biblia: Reading the Bible through Hispanic Eyes* (1996): marginality, poverty, *mestizaje*, exile, and solidarity. Many Latinos and Latinas have a keen awareness of being outsiders, whether it be Protestant Latinos and Latinas who see themselves as outsiders in a culturally Catholic Latin America or in Anglo-Protestant communities in the U.S. The same

could be said of many U.S. Latino Catholics who do not feel at home in the U.S. Church. For many of them the Bible is a source of strength and an explanation of the pain that this situation produces. They find it easy to identify with biblical characters on the margins. This allows us to see things unnoticed by others. It helps us to understand why those in the center have a hard time "being evangelistic."

Hermeneutics, or the science of interpretation, has taught us that what one finds in the Bible depends on one's perspectives. Liberation theology has taught us to ask: what is it that the poor find in the Bible that is important for the entire Church? The mixed-race status of many Latin Americans which in some societies is seen as undesirable or impure, has thanks to the work of Mexican José Vasconcelos (*La Raza Cósmica*, 1925) and Virgilio Elizondo (*Galilean Journey*, 1983) come to be seen as something new, positive, and a godsend that ties us to Jesus the Galilean, a mestizo. It is a break with a perspective of ethnic and cultural purity and superiority. Among some second generation Hispanics, this manifests itself as an ambivalence to belonging and not belonging to both Hispanic and U.S. cultures.

The legal status of many U.S. Latinos as exiles and aliens easily helps us identify with the Babylonian exile of the Hebrews. We are in a land not our own and must find a way to survive here. It involves leaving behind one's center for a periphery. Often our new center is responsible for the decay of our old center. This breeds a certain ambiguity about our new center for fear of losing our identity, and resentment about having left our old center behind and finding ourselves on the periphery. There is a danger here of not seeing ourselves as participants and contributors to the new center. Yet more often than not, our key for understanding redemption is a sense of community and extended family which provides among other things a wide variety of role models for being male and female.

## SOME CONTEMPORARY LATINO VIEWS ON THE BIBLE

Important as the work of Carlos Mesters, Justo González and others has been in fomenting a popular reading of the Bible among many Latinos and Latinas in Latin America and the United States, challenges remain for a thriving biblical spirituality among Latinos and Latinas. A recent study commissioned by the American Bible Society among other organizations, and done by the Barna Group of Ventura, California, highlights current religious attitudes of U.S. Latinos toward the Bible and points to some areas that a *pastoral bíblica* or Bible-focused ministry needs to address in the future. What follows is a paraphrase from the executive summary of some of the more interesting findings of the Barna study, *Hispanic America: Faith, Values, and Priorities* (2012).

Hispanics tend to have theologically conservative views of the Bible. More than half believe that it is the actual Word of God, and only 10% would characterize it as just another book of teaching. Unfortunately, Hispanics as a rule do not read the Bible very often. While about 20% of Hispanics read the Bible more than once per week, twice that many (42%) read it less than once per year. However, of those who read it, about half spend a lot of time thinking about how it applies to them. Yet some 25% say that they find the Bible hard to read because they either don't understand its background or can't relate to its language. For those who read the Bible frequently, it has moderate impact on family issues, and some influence on education and sexuality, and little influence on work, money, and media. 55% said the Bible had little or no influence on the decisions they made at work, while 71% said it had a lot or some influence on their marriage. 68% said the same about their decisions as parents, while 43% said it had no influence on their financial decisions. 38% said the Bible did not influence their educational decisions, and 46% said it had no influence on the choice of movies or television they watch. 49% said it had a lot or some influence on their sexuality, and 42% said it had a lot or some influence on their views of political and social issues.

The most popular answer for how they make everyday choices is to do what feels comfortable in the situation. Women and Roman Catholics are more likely to hold this view than other demographics. The second most popular answer is to follow specific principles. Protestants are more likely than the other faith denominations to hold this view. And when asked where those values come from, only 28% said the Bible, followed by values instilled by their parents. Evangelicals and Charismatic Catholics are more likely to cite the Bible, while Roman Catholics are more likely to cite their parents. The third most popular answer is to do what makes others happy. Charismatic Catholics and Mainline Protestants are more likely than other religious denominations to hold this view.

As I reflect on the Barna study, I think that one of the challenges that faces ministers to Latinos and Latinas in the U.S. is how to help them see the Word of God as a source of guidance and inspiration for their decisions about work, school, finances, and the way they recreate with social communications media. While biblical spirituality informs other aspects of their lives such as raising a family, sexuality, and political and social issues, that biblical spirituality has failed to find rich soil where it can lay down roots with regard to many other aspects of Latinos' lives both outside and inside the home, but especially *ad extra* in the world outside the home.

## BENEDICT XVI AND BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY

One of the chief concerns of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's pontificate was revisiting the importance of the Word of God and Vatican II's teaching on it, and divine Revelation for the faithful today. On various occasions, Benedict XVI expressed the opinion that *Dei Verbum* was not only one of the three most important documents of the Council (along with *Lumen Gentium* and *Sacrosanctum Concilium*), offering the hermeneutical keys for understanding its program, but that it was also the least assimilated of the conciliar documents.

For Benedict XVI, the Word of God has a unique nature. The Word of God is powerful and abiding. It reflects the Word made flesh and calls those who read it in faith to be informed about sublime truths unattainable by human reason and transformed by its law of love for God and neighbor. The Scriptures are essentially a dialogue between human beings and God. Holy Writ is born of human beings in community, the Church; therefore, its riches should be unveiled by historical and literary hermeneutical methods such as historical-critical exegesis. But the Scriptures are inspired of God by the Holy Spirit, and in their wholeness they give a trustworthy testimony to God in Christ. To forget this and neglect the employment of other forms of hermeneutics, especially canonical exegesis and interpretation illumined by the liturgical and theological traditions of the Church, would be to miss out on the layers of meaning that the Scriptures have to offer, in particular for homiletics. Furthermore, a common reading of the Scriptures and the traditions of the churches and ecclesial communities also provides a way forward in the search for Christian unity.

Pope Benedict XVI's apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010) gathered the insights and recommendations of the 2008 Synod of Bishops on the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church, as well as presented the most complete exposition of his theology of the Word of God. It is divided into three major parts that touch on the doctrinal and pastoral aspects of the Word of God, as well as its impact on the world outside of the Church. I would like to highlight three suggestions from *Verbum Domini* that I think can serve to complement *la pastoral biblica* in the United States in light of some of the challenges that the Barna survey identified. They are:

- *Lectio divina* as a biblical means of praying, encountering and befriending Jesus Christ more fully;
- Biblical formation focused on those passages of Scripture that confuse and perplex people; and
- A paradigm for more biblically-focused homilies and sermons.

## ENCOUNTERING JESUS CHRIST THROUGH BIBLICAL PRAYER

Benedict XVI never tired in underscoring a central teaching of Vatican II's *Dei Verbum*—that the fullness of God's Revelation is Jesus Christ. In *Verbum Domini*, he underscores that “the novelty of the Christian message does not consist in an idea but in a fact: God has revealed himself” (*VD*, §92). It is from this central insight that all other aspects of the biblical spirituality that he proposes flow, and indeed its practical suggestions are at its service. Principal among these practical suggestions is his call for the medieval practice of biblical meditation called *lectio divina*. Undergirding this spirituality is his notion that the Word of God is both informative and performative. For Benedict XVI, “the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing” (*Spe Salvi*, §2).

To facilitate a word-centered *metanoia* or conversion, Benedict XVI frequently extolled the medieval monastic contemplative prayer-form of *lectio divina*. He is convinced that the fundamental dialogical structure of Scripture could serve contemporary believers by recovering *lectio divina* as something both prayerful and dialogical. The aim of this *ressourcement* of the venerable form of scriptural prayer was to develop a biblical spirituality that moved beyond devotions. At the heart of this biblical spirituality is the belief that the Church is called to be a listening Church—listening to Sacred Scripture.

In *Verbum Domini*, Benedict XVI provided his most comprehensive description of what he understands *lectio divina* to be. He proposed a four-fold method for engaging in *lectio divina* that “is truly ‘capable of opening up to the faithful the treasures of God's word, but also of bringing about an encounter with Christ, the living word of God’” (*VD*, §87, citing the *Final Message* of the Synod, III, 9). It begins with the reading (*lectio*) of a text that tries to answer the question: *what does the biblical text say in itself?* Benedict XVI emphasizes that without this attention to the original meaning of the text, there is always a risk that the text will become a pretext for never moving beyond our

own ideas. Next comes meditation (*meditatio*), which asks: *what does the biblical text say to us?* For the former Holy Father, this is the moment where each person, as an individual but also as a member of the community, must let himself or herself be moved and challenged. The third moment is that of prayer (*oratio*), and it asks the question: *what do we say to the Lord in response to his Word?* Benedict XVI says that “prayer, as petition, intercession, thanksgiving and praise, is the primary way by which the word transforms us” (*VD*, §87). Finally, *lectio divina* concludes with contemplation (*contemplatio*), “during which we take up, as a gift from God, his own way of seeing and judging reality, and ask ourselves *what conversion of mind, heart and life is the Lord asking of us?*” (*VD*, §87).

The importance of *lectio divina* for Benedict XVI lies in the riches that contemplation offers for an adult faith or spirituality; namely, “creating within us a truly wise and discerning vision of reality, as God sees it, and at forming within us ‘the mind of Christ’” (*VD*, §87, citing 1 Cor 2:16). In this way, the Word of God appears as a criterion for discernment, and it becomes “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions

of the heart” (Heb 4:12). For the former Holy Father, *lectio divina* is not concluded “until it arrives at action (*actio*), which moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others in charity” (*VD*, §87).

*Verbum Domini* stresses the *ad extra* dimension of a Word-centered spirituality. Benedict XVI reminds us that there is an intrinsic link between communicating God’s Word and the quality of Christian witness to the world. Christian witness is what makes the Word credible “lest it appear merely as a beautiful philosophy or utopia, rather than a reality that can be lived and itself give life” (*VD*, §97). A Word-centered spirituality calls Christians to social engagement in the world, as well as preaching “a Word which disrupts, which calls to conversion and which opens the way to an encounter with the one through whom a new humanity flows” (*VD*, §93).

And with regard to this venerable form of biblical prayer, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger underscored in *The Spirit of the Liturgy* the importance of silence for the contemporary believer. He sees it as an essential condition of possibility to let the Lord in his word transform us (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 211). He returned to this theme on several occasions as Bishop of Rome, noting that the study of theology requires an education to silence and contemplation so that one is able to listen to God speaking in one’s heart. Quoting St. Ignatius of Antioch in an address at the beginning of the academic year of the Pontifical Roman Universities at St. Peter’s Basilica on October 23, 2006, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI observed that God’s Word “comes out of silence,” and only if our own words are born of silence and contemplation can they overcome “the inflated discourses of the world that seek the consensus of public opinion.... This ascesis is based on loving familiarity with the Word of God and, I would say even more so, on that ‘silence’ from which the Word originates in the dialogue of love between the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.”

Benedict XVI warns against an “individualistic approach” to *lectio divina* that undermines *communio* in the Church and forgets that the Word of God is given to build up community in the Church. To cultivate a *lectio divina* that is both personal and communal at the same time, Benedict XVI recommends prayerful reflection on the Word of God within the context of the liturgy, especially the celebration of the Eucharist and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. In this way, “what the Church celebrates when she proclaims the word in a liturgical setting” is accompanied and deepened by closely relating *lectio and liturgy* (*VD*, §86).

In the Mary, Mother of God, Benedict XVI sees the perfect fulfillment of this form of prayer. For she “is the model of docile acceptance of God’s word, for she ‘kept all these things, pondering them in her heart’ (Lk 2:19, 51); she discovered the profound bond which unites, in God’s great plan, apparently disparate events, actions and things” (*VD*, §87).



## THE DARK PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE

Additionally, Benedict XVI considers what he calls the “dark passages of the Bible,” which, “due to the violence and immorality they occasionally contain, prove obscure and difficult” (*VD*, §42). He reminds us of the progressive nature of God’s Revelation and plan, which is accomplished slowly and in stages, often with little cooperation from human beings. Indeed, sin may be understood as the disobedience that is the refusal to hear the Word of God, and breaking his covenant of closeness toward us. He cautions us about neglecting these difficult passages of Scripture, and recommends interpreting them “in their historical-literary context and within the Christian perspective which has as its ultimate hermeneutical key ‘the Gospel and the new commandment of Jesus Christ brought about in the paschal mystery’” (*VD*, §42, citing *Propositio 29* of the Synod).

In particular he focuses on the relationship between the Word of God and the Church, and on the importance of reading and interpreting the sacred text within the believing community in order to appreciate its richness fully. In an earlier work, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, Ratzinger states that Revelation (or God’s approach to human beings) is always greater than can be contained in human words and in the Scriptures. While Scripture is not simply identical to divine Revelation, it is, nonetheless, the essential witness to it. Revelation is alive and is something greater and more than Scripture because it “arrives” and is “perceived.” Revelation is not a thing but the living God, and it always requires a living person to whom it is communicated. The goal of Revelation is to gather and unite men, and for this reason, the Church is a necessary aspect of it.

If Revelation is more than Scripture, then the historical-critical method of exegesis cannot be the last word about its meaning. In his memoirs, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977*, Ratzinger wrote that “...the living organism of the faith of all ages is then an intrinsic part of revelation. And what we call ‘tradition’ is precisely that part of revelation that goes above and beyond Scripture and cannot be comprehended within a code of formulas” (127). While he has repeatedly extolled this scientific study of the Word of God, he has also recognized its limitations. In the first volume of his trilogy *Jesus of Nazareth*, Ratzinger summarized these limitations as presenting hypotheses about the past as if they were unquestionable facts, without attending to the question of inspiration or to the unity of Scripture. As a corrective to reductionistic exegetical methods, the former Holy Father has advocated canonical or theological exegesis.

Theological or canonical exegesis consists of reading individual texts of the Bible in the context of the whole. It is an approach championed in our own days by the Protestant exegetes, the late Brevard Childs of Yale University and Ed Parish Sanders of Queens College, Oxford and Duke Divinity School. However, Benedict XVI's approach is more Catholic and expansive than theirs, in that he also draws upon the living tradition of the Church, especially its liturgy, to understand the biblical text. Benedict XVI understands the Bible as a text of and for the Church, and so considers it legitimate practice, as did the Fathers of the Church in their exegesis, to draw upon the living faith of the Church to interpret the biblical text. Benedict XVI's approach stands in contrast with other hermeneutical or interpretative biblical approaches that question the usefulness of the Scriptures, documents of faith, to know the historical Jesus.

Perhaps the most disturbing Scripture passage that Benedict XVI alludes to in *Verbum Domini* is where God speaks by his silence, namely the Crucifixion. "The silence of God, the experience of distance of the Almighty Father, is a decisive stage in the earthly journey of the Son of God. . .[and] reflects the situation of all those who, having heard and acknowledged God's word, must also confront his silence" (*VD*, §21). A harrowing experience for many, not least of whom are God's friends, the saints, "God's silence prolongs his earlier words. In these moments of darkness, he speaks through the mystery of his silence. Hence, in the dynamic of Christian revelation, silence appears as an important expression of the word of God" (*VD*, §21).

## MORE BIBLICAL HOMILIES

The final point related to the Word of God and the New Evangelization from Pope Benedict XVI's teaching that I would like to highlight is his plea for more biblical homilies. Nowhere does the pastoral quality of his pontificate shine forth more clearly than in his carefully crafted homilies. Biblical, liturgical, scholarly, yet pastorally insightful, Benedict XVI's homilies reveal an affinity with his great intellectual mentor, St. Augustine of Hippo, who like so many other Patristic bishops, was a mystagogical preacher *par excellence*, reflecting on the Word of God in light of sacraments to feed the faith of the flock. Benedict XVI's preaching, then, provides those of us who prepare and hear homilies with a helpful model for understanding how the Word may be broken open in a thoughtful, creative, and challenging way that feeds the faith.

*Verbum Domini* contains some very practical suggestions about how to organize a homily so that the Word of God is central, and its message is communicated effectively to the faithful and related to their lives in the world of today (cf. §59). In a certain way, the three guiding questions proposed by the former Holy Father for all homilists also give us an insight into his own homily preparation and preaching style. He writes that the homily is a way of bringing the message of the Scriptural readings to life in such a way that those who hear it understand that God is active in their daily lives. "It should lead to an understanding of the mystery being celebrated, serve as a summons to mission, and prepare the assembly for the profession of faith, the universal prayer and the Eucharistic liturgy" (*VD*, §59). Generic and abstract homilies which veil the luminosity of God's Word should be avoided, as well as "useless digressions which risk drawing greater attention to the preacher than to the heart of the Gospel message.

The faithful should be able to perceive clearly that the preacher has a compelling desire to present Christ, who must stand at the center of every homily" (*VD*, §59). And to help preachers better realize their homiletic task, Benedict XVI suggests the following questions to focus their work:

What are the Scriptures being proclaimed saying? What do they say to me personally? What should I say to the community in the light of its concrete situation? The preacher "should be the first to hear the word of God which he proclaims", since, as Saint Augustine says: "He is undoubtedly barren who preaches outwardly the word of God without hearing it inwardly." (*VD*, §59, citing *Propositio 15* and *Sermo 179*, 1: PL 38, 966)

## CONCLUSION

The legacy of theologians and *pastoralistas* or pastoral agents, such as Carlos Mesters and Justo González, did much to foment a biblical spirituality among Latinos and Latinas and relate it to another important contribution of Vatican II: the baptismal mission of the laity to the world. Yet challenges remain for making the life-giving Word of God the engine of renewal for Jesus' disciples today. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's 2010 apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* offers us some interesting suggestions for addressing those challenges. Especially noteworthy are *lectio divina* as a biblical means of praying, encountering and befriending Jesus Christ more fully, biblical formation focused on those passages of Scripture that confuse and perplex people, and a paradigm for more biblically-focused homilies and sermons.



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