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Actualization of Sacred Scripture According to the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s Document “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” as a New Way to Refer the Word of God to Life

The purpose of the following article is to present the updating of Sacred Scripture discussed in the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*¹ as a new and hitherto insufficiently studied form of referring the Bible’s message to the lives of the contemporary faithful.

When we look into the four volumes of the *Bibliography of Polish Bible Studies* edited by Piotr Ostański, we learn that only three publications with the phrase “actualization” appeared between 1993, the year the document was published, and 2009. These include two articles, *Aktualizacja według Dokumentu Papieskiej Komisji Biblijnej „Interpretacja Biblii w Kościele”*²

¹ W artykule opieramy się na tłumaczeniu: Papieska Komisja Biblijna, *Interpretacja Biblii w Kościele*, tłum. R. Rubinkiewicz, [in:] *Interpretacja Biblii w Kościele. Dokument Papieskiej Komisji Biblijnej z komentarzem biblistów polskich*, red. R. Rubinkiewicz, Warszawa 1999, p. 24–102.

² R. Pindel, *Aktualizacja według Dokumentu Papieskiej Komisji Biblijnej „Interpretacja Biblii w Kościele”*, [in:] *Z badań nad Biblią*, red. T. Jelonek, vol. 5, Kraków 2002, p. 9–26.

by Roman Pindel and *L'attualizzazione del messaggio biblico*³ by Jacek Uliasz, which directly refer to the actualization discussed by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. Thus it is necessary to deal with the topic of actualization in order to at least to a small degree fill that void.

1. Actualization According to the Document “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church”

Over the course of 2,000 years of Christian history, various methods of referring the message of Sacred Scripture to the life of the community of the faithful have been developed. Some of them did not survive the test of times, while others, such as allegorical interpretation; *lectio divina*; the fundamentalist approach; and accommodation, or opening the Bible “in a haphazard way;” are still used today. All these methods create a rich background from which actualization in such a form as that presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission emerges. Such an actualization is something novel, above all because of its methodological assumptions and systematization. One could say that it still is something new, because although more than two decades have passed since the document appeared, the topic of actualization has not yet been studied in sufficient depth.

The document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* was the first Church document dealing with the Bible that deals with the term “actualization” understood as applying the meaning of the Sacred Scripture to the mentality of today’s people.⁴ Previously, this term was applied in sacramentology.⁵ This does not mean, however, that the concept of ac-

³ J. Uliasz, *L'attualizzazione del messaggio biblico*, „Studia Sandomierskie. Filozofia – Teologia – Historia” 14 (2007) z. 2–4, p. 321–347.

⁴ Cf. P. S. Williamson, *Catholic principles for interpreting Scripture*, „Catholic Biblical Quarterly” 65 (2003) nr 3, p. 346.

⁵ Cf. M. Girard, *Dokument Papieskiej Komisji Biblijnej „Interpretacja Biblii w Kościele” – bilans i perspektywy*, „Verbum Vitae” 2003 nr 4, p. 282.

tualization is a novelty in Biblical studies, because it has functioned in that realm for many years.

The word “actualization” is a translation of the French term *actualiser* used in the original French version of the document. It means “making relevant up until today.”⁶

1.1. The Place of Actualization

In order to correctly understand the text concerning actualization, it is necessary to present the context of statements about it, or the entire document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, which presents a closer context.⁷

The authors placed the text concerning actualization in the fourth part of the document, which is titled *Interpretation of the Bible in the Life of the Church*. This title deals with three topics, each of which is discussed in a separate subchapter. The first theme is that of actualization and the second is inculturation, while the third subchapter is titled *Use of the Bible*. The latter is divided into four sub-points: *In the Liturgy*, *Lectio Divina*, *In Pastoral Ministry* and *In Ecumenism*. The fact that actualization is discussed first means that it is the basis for reflections undertaken in subsequent parts of the document. The question of actualization is a fundamental one, because without it inculturation cannot be properly undertaken. First, one must tailor the message of Biblical text to the times in which one lives. Next, one could adjust that message to the present development of culture in various parts of the world. Something similar takes place in the case of the topics discussed in the topic *Use of the Bible* because the methods mentioned in it also take place in a specific time and place.

⁶ Cf. P. S. Williamson, *Actualization: a new emphasis in catholic Scripture study*, „America” 1995 nr 172, p. 17.

⁷ The later context created by Church teaching in the twentieth century (especially the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) is also very important. This topic is discussed by Roman Pindel in his article *Aktualizacja...*, op. cit.

In the introduction to the fourth part of the document, one can find comments that directly link it with the previous one, which specifically with a specific dimension of the Catholic interpretation of the Sacred Scripture. At the root of these comments we can find reactions to an inappropriate use of historical-critical methods as well as limiting oneself to a scientific analysis of the texts. For this reason, the authors write the following at the very beginning: “Exegetes may have a distinctive role in the interpretation of the Bible, but they do not exercise a monopoly.”⁸ This is because the Sacred Scripture have dimensions that are out of the limits of the competences of scientific interpretation. Next, the commission says that the Church does not treat the Bible solely as an ancient collection of historical texts, but also as the World of God. The authors also underline the fact that the addressees of the Word of God are both the community of the Church and the entire contemporary world. At the end of the introduction, the commission describes concrete activities that are the fruit of that particular treatment of the Bible by the Church: actualization, inculturation, liturgy, *lectio divina*, pastoral ministry, and ecumenism. These practices express the Church’s faith in the living Word of God.⁹

In the introduction to the point dealing with actualization, the authors of the document signal that certain topics discussed especially in the two points of the third part of the document (namely with interpretation of the Sacred Scripture in the Biblical tradition as well as in Church tradition) are inextricably tied to the question of actualization. Both the practice of the inspired authors, who interpreted older Biblical texts within the new reality, and the interpretation of actualization in Church tradition are the blueprint for present-day actualization.¹⁰

1.2. The Principles for Actualization

The authors of the document have established five principles that have fundamental significance for actualization. The first principle deals with

⁸ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation...*, op. cit., IV.

⁹ Cf. R. Pindel, *Aktualizacja...*, op. cit., p. 10

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

the possibilities for actualization. Thus actualization is possible because Biblical texts possess full meaning “because the richness of meaning contained in the Biblical text gives it a value for all time and all cultures.”¹¹ To support the timeless actuality of Biblical texts, the authors refer to three fragments of Sacred Scripturae: Isaiah 40 : 8, Isaiah 66 : 18–21, and Matthew 28 : 19–20. These Biblical quotes discuss the permanence and universality of God’s work, but they do not explain such a fullness of the Biblical text.¹² In the original French, the authors of the document used the expression *plénitude de sens du texte biblique*. In order to grasp the significance of these words, we could use the English translation by Fitzmyer. He uses the expression *richness of meaning*.¹³

We can find the expression *richness of meaning* in Ricoeur. He uses it when discussing the symbolic nature of Biblical language, which is inexhaustible and arouses our desires.¹⁴ In the chapter. The document had already dealt with this topic in the chapter *The Meaning of Inspired Scripture*: “One branch of modern hermeneutics has stressed that human speech gains an altogether fresh status when put into writing. A written text has the capacity to be placed in new circumstances, which will illuminate it in different ways, adding new meanings to the original sense. This capacity of written texts is especially operative in the case of Biblical writings, recognized as the Word of God. Indeed, what encouraged the believing community to preserve these texts was the conviction that they would continue to be bearers of light and life for generations of believers to come. The literal sense is, from the start, open to further

¹¹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation...*, op. cit., IV, A, 1.

¹² Cf. R. E. Murphy, *Reflections on „actualization” of the Bible*, „Biblical Theology Bulletin” 26 (1996) nr 2, p. 79.

¹³ Papieska Komisja Biblijna, *Interpretacja Pisma Świętego w Kościele. Przemówienie Ojca świętego Jana Pawła II oraz Dokument Papieskiej Komisji Biblijnej*, tłum. K. Romaniuk, Poznań 1994, p. 98.

¹⁴ P. Ricoeur discusses this topic in *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth 1976.

developments, which are produced through the ‘rereading’ (‘relectures’) of texts in new contexts.”¹⁵

Any literary text, and especially the Bible, has a meaning that is greater than itself. Both in the past and today readers of the Bible have asked questions typical for their times. Meanwhile, Sacred Scripture sheds light on their contemporary problems.¹⁶ Thus at any time an actualization has an impact on readers of the Bible, which refers them back to a different age.¹⁷

The second principle concerns the necessity of actualization. Actualization of the Sacred Scripture is necessary because the Word of God, which is found in the Bible, is at a measurable distance from us because of language, culture, and context. The historical conditions of the Sacred Scripture do not possess an absolute value.¹⁸ Thus, as we see in the document, for this reason its message must be extracted from the historical conditions of the past and applied to contemporary realities and expressed in the language of contemporary people.¹⁹ In order to achieve this, one must emphasize the hermeneutic effort whose purpose is to reach the essence of the Biblical message. Thus one should take into consideration the principles of scientific and theological interpretation of the Sacred Scripture.²⁰

The third principle deals with the relationship between the Old and New Testament, which must necessarily be taken into account in order to actualize properly.²¹ The authors of the document call this relationship “dynamic unity,” which is expressed in the fact that the New Testament

¹⁵ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation...*, op. cit., II, B, 1.

¹⁶ Cf. P. S. Williamson, *Catholic principles for interpreting Scripture: a study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s „The interpretation of the Bible in the Church”*, Roma 2001, p. 292.

¹⁷ Cf. R. Pindel, *Aktualizacja...*, op. cit., p. 14.

¹⁸ The commission claims this when discussing the topic of the relation of exegesis to dogmatic theology – cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation...*, op. cit., III, A, 2.

¹⁹ Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation...*, op. cit., IV, A, 1.

²⁰ Cf. R. Pindel, *The Interpretation...*, op. cit., p. 15.

²¹ Tę relację dokument omawia w części trzeciej dokumentu zatytułowanej *Charakterystyczny wymiar interpretacji katolickiej* w rozdziale *Interpretacja w Tradycji biblijnej*.

is both the “fulfillment” and the “surpassing” of the Old Testament. The penultimate, fourth principle concerns the ecclesial and communal nature of actualization.²² In the document, we read: “In the process of actualization, tradition plays a double role: On the one hand, it provides protection against deviant interpretations; on the other hand, it ensures the transmission of the original dynamism.”²³ If the previous principle deals with relationships within the Bible, then this one touches on the relationship between Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Sacred Scripture developed within the field of Tradition, as part of which it proceeded to deepen its understanding and put its message into life. Thus when engaging in the process of actualization we cannot limit ourselves to the Sacred Scripture but we should take into consideration Tradition, thanks to which actualization takes place. Here we reach the ecclesiastic aspect of actualization, because in accordance with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council Sacred Scripture and tradition “form one sacred deposit of the Word of God, committed to the Church.”²⁴ The Bible is the writing of the Church, and for this reason it cannot be separated from it. Living tradition has a dual role: a negative one, as it protects against incorrect interpretation, as well as a positive one, which is seen in the message of early dynamism.

The final, fifth principle deals with the topic of having an appropriate approach to actualization and is the consequence of the previous principle. The authors of the document claim that actualization cannot be the same as manipulation of the text, in which instead of listening to what the text wants to communicate to us we carry over our own views to the text. Correct actualization should be marked by “sincerely seeking to discover”²⁵ what light the Biblical could shed on contemporary times. This is because the Bible is the authoritative guide for the Church. At the very end, the commission reminds us of the correct relationship between

²² Cf. R. Pindel, *Aktualizacja...*, op. cit., p. 16.

²³ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation...*, op. cit., IV, A, 1.

²⁴ Sobór Watykański II, *Konstytucja dogmatyczna o Objawieniu Bożym „Dei Verbum”*, Wrocław 2003, nr 10.

²⁵ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretacja...*, op. cit., IV, A, 1.

the Church's Magisterium and Sacred Scripture. The document quotes the text of the conciliar constitution *Dei Verbum*: "The Magisterium of the Church is not above the Word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, by divine commission, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the Church listens to the text with love, watches over it in holiness and explains it faithfully."²⁶

1.3. Methods of Actualization

After discussing the assumptions that real actualization should be based on, the authors of the document present the ways in which the message of Biblical texts should be actualized. They do this in the second subchapter titled *Methods*.

At first, I should note a certain problem related to this chapter; namely, its division. There is no consensus among the interpreters of the document concerning the structure of this subchapter. Commenting on the document, Fitzmyer writes that the commission distinguishes between four methods with the help of which the Bible can be actualized. They are: Jewish exegetical methods, the typology and allegory once used by the Church Fathers, interpretation of the Sacred Scripture with the help of Scripture, and philosophical hermeneutics.²⁷ Williamson, who claims that it is impossible for the Commission to want to present rabbinical and patristic methods as still binding today, is opposed to such a division.²⁸ This author distinguishes between three parts in the text. The first

²⁶ Sobór Watykański II, *Konstytucja dogmatyczna...*, op. cit., 10.

²⁷ Cf. J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's document „The interpretation of the Bible in the Church”*, Roma 1995, p. 173.

²⁸ Cf. P. S. Williamson, *Catholic principles for interpreting Scripture...*, op. cit., p. 297. In his commentary to the document, Fitzmyer writes as if to beat to the punch the accusation that by recommending typology and allegory as forms of actualization the commission does not deny this, which it previously had said about the impossibility of applying such an interpretation today, since an allegorical interpretation could be the cause of confusion among contemporary people. According to him, one must take into consideration Pope Pius XII's words from the encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* regarding the

illustrates the multitude of possible methods by referring to examples of Jewish and patristic interpretation. Meanwhile, the second contains suggestions related to actualization with a particular emphasis on contemporary means of thinking and methods. Finally, the third is an analysis of requirements taken from philosophical hermeneutics that actualization must fulfill.²⁹

However, Pindel and Murphy are among those who have best grasped this structure. They also note three parts, but they ascribe a different nature to them. The first part deals with methods utilized in the past, while the second contains suggestions concerning actualization undertaken in contemporary times, and the third part names the various levels that should be considered in the process of actualization.³⁰ I accept this division.

The first part of this subchapter thus concerns the methods of actualization that were used in the past. The aim of this part is to point out the rich spectrum of the forms of actualization as well as to give appropriate examples of actualization that were undertaken in Jewish milieus as well as by the Church Fathers.³¹

At the beginning of the discussion of the second part of the subchapter it is worth noting that although it has the title *Methods* the commission does not specify which methods that should be used today, but instead it gives certain indications and traits that should be taken into consideration while actualizing the Sacred Scripture. This part begins with the sentence: "Modern attempts at actualization should keep in mind both changes in ways of thinking and the progress made in the interpretive

threats that the figurative sense carries in order to resolve this problem. However, these words do not change the fact that the division applied by Fitzmyer is inappropriate in part because it does not take into account the criterion of time.

²⁹ P. S. Williamson, *Catholic principles for interpreting Scripture...*, op. cit., p. 297. A division similar to that presented by Williamson can be found in: M. Laconi, *Nella vita della Chiesa*, [in:] *Pontificia Commissione Biblica, L'interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa. Commento*, a cura di G. Ghiberti, F. Masetto, Torino 1998, p. 365–366.

³⁰ Cf. R. Pindel, *Aktualizacja...*, op. cit., p. 17 as well as R. E. Murphy, *Reflections on „actualization” of the Bible...*, op. cit., p. 80–81.

³¹ Cf. R. Pindel, *Aktualizacja...*, op. cit., p. 17.

method.”³² Roman Pindel has distinguished between two dimensions of this indication. He calls the first one the anthropological-cultural dimension.³³ In order for his or her work to be correct and fruitful, the person undertaking the process of actualization should take into account the reality in which the contemporary person lives. This means his or her language, thinking, life experiences, culture, philosophical assumptions, and state of knowledge.³⁴ When actualizing Sacred Scripture for the contemporary reader, one cannot use categories or subject matter from the past, which in no way speak to the reader. Such an actualization would be a contradiction of oneself. Pindel calls the second dimension of the first recommendation the methodological dimension.³⁵ It emphasizes that the person undertaking the actualization should take into account the progress made in the area of the methods of interpretation of Sacred Scripture and search for such methods that best correspond to the requirements of actualization. One cannot hold on tightly to one method; instead one’s mind should constantly be open to new forms of interpretation.

The second suggestion deals with the basic matter without which one cannot undertake actualization; namely, the “correct exegesis”³⁶ of the text. The authors understand “correct exegesis” as such an activity that would discover the literal meaning of the Biblical text. In other words, each actualization should begin with establishing the literal meaning of the text. It is also necessary to take into consideration Biblical criticism.³⁷

In the third suggestion, the commission suggests a method that it believes is best for actualization. In the text we read that it is “the most sure

³² Papiéska Komisja Biblijna, *Interpretacja...*, op. cit., IV, A, 2.

³³ Cf. R. Pindel, *Aktualizacja...*, op. cit., p. 18.

³⁴ Cf. S. Haręga, *Droga Słowa Bożego od zrozumienia do inkulturacji*, [in:] *Interpretacja Biblii w Kościele. Dokument Papiéskiej Komisji Biblijnej z komentarzem biblistów polskich*, przekł. i red. R. Rubinkiewicz, Warszawa 1999, p. 209.

³⁵ Cf. R. Pindel, *Aktualizacja...*, op. cit., p. 18.

³⁶ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation...*, op. cit., IV, A, 2.

³⁷ The commission also gives a suggestion to those that do not have an academic background in exegesis. It is recommended that they use commentaries and other exegetical literature.

and promising” method.³⁸ It is the interpretation of Sacred Scripture with the help of Sacred Scripture.³⁹ In the document, we read that this method is particularly fruitful when we deal with the texts of the Old Testament, which are later applied in the Old or New Testament.⁴⁰

The fourth suggestion is: “The actualization of a Biblical text in Christian life will proceed only in relation to the mystery of Christ and of the Church.”⁴¹ Actualization’s relation to the mystery of Christ means that the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ must be in the center of interpretation. The consequence of this is that one cannot stop at the literal sense, but, if possible, the person doing the actualizing should look for the spiritual sense, which the commission defines as the sense of the text read with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit “in the context of the Paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it.”⁴² With regards to the necessity of taking into account the relation between actualization and the mystery of the Church, the authors wanted to emphasize that actualization must consider the ecclesial context and, consequently, tradition. Harężga also sees a pneumatological dimension in this suggestion. Apart from being humanity’s work, actualization is also a gift of the Holy Spirit that allows us to notice the mystery of Christ and the Church. The fruits of the undertaken actualization are conditioned by openness and fidelity to the Holy Spirit.⁴³

³⁸ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation ...*, op. cit., IV, A, 2.

³⁹ R. E. Murphy writes that this stance is surprising, because it accepts the principle of *Scriptura sui interpres* originating from the Reformation. However, his surprise is in itself surprising, because the authors of the document clearly refer to the means of interpretation of Scripture using Scripture, which was characteristic of patristic exegesis and not of the principle of hermeneutics proclaimed by Luther.

⁴⁰ The authors give the example of the motif of manna in Exodus 16, which is discussed in Wisdom 16:20–29 and in John 6.

⁴¹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation ...*, op. cit., IV, A, 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, II, B, 2.

⁴³ Cf. S. Harężga, *Droga Słowa Bożego...*, op. cit., p. 209.

1.4. The Steps of Actualization

In the last subsection concerning the methods of actualization, the authors of the document present three steps that must be taken in order to actualize properly. These steps' formulation was formulated on the basis of contemporary directions in hermeneutic philosophy, which are discussed in the document's second section titled *Hermeneutical Questions*.⁴⁴

The first step of actualization is described as such: "to hear the word from within one's own concrete situation."⁴⁵ Every person is born, grows up, and lives in a particular reality that has an impact on his or her relation to him or herself and to small and large communities, such as the family, Church, and humanity, and also on his or her relationship with God. Not only such factors as language, culture, and the development of civilization contribute to this reality, but also even the smallest ups and downs that a person experiences: happiness and sadness, loneliness and being with someone, etc. Thus before we begin the actualization of the Biblical message we should find out which situation the person whom we are going to proclaim the Gospels to lives in. It necessary to analyze in depth the anthropological problems of the contemporary world and person from the very beginning. The pre-reasoning of the person also plays a key role here. Once we learn of these problems, we can proceed to listening to the Word of God.⁴⁶

Here we come to the second step in the process of actualization. Once we have learned of the anthropological matters and have begun to listen to the Word of God, we have to confront reality with the word. The commission expresses this in the following way: "to identify the aspects of the present situation highlighted or put in question by the Biblical

⁴⁴ The first chapter of this part mentions such authors as: F. Schleiermacher, W. Dilthey, M. Heidegger, R. Bultmann, H. G. Gadamer and P. Ricoeur. The views of these last three philosophers have been discussed in greater detail in the subchapter *Modern Perspectives*.

⁴⁵ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation ...*, op. cit., IV. A. 2.

⁴⁶ Roman Pindel notes the importance of the authors' use of the word "listen." He claims that they chose this term in order to indicate both communal and individual listening – cf. R. Pindel, *Aktualizacja...*, op. cit., p. 21.

text.”⁴⁷ Thanks to this confrontation, we can describe the dimensions of the current situation that Sacred Scripture refers to. Thus actualization requires skillful recognition of these aspects. Next, these dimensions are evaluated by Sacred Scripture.

The third step of actualization has been formulated in the following way: “to draw from the fullness of meaning contained in the Biblical text those elements capable of advancing the present situation in a way that is productive and consonant with the saving will of God in Christ.”⁴⁸ After confronting the current situation with the message of Sacred Scripture and, consequently, after discovering that there are dimensions of that situation that the Biblical texts refer to as well as after describing these dimensions, the person undertaking the actualization must go into the text of Sacred Scripture in order to look for elements that will help him or her to transform reality. The authors claim that this transformation must be in accordance with God’s will, so there is no place for manipulation.

At the very end of the subchapter concerning the methods of actualization, the commission mentions those problems that are especially worth undertaking through actualization. They include the communal nature of the Church, offices, aid to the poor, or the social status of women. Furthermore, values that are worth noting, such as human rights, the right to life, peace, and the environment, are presented.

1.5. The Limits of Actualization

The last subchapter of this section of the document concerning actualization has the title *Limits*. It mentions the limits that should not be exceeded when actualizing Sacred Scripture. First of all, one should avoid being selective in one’s choice of texts. This above all refers to an attitude that is evident in taking advantage of Biblical texts in order to support specific ideologies rather than trying to grasp what the text truly wants to communicate to us. This happens in various cults; the authors mention the Jehovah’s Witnesses in this case.

⁴⁷ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation...*, op. cit., IV. A. 2.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The second caution says that actualization cannot be based on assumptions that are contradictory to the fundamental teaching of Sacred Scripture. In this place, the authors mention two philosophical currents that one cannot use to begin actualization: rationalism and atheistic materialism.

In the third note of warning, the authors claim that we must clearly reject “every attempt at actualization set in a direction contrary to evangelical justice and charity.”⁴⁹ Examples of such inappropriate actualization would be the use of fragments of Sacred Scripture to justify racism, anti-Semitism, or the superiority of one sex over the other. The New Testament not only cannot be actualized in such a way that would incline one towards anti-Semitism, but it should also be repeated that “the Jews remain ‘beloved’ of God.”⁵⁰

Next, the direction to be undertaken in order to avoid the abovementioned deviations is presented. The commission once again notes that actualization should begin with “a correct interpretation of the text”⁵¹ of Sacred Scripture, and next to undertake it in accordance with the Church’s Magisterium, taking into account the Church’s living tradition.⁵²

The last paragraph of the subchapter about the limits of actualization, which at the same time is the last paragraph devoted to actualization, contains recommendations to practice actualization. Actualization is necessary, and certain threats that accompany it should not cause it to be given up.

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, op. cit., IV. A. 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.* The previous statements indicate that the authors understand correct interpretation as both reaching the literal meaning of the text and discovering its spiritual meaning.

⁵² This is another reference to the principles for theological interpretation of Sacred Scripture presented in the Second Vatican Council’s dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*—cf. R. Pindel, *Aktualizacja...*, op. cit., p. 26.

2. The Definition of Actualization

After discussing the statements concerning actualization that can be found in the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document, we will now try to systematize all the information in order to develop a definition of actualization resulting from the document.

In his article *Concerning the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Fitzmyer has tried to define actualization on the basis of the document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. He describes actualization as but one dimension of the literal sense of Sacred Scripture, which is exclusively built on a properly established literal sense.⁵³ As we can see, despite the commission's statement on the necessity of taking into consideration the mystery of Christ and of the Church, which is a specific recommendation to discover the spiritual meaning of Biblical texts and to take tradition into account, the author limits actualization solely to the process of applying the literal sense.⁵⁴

Actualization may be defined as a possible and necessary process of applying the message of Sacred Scriptures to contemporary times, a process that presents both the literal meaning of the Biblical text and its Christological, canonical, and ecclesial dimensions without manipulating the text, instead seeking the light that Sacred Scripture sheds on contemporary times in order to change our lives in accordance with Christ's will. The above definition contains all the assumptions of actualization discussed in the document. After such a presentation of actualization we can immediately see how it is different from different forms of applying the message of Sacred Scripture to our lives.

⁵³ J. A. Fitzmyer, *Concerning the Interpretation the Bible in the Church*, [in:] *The interpretation of Scripture. In defense of the historical-critical method*, New York–Mahwah 2008, p. 84.

⁵⁴ Naturally, there are texts whose literal meaning is simultaneously their spiritual sense. This is the case with texts that directly refer to the paschal mystery. However, Fitzmyer does not discuss such cases; he only extends the literal meaning in order to show that what has been said is still relevant today. However, he does not forget the Christological, canonical, and ecclesial nature of actualization.

3. The Novelty of Actualization

In the introduction, we said that the actualization discussed in the document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* is a novelty. Now, we will try to point out seven particular characteristics that the Pontifical Biblical Commission gives to this process.

1) A special treatment of the Biblical text: Thus far, the methods of applying the message of Sacred Scripture to contemporary times have very frequently emphasized the sense intended by the Holy Spirit known as the spiritual sense: *lectio divina* puts emphasis on the live and active Word of God, on hearing God. Opening the Bible haphazardly often leads to an instrumental treatment of the Biblical text; the greatest possible form of fundamentalism emphasizes the inerrancy of the Bible; and accommodation of the Biblical text applies the Bible to circumstances not intended by the inspired author,⁵⁵ thus overcoming the meaning of Sacred Scripture. By contrast, actualization treats the Biblical text as a work that was written in a specific time under specific circumstances that were passed on and interpreted in the community of faithful and now is read by people who also are conditioned by their times, and it is also read as the Word of God. By making use of modern exegetical methods and the principles of Catholic interpretation, actualization binds together two worlds: that of the text's author and that of the reader. Other new aspects of actualization result precisely from this unique treatment of the Bible.

2) Basing actualization on the principles of contemporary hermeneutics: Already in the first principle the document uses the expression "fullness of [Biblical] meaning" or, according to Romaniuk's translation, "the richness of meaning." As we have mentioned above, this concept refers to the thinking of Ricoeur and thus the basic principle of actualization is strictly related to contemporary hermeneutics. The entire process of actualization, described in three steps, has its source precisely in hermeneutic philosophies.

⁵⁵ Cf. J. Kudasiewicz, *Akomodacja tekstu bibl.*, [in:] *Encyklopedia katolicka*, red. F. Gryglewicz, R. Łukaszyc, Z. Sułowski, vol. 1: *A i Ω-Baptyści*, Lublin 1973, col. 244.

3) Basing actualization on the literal meaning of the Biblical text: The authors of the text claim that actualization must be based on proper exegesis of the text. According to the commission, proper exegesis is one that describes the literal meaning of Sacred Scripture. Reaching the literal meaning requires application of the historical-critical method.⁵⁶ Such a close connection of actualization with proper exegesis is a principle that distinguishes actualization from other methods, especially those that have exaggerated the inerrancy of the Bible or focused solely on the spiritual sense

4) The Christological, canonical, and ecclesial dimensions: Actualization, which places Christ in the center, is done in accordance with the dynamic unity of the Bible and the dynamism of living tradition. As we can see, the actualization discussed in the document does not omit any aspect of Catholic interpretation.

5) Opening up to humanity and its mentality: In the document we read that during actualization we should take into account the evolution of human mentality. This is yet another unique trait; actualization must constantly take into account the changes that take place in the thinking of particular persons or societies. Actualization begins with understanding the problems of the modern world and humanity; it begins from an anthropological and sociological analysis.

6) Opening up to new methods of interpretation: According to the document's authors, actualization cannot be closed within the confines of one method, but it must search for one thanks to which contemporary people can better understand the message of the Bible.

7) A clear definition of boundaries: It is also important for the process of actualization that the commission clearly defines its boundaries. Such a presentation is intended to protect the faithful from abuses that very frequently were not avoided when applying the Biblical message to contemporary times.

Marc Girard presents actualization as one of the seven doors opened by this document.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, if we look at the Biblical bibliogra-

⁵⁶ Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation...*, op. cit., I, A, 1.

⁵⁷ Cf. M. Girard, *Dokument Papieskiej Komisji Biblijnej...*, op. cit., p. 282.

phy, we can see that few have wanted to walk through those doors and deepen their understanding of such an important topic. Many questions, such as the nature of actualization, the “richness of meaning” and the relationship between actualization and philosophical hermeneutics or various methods of interpretation that can be used in the process of actualization have yet to be thoroughly studied. We hope that this article will lead to the rediscovery of actualization and will encourage us to walk through its doors.

Abstract

Actualization of Sacred Scripture According to the Pontifical Biblical Commission's Document “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” as a New Way to Refer the Word of God to Life

The actualization of the Holy Scripture is a necessary task nowadays. On the one hand, we have the Biblical texts conditioned by the times in which they were formed; on the other, we have the the modern reader, also conditioned by his or her times, wanting to live the Word of God. The fourth section of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 1994 *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* takes up this issue. The aim of this article is to analyze the statements of the document on actualization and to present the process as a new, special and hitherto insufficiently explored way to reference the message of the Bible to the life of believers today.

Keywords

Actualization; interpretation of the Bible in the Church; Pontifical Biblical Commission

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