



Sacred Scripture and the social commitment of the Church

Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ

'Saint Paul points to human history as the arena in which the agonising battle between death and life, between sin and grace, between human iniquity and the justice of God, is waged.' Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ considers how Scripture affirms and is itself an expression of how encounters with the Word of God occur in our relationships with others and transform them, transform our reality.

I. An inexhaustible circularity

A brief anecdote handed down from the Hasidic tradition tells us that:

One day, a young disciple asked his elderly teacher: 'Rabbi, can you tell me why God appeared in ancient times to our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob while today no one sees Him anymore?'

After a long silence, the old rabbi answered:

'Because we no longer know how to stoop low enough.'

Many interpretations can be given to this enigmatic story, but among all the possible explanations, I like to recall the one that brings us back to the need to approach God by taking a look 'from below'. To discover the face of God, to access his revelation, one must stoop to the earth, seek him in the midst of men and women, because God 'has pitched his tent among us' (Jn 1:14). Reading sacred Scripture 'from below' means lowering oneself to real people, descending into the abyssal depths of human limitations.

As the psalmist says: 'For the human heart and mind are deep' (Ps 64:7).

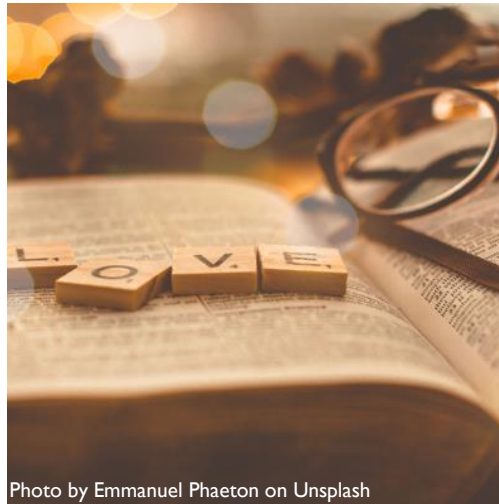


Photo by Emmanuel Phaeton on Unsplash

The Bible testifies that human history is the *place* where God has chosen to show himself, to make himself visible and knowable, through his action on behalf of humanity. That is why God reveals himself as the God of *someone*: of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, of the people of Israel and, finally, in the fullness of time (Heb 9:26), of Jesus Christ.

In order correctly to situate the relationship between sacred Scripture and the social commitment of the Church, it is necessary, first of all, to highlight the inexhaustible circularity, the 'paschal' communication, which is established in the economy of salvation between creator and creature, between immanence and transcendence, between God and the world: it is the exodus of the Trinity towards the human and of the human towards the Trinity.

In other words, the history of persons and of peoples, the concrete lives of imperfect men and women, with their dramas and victories, their 'joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties' (*Gaudium et spes* [GS] §1), is the place of the travail of redemption; it is the soil in which, through Christ, the seed of new life is sown.

Saint Paul affirms this when he writes that ‘the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now’ and waits in hope to be ‘set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God’ (Rom 8:21-22). In this way, Paul points to human history as the arena in which the agonising battle between death and life,¹ between sin and grace, between human iniquity and the justice of God, is waged.

‘Faith comes from what is heard’ (Rom 10:17) – the apostle goes on to say – and listening to the gospel begins the adventure of the ‘good fight of the faith’ (1 Tim 6:12): every disciple discovers being called to go out of him/herself to meet Christ. Recognising Jesus, confessing him as Lord, leads the disciple to find Christ’s presence in the wounded humanity of those who make themselves his neighbours.

Mature discipleship consists precisely in learning that listening to God cannot be separated from listening to the human, but rather in understanding that one refers to the other, in a continuous reciprocity in which the Christian finds him/herself immersed, placed and exposed – by virtue of their baptismal dignity – as ‘priest’ and ‘mediator’.

Fidelity to Christ is configured as a twofold vigilance: it is self-guardianship *in God* and guardianship of one’s sibling placed at one’s side *by God*. At the same time, this fidelity calls for the exercise of a twofold believing ‘hermeneutic’: on the one hand, it asks us to illuminate with the Word of God the present time, created realities, and today’s problems and struggles of humanity. On the other hand, it asks us to shed new light on the mystery of God, drawing on the experiential treasury of peoples and the multifaceted richness of cultures, without disdaining to take advantage of the challenges posed by today’s history as a favourable opportunity to deepen our understanding of the Scriptures.

The reflection of Vatican II, in *Gaudium et spes*, seems to point in this direction when it states that: ‘With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage’. At the same time, that pastoral constitution adds that: ‘Since the Church has a visible and social structure as a sign of her unity in Christ, she can and ought to be enriched by the development of human social life’ (GS §44).

The Church’s social teaching, then, always develops in the renewed encounter between gospel and human history. It is a particular way in which the Church exercises the ministry of the Word and carries out her prophetic mission in defence of men and women in every age and time.

2. *God speaks in ‘human fashion’*

Another reference to the conciliar documents is of fundamental importance in order to provide an adequate theological depth to our theme. I refer to a passage in *Dei verbum* which says that God spoke to men ‘in human fashion’ (*Dei verbum* [DV] §12). The Council declared that, in order to give a correct interpretation of Scripture, one must pay attention to what it pleased God to manifest through the intentions of the inspired writers, that is, one must take into consideration their culture, the choice of ‘literary genres’ they employed, the modes of expression and narration in use in the era in which the sacred texts were written.

The affirmation of DV §12 seems to echo the teaching of the Fathers of the Church, especially St Augustine, who maintains that God gives himself *per homines hominibus*.²

In the light of this principle – ‘to people through people’ – Augustine formulated a series of methodological criteria aimed at reading the Bible correctly and understanding it, giving us a sort of proto-manual of Christian exegesis. The first and most important of these is enunciated by the *Doctor Gratiae* with extreme clarity: ‘the fundamental idea is to understand that the fullness and purpose of the Law, as of all the divine Scriptures, is love, the love of Being, which we must enjoy, and of the beings who can enjoy it with us.’³

God speaks to men and women ‘in human fashion’ because in the incarnation of the Word, God takes the spectrum of expression of the human reality of love and raises it to the divine quality of the relations between the Trinitarian persons: it is love of communion, in which unity is mutual interpenetration that does not elide the differences.

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* says that: ‘it is the very mystery of God, Trinitarian Love, that is the basis of the meaning and value of the person, of social relations, of human activity in the world, insofar as humanity has received the revelation of this and a share in it through Christ in his Spirit’ (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* [CDSC] §54).

Jesus teaches us that the law of the transformation of the world is the new commandment of charity (GS §38): human love, fragile because of sin, is healed, integrated, liberated by the love of God, given and received. This love, poured into our hearts through the spirit, strengthens the dynamism of openness and union towards other people, encouraging us to pursue their good with determination.

Charity cannot be reduced to the choice of carrying out a series of beneficial actions, because love for one’s neighbour is played out at a deeper level, that is, it involves an *epiphany* of being: the other person is revealed in his or her original beauty, precious in the eyes of God, as

a creature constituted in an inalienable dignity, beyond any physical or moral appearance, any social or cultural belonging.

This epiphany of being implies a renewed relational dynamic: love for the other for what he or she is in him/herself impels us to seek the best for his or her life, that is, complete human fulfilment, integral human development.

Love is the only interpretive key for reading Scripture, as Pope Francis affirms in *Evangelii gaudium*: ‘The best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart’ (*Evangelii gaudium* [EG] §264).

At the same time, love is the only key capable of deciphering society: ‘the Gospel responds to our deepest needs, since we were created for what the Gospel offers us: friendship with Jesus and love of our brothers and sisters’ (EG §265).

The great commandment of love orients people in their commitment to the building of an inclusive civilisation, in which human ‘waste’ is not produced, because it makes possible that social friendship which does not remain indifferent to the cry of the earth’s poor. The Church’s social commitment is based on listening to the Word of God contained in the Scriptures, because from God’s love springs the plan of a human fraternity open to all. It is not a question of proselytising, of bringing everyone back into the fold of the Catholic Church, but of fertilising and fermenting society with the Gospel. Even in its relationship with non-believers, the Church is called to put into circulation the human and humanising values that emerge from Christ’s message of redemption: ‘Evangelizing the social sector, then, means infusing into the human heart the power of meaning and freedom found in the Gospel, in order to promote a society befitting mankind because it befits Christ: it means building a city of man that is more human because it is in greater conformity with the Kingdom of God’ (CDSC §63).

3. Christian *paideia* and *politeia*

The experience of believing contact with Scripture is essential in order to unmask the iniquity that dwells in the human heart, as well as the injustice that dwells in the world around us. The last aspect I would like to recall concerns precisely the pedagogical function of sacred Scripture in its relationship with the social teaching of the Church.

To highlight this link, we are helped by a passage from the [Second Letter to Timothy](#) in which Paul writes that: ‘All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work’ (2 Tim 3:16-17).

I leave to the experts the perplexities raised by this text in the original Greek, whose possible translations are many,⁴ and I focus briefly on the noun *paideia*⁵.

In fifth century B.C. Greece, the term *paideia* denoted the pedagogical model in force in Athens and referred not only to the scholastic education of children, but also to their ethical and spiritual development. The goal was to make them complete citizens, guiding them in a progressive and harmonious integration into society.

Cicero and Quintilian translated the Greek word *paideia* with the Latin substantive *doctrina*, so as to indicate the set of instructions useful to the ‘humanisation’ of children, through the refinement of their thought and education to the *res publica*.

It was St Augustine who assimilated this educational process from the Greek-Latin culture and declined it in the Christian perspective: from the gospel springs forth a *paideia/doctrina* that, compared to those formulated by the classical world, has a ‘definitive’, ‘final’ value,

because it is aimed at perfecting man, healing him from sin and sanctifying him in grace.

The Christian *paideia* turns out to be the offspring and crowning glory of the ancient *paideia*: it outlines an ideal of education for the person that inspires a model of a harmonious and hard-working community, like bees in a beehive, and it opens up to the dimension of *politeia*, tracing out the lines of a social project that aims at peaceful coexistence, solidarity and cooperation among people.

When we speak of the social teaching of the Church, we should think of it in this pedagogical perspective, in a line of succession with Christian *paideia/politeia*: its teaching is directed towards re-establishing and reinforcing the relationship between God and the person, between the person and the community. As the apostle affirms, all Scripture is useful for ‘teaching, for reproof, for correction’, but its educational function has as its principal purpose that of ‘training in righteousness’.

Teaching and spreading the Church’s social teaching belongs in an essential way to the Christian message: it is not a marginal action, which is added as a second step, as a field of practical applications following a *corpus* of dogmatic truths; on the contrary, it is located at the very heart of the evangelical proclamation. It is part of the Church’s ministry, as a service to the Word and to humankind, because ‘only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light’ (GS §22).

This is well understood in a dense passage of *Evangelii gaudium*, in which it is affirmed that the understanding of the social dimension can no longer be understood as an addition to the gospel, a moment subsequent to it according to the adage ‘*operari sequitur esse*’, but rather as its interior, intrinsic reality:

The *kerygma* has a clear social content: at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others. The content of this first proclamation has an immediate moral implication centred on charity (EG §177).

Lack of attention to the poor and reluctance to express tangible solidarity with one's neighbour are related to the difficulty of building an authentic relationship of listening to the Word of God and of dialogue with God (EG §187). It is this principle of correspondence, which sets the measure of the authenticity of one's relationship with God in the dedication one expresses toward one's brother or sister, that guides believers in their active commitments and suggests to them the criteria by which to make their choices in the spheres of social reality, the economy, politics, the environment, technology, health and safety, media and culture.

Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ is Prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

This article is based on a lecture delivered at the presentation of The Jerome Biblical Commentary for the 21st Century at the Pontifical Biblical Institute on 15 March 2022. The author acknowledges with gratitude the excellent draft prepared by Rev. Christian Barone (Sicily) and the equally excellent translation into English of Fr Robert Hurd SJ.

¹ As recited in the Easter Sequence: *mors et vita duello confluxere mirano*.

² St Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Prologue, 6.

³ St Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I, 35:39.

⁴ The noun *γραφή* can mean a single verse, a book, or the entire collection of Scripture, while the adjective *πᾶσα* can be understood in a collective ('the whole') or distributive ('every') sense. Lacking the determinative article, it is most likely to be understood in a distributive sense ('every passage of Scripture'). Moreover, since at the time of the writing of 2 Timothy there was not yet a collection of Christian Scriptures, the expression *πᾶσα γραφή* would refer only to the Old Testament.

The adjective *θεόπνευστος* also raises several questions, because it can be interpreted in an active sense ('spiriting the divine'), in the sense that Scripture is filled with the breath of God, or in a passive sense, in the sense that Scripture is 'inspired by God'. There remains, however, the problem of the grammatical function of *θεόπνευστος*: is it used as a predicate ('all the Scripture inspired') or as an attribute ('all inspired Scripture')? Most exegetes lean toward interpreting the adjective as a predicate, so 2 Timothy would be stating that every passage in the Old Testament is inspired.

⁵ In the text of 2 Tim 3:16 in the accusative singular *παιδείαν* and governed by the preposition *πρὸς*.