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The Pope to the Catholic Biblical Federation: the Bible is not a collection of sacred books to study, it is the Word of life to be sown

At 12.10 today, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the International Congress promoted by the Catholic Biblical Foundation (CBF) on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of its founding, on the theme *The Bible and Life: the biblical inspiration of all pastoral life and the mission of the Church – Experiences and challenges* (Rome, Hotel Ergife, 24 to 26 April 2019).

The following is the Pope's address to those present at the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Eminences, dear brothers in the Episcopate, brothers and sisters,

With the words of the Apostle Paul, I welcome you here "in Rome … loved by God", wishing you "grace and peace" (*Rm* 1: 7). I thank Cardinal Tagle for the greeting he addressed to me on your behalf. You are gathered on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the *Catholic Biblical Foundation*. This jubilee will give you the opportunities to focus on your ecclesial service and to confirm each other in your commitment to spreading the Word of God.

Your reflection developed around two words: *Bible* and *life*. I too would like to say something about this indivisible pair. "The word of God is alive and active" (*Heb* 4 :12); it does not die, nor does it age, but it remains for ever (cf. *1 Pt* 1: 25). It stays young in the presence of all that passes away (cf. *Mt* 25: 35) and preserves those who put it into practice from inner aging. It is living and gives life. It is important to remember that the Holy Spirit, the Life-Giver, loves to work through the Scripture. Indeed, the Word brings to the world the breath of God, and infuses the warmth of the Lord into the heart. All the academic contributions, the volumes the are published are and cannot but be at the service of this. They are like firewood that, painstakingly collected and assembled, serves to heat. But just as firewood does not produce heart by itself, thus are the best studies; it

takes fire, it takes the Holy Spirit for the Bible to burn in the heart and to become life. And so the good firewood can be useful to feed this fire. But the Bible is not a beautiful collection of sacred books to study – it is the *Word of Life* to be sown, the gift that the Risen Christ asks to be gathered and distribution so that there may be life in His name (cf. *Jn* 20: 31).

In the Church the Word is an indispensable *injection of life*. For this reason, homilies are fundamental. Preaching is not an exercise in rhetoric, nor is it a collection of wise human notions; it would be mere firewood. It is instead the sharing of the Spirit (cf. *1 Cor* 2: 4), of the divine Word that has touched the soul of the preacher, who communicates that warmth, that anointment. Many words flow daily into our ears, transmitting information and providing much *input*; so many, perhaps too many, to the point of often exceeding our capacity to receive them. But we cannot do without the Word of Jesus, the only Word of eternal life (cf. *Jn* 6: 68), which we need every day. It would be beautiful to see the flourishing of "a new season of greater love for sacred Scripture on the part of every member of the People of God, so that … [they] deepen their personal relationship with Jesus" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, 72). It would be good if the Word of God became "ever more fully at the heart of every ecclesial activity" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 174); the beating heart that vitalizes the members of the Body. It is the desire of the Spirit to mould us as a Church based on the Word: a Church that does not speak for herself or of herself, but who has at her heart and on her lips the Lord, and who draws from His Word every day. The temptation is instead that of announcing ourselves and speaking about our dynamics, but in this way we do not transmit life to the world.

The Word gives life to every believer, teaching them to *renounce* themselves so as to *announce* Him. In this sense, it acts like a cutting sword that, entering in depth, discerns thoughts and sentiments, brings the truth to light, wounds to heal (cf. *Heb*, 4: 12; *Job* 5: 18). The Word leads us to live in a Paschal way: as a seed that by dying, gives life, like the grape that when squeezed gives wine, like olives that give oil after passing through the press. In this way, provoking radical gifts of live, the Word gives vivifies. It does not leave us calm, it challenges. A Church that lives in listening to the Word is never satisfied with her own security. She is obedient to the unpredictable novelties of the Spirit. She does not tire of proclaiming, does not give in to disappointment, does not give up in promoting communion at every level, because the Word calls us to unity and invites each person to listen to the other, overcoming their own particularities.

The Church that is nurtured by the Word, therefore, lives to *proclaim* the Word. We do not talk about ourselves, but we go out into the streets of the world: not because we like them or find them easy, but because they are places of proclamation. A Church faithful to the Word does not spare her breath in proclaiming the *kerygma*, and she does not expect to be appreciated. The divine Word, which comes from the Father and flows into the world, drives her to the ends of the earth. The Bible is the best vaccine against closure and self-preservation. It is the Word of God, not ours, and it takes us away from being at the centre, preserving us from self-sufficiency and triumphalism, constantly calling us to come out of ourselves. The Word of God possesses a centrifugal force, not a centripetal one: it does not cause us to fall back, but pushes us to the outside, towards those whom it has not yet reached. It does not ensure warm comfort, because it is fire and wind: it is the Spirit that ignites the heart and shifts horizons, broadening them with His creativity.

Bible and life: let us commit ourselves to embracing these two words, so that one may never be without the other. I would like to conclude as I began, with an expression of the Apostle Paul, who writes towards the end of a letter: "As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray". Like him, I also ask you to pray. But Saint Paul specifies the reason for the prayer: "that the message of the Lord may spread" (2 *Thess* 3: 3). Let us pray, and let us ensure that that the Bible does not remain in the library among the many books that speak of it, but rather that it runs through the streets of the world and waits where people live. I hope you will be good bearers of the Word, with the same enthusiasm that we read in these days in the Easter stories, where everyone runs: the women, Peter, John, the two from Emmaus ... They run to meet and announce the living Word. I wish this sincerely for you, thanking you for all you do.