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EXPLORING THE PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS IN TWO BIBLICALLY-BASED HOMILIES

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The primary concern of this article is an issue of a hermeneutical nature: What is the appropriate way of interpreting Scripture? How do we approach and construe it? Do we "dismiss certain rigorous [moral] demands with the magic phrase of 'time conditioned'"?[1] But is it not that historically conditioned assertions of faith are precisely the concern of the whole historical-critical enterprise? Is it not the case that the historical-critical method is precisely concerned with the original historical circumstances surrounding the initial articulation of any theological statement?

Eminent New Testament scholar John P. Meier makes a cogent point when he criticizes the modern preoccupation with "instant relevance" which does not have the willingness to undergo the often tedious and complex process of methodical biblical research. "To think that we can bypass [Matthew]," Meier argues, "to get directly to the 'authentic message' of Jesus betrays a poor understanding of both historical revelation and historical research."[2] As such, he

[1]John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 2.

[2]Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel*, 8.

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displays a confidence in the ability of exegetical studies to recover the original authorial intent in its original historical context. After all, a new world can unfold in front of the text only when there is an old one behind it.

Can we, however, really recapture the original situation in which, for instance, Matthew—and all the other Gospel evangelists—spoke to their church? Is this tenable in the first place? Is biblical hermeneutics, then, a matter of engaging the mind of the author or the text? Does biblical interpretation not call for an existential referent and a way for construing a world that is possible only if so appropriated existentially?

Development of Biblical Interpretation in the Church

To respond to the challenges of modernity, with its emphasis on empirical verification, and the celebration of autonomous reason "freed from the constraints of biblical supernaturalism, theological dogma, and Church authority,"[3] the Church employed the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation. Pius XII's encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), considered the *magna carta* of Catholic biblical scholarship, instructed Catholic scholars to use the historical-critical method in their study of the biblical texts, raising fears among Catholic conservative biblical scholars that this might lead to a rationalism harmful to the faith.[4]

Two other Roman documents followed—one from the Pontifical Biblical Commission established by Leo XIII in 1902, and the other from the Second Vatican Council. The *Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels* (1964) acknowledged the three-stage development of the gospel tradition, and the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*

[3]Thomas P. Rausch, *Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003; reprint, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2004), 25.

[4]Rausch, *Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology*, 25.

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(*Dei Verbum*) of 1965 insisted that those interpreting the Bible must determine not only the original meaning intended by the authors but also the literary forms they used to express that meaning.[5]

In 1993, the Pontifical Biblical Commission issued the document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, reaffirming the value of the historical-critical method and evaluating several contemporary hermeneutical principles. Particularly critical of the fundamentalist tendency to confuse the words of the gospel writers with the words and deeds of the historical Jesus, and its failure to acknowledge the historical character of biblical revelation, this document addresses the precise nature of Catholic biblical interpretation as one that takes place within the living tradition of the Church. Hence, the Bible is not a mere historical document to be subjected to an exclusively academic, scientific study, but must be received as God's Word interpreted within the life of the Church.[6]

The development of the Church's biblical hermeneutics appears to be a direct response to the development in the history of interpretation itself. I summarize Paulian-Timotei Petric's[7] account of this development here, which gives a clear sketch of this history.

This "interpretive" history significant for our purposes effectively began with the post-Enlightenment era. Francis Bacon, René Descartes, and Isaac Newton all believed that the human mind can have access to the truth. However, this capacity to know the truth, particularly the mind of the author in a text, was questioned by the literary critics who argued that it is impossible to recover the original intent of the author in a text given the distance between the author's original context and the context of the present reader. To avoid the extreme of handing

[5]Rausch, *Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology*, 26.

[6]Rausch, *Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology*, 27.

[7]Paulian-Timotei Petric, "The Reader(s) and the Bibles(s) 'Reader Versus Community' in Reader-Response Criticism and Bible Interpretation," *Sacra Scripta* 10:1 (2012): 54–68.

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over to the reader the exclusive role of interpretation, then, the literary critics made the text itself the absolute source of truth and meaning.

The succeeding structuralist criticism proceeded with the agenda of the so-called new or literary criticism, "refusing to accept that the author's intention has anything to do with the meaning of the text."[8] The structuralists then went further by claiming that beyond the text's verbal form, the real bearer of meaning is the text's literary form—the cultural and literary codes, linguistic and cultural conventions embedded in the text itself.[9] However, without an author determining and controlling the interpretations, "multiple meanings" that contradict the very idea of the "meaning of the text" would result.

To reconcile the concern for authorial intent and the new emphasis on the autonomy of the text, E. D. Hirsch in his *Validity of Interpretation*[10] distinguished between "meaning" (the author's intention) and "significance" (the text's impact on the readers), giving way to the last critical component in the history of interpretation: the reader.

The reader—long overlooked in the hermeneutical process—is now at its center. This reader-response interpretive principle takes away the meaning of the text from the author and its context, and asserts that the meaning of the text lies in the experiences of the readers as they encounter it. In its most radical form, "the reader is the absolute and unique source of meaning, creating it in the act of reading."[11] There is, then, no objective text. "Insofar as every reader brings an

[8]Petric, "The Reader(s) and the Bibles(s) 'Reader Versus Community' in Reader-Response Criticism and Bible Interpretation," 57.

[9]Petric, "The Reader(s) and the Bibles(s) 'Reader Versus Community' in Reader-Response Criticism and Bible Interpretation," 57.

[10]E. D. Hirsch, *Validity of Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 1, cited by Petric, "The Reader(s) and the Bibles(s) 'Reader Versus Community' in Reader-Response Criticism and Bible Interpretation," 58.

[11]Petric, "The Reader(s) and the Bibles(s) 'Reader Versus Community' in Reader-Response Criticism and Bible Interpretation," 60.

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interpretive framework to the text, to that extent every reader generates a new meaning and thus creates a new text."[12]

Without the author, then, is there a Bible as God's Word? If the temporal gulf between author and reader rejects the possibility of some meaning communicated from one to the other, then how much more the ontological gap between God (as author) and the human being (as reader), making the reader see nothing else in the text except his or her own mind.[13] But if biblical interpretation must always take place within the Church's living tradition of faith, what is the community's role in that interpretation?

At the heart of contemporary biblical interpretation for preaching is the interplay between understanding and explanation. Raymond Bailey explains:

> Preachers must strive to determine the meanings of texts, consider the implications for a particular people in a particular culture at a particular time, and then communicate their findings to those people.[14]

According to contemporary hermeneutics, however, a text is not a depository but a mediation of meaning. The task, then, of biblical interpretation for purposes of preaching is one of "mediating God's Word to a particular community through which a preacher illumines the meaning of sacred scripture."[15] Like any other reader of any text, the preacher precisely as "mediator" of God's Word does not so much

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[12]M. Silva, "Contemporary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation," in W. C. Kaiser, Jr. & M. Silva, eds., *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics—The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 243, cited by Petric, "The Reader(s) and the Bibles(s) 'Reader Versus Community' in Reader-Response Criticism and Bible Interpretation," 61.

[13]Petric, "The Reader(s) and the Bibles(s) 'Reader Versus Community' in Reader-Response Criticism and Bible Interpretation," 61.

[14]Raymond Bailey, *Hermeneutics for Preaching: Approaches to Contemporary Interpretations of Scripture* (Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1992), 8.

[15]Mario Francisco, lecture notes (Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, May 23, 1996).

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as stand before his congregation to simply determine the fixed meaning of a particular biblical text as to communicate what that text actually says to men and women as they go about the concrete task of making sense of their present lives. Thus, while uncovering the meaning of a biblical text in its own historical setting remains to be paradigmatic in contemporary biblical interpretation, this does not mean that the meaning of a significant text is fully exhausted in the author's intended meaning for his original audience within a particular historical milieu.[16] Nevertheless, it is important to underline the essential role of historical exegesis and the exegete who goes about this task. Like the professional rendition of any form of music that affords the ordinary listener an opportunity to appreciate the same, a technical understanding of the text gives the reader access to a world of meaning—whether that world is that which is behind or in front of the text—as well as the capacity to make that "ancient world" bear upon the world of the present. For, as in music, unless someone performs the score, the ordinary person loses an opportunity to appreciate and encounter that world.

One may say that the present role of the preacher becomes central more than ever to the ongoing life of the faith community. For, in some real sense, given the insights of contemporary hermeneutics and biblical/theological research, the contemporary preacher should take cognizance of and participate in the collaborative efforts taking place between and among exegetes, theologians, and pastors.[17] "The preaching hermeneut seeks to interpret and understand Scripture in order to explain the meaning of texts to and for others."[18] Sandra Schneiders argues:

[16]Sandra M. Schneiders, "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics: The Problem of the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture," *Horizons* 8/1 (1981): 23, 31–32. Schneiders cites the "polyvalent and analogous" nature of language as that which indicates the polysemic nature of a text. See her "Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Literal Sense of Scripture," *Theological Studies* 39 (1978): 731.

[17]See Schneiders, "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics," 38–39.

[18]Bailey, *Hermeneutics for Preaching*, 10.

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> … pastors must learn to contribute to this collaborative project their own experience and concerns. They must learn to formulate the speculative [theological] questions from a pastoral perspective and surface the practical implications of academic proposals ….[19]

It is in light of these progressive concepts of contemporary philosophical and biblical hermeneutics that the homilies of Augustine and Liptak will be examined.

St. Augustine's Sermon 53 on the Beatitudes[20]

Augustine belongs to the tradition of allegorical exegesis[21] that swept into the West between the fourth and fifth centuries.[22] Characteristic of this type of exegesis is to portray the Old Testament as prefigurative of the New Testament. This is epitomized in this Augustinian principle: "The New Testament lies in the Old; the Old Testament is enlightened through the New."[23] For example, this homily of Augustine on the Beatitudes cites several Old Testament passages to ground certain points he raises regarding certain beatitudes.[24]

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[19]Schneiders, "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics," 39.

[20]Augustine of Hippo, *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount with Seventeen Related Sermons*, The Fathers of the Church Vol. 11, trans. Denis J. Kavanagh (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1951).

[21]Allegorical exegesis seeks a meaning that transcends the literal sense (traditionally understood as that which the author intended to convey to his original audience) in a particular text in Scripture. "The allegorist assumes that everything stands for something else." See Bailey, *Hermeneutics for Preaching*, 15.

[22]Raymond E. Brown & Sandra Schneiders, "Hermeneutics," in Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, & Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 2nd ed. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1993), 71:38, 1154.

[23]Augustine of Hippo, *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum* 2.73, cited by Brown & Schneiders ("Hermeneutics," 71:38, 1154) from J. Migne, *Patrologia latina.*

[24]See, for example, Eccl. 1:14 which contradicts the first beatitude on poverty of spirit in Mt. 5:3. See also Wis. 1:1 which Augustine cites to support Mt. 5:8 (on purity of heart).

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Augustine's discovery of the allegorical method—largely in reaction to the Manichaeans' thoroughly literal interpretation of the Old Testament—explains his tendency towards a symbolic interpretation of Scripture.[25] Augustine, for instance, cites the "mountain" in Mt. 5:1 as symbolic of the higher precepts of justice given by God to the new chosen people through His Son.[26] Augustine, however, departs from the simple allegorism of Origen who is acknowledged to be the master of allegory during the Patristic period.[27] While affirming Origen's exegetical process of allegorizing—since God intended that access to the deep meaning in Scripture should be deliberate and is, thereby, an inherently difficult task—Augustine insists on consulting the rule of faith in the face of ambiguous passages. This is especially true when one distinguishes between literal and figurative statements in Scripture.[28]

Having become a modified allegorist, Augustine increasingly interpreted more Scriptural passages literally.[29] It is probably more accurate to say, however, that Augustine assumed a more common sense understanding of Scripture. Regarding this very important point, Augustine himself, at some period in his sermon, says: "All the other sayings are plain and clearly understood in themselves; there is no need to discuss them once they are mentioned."[30] Augustine, for

[25]See Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, 4–6. Cf. Robert Grant & David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 78.

[26]Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, 20–21. See also his Sermon 53, no. 1 (Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, 212). Augustine's commentary on the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:1–12) provides the groundwork for his Sermon 53.

[27]See Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, 79. Cf. Bailey, *Hermeneutics for Preaching*, 15. Cf. also Brown & Schneiders, "Hermeneutics," 71:35–36, 1154.

[28]Bailey, *Hermeneutics for Preaching*, 16. Cf. Grant & Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 79.

[29]Bailey, *Hermeneutics for Preaching*, 16.

[30]Augustine, Sermon 53, no. 8.

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example, refers to "they that mourn" (Mt. 5:4) simply as those who grieve "over the loss of things that are highly prized."[31] Augustine, however, is quick to add that

> those who have been converted to God are losing the things which in this world they used to embrace as precious things, for they find no delight in the things which they used to enjoy. They are torn with grief until a love for eternal things is begotten in them.[32]

Here Augustine clearly gives a spiritual meaning[33] to a passage that can be otherwise understood using a common sense understanding.

This common sense understanding of Scripture precisely exposes Augustine's affinity to the rhetorical sense of Scripture. Such a common sense understanding betrays a meaning that is already incarnate in the lives of the listeners, a meaning that is arrived at by way of a shared horizon and tradition embedded not only in the life of the community concerned, but also in the life of those who came before it and in the life of those who will come after. This is the reason why Augustine explains that the words of the Lord were not only directed to his "assembled audience" but "also to those who were not present and to those of later ages."[34] Hence, judging from this, Augustine acknowledges the horizon of the text, including its original historical situation, and, more importantly, the horizon of his listeners.

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[31]Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, 22.

[32]Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, 22. In the sermon, Augustine points out that in the face of human tragedy, as in the death of a loved one, earthly consolation will never be sufficient. True consolation will only come in the hereafter. Cf. his Sermon 53, no. 3.

[33]A spiritual meaning of passages that prove to be difficult to interpret is of particular significance to Augustine. Having been profoundly convinced by the Ambrosian principle "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6), Augustine would declare that even passages that when literally read seemed to teach falsehood now could be understood spiritually. See Augustine's *Confessions* 6.4.6.

[34]Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, 25.

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While interpreting Scripture without the benefit of the historical methods, patristic and medieval exegesis especially in the Augustinian tradition was already relatively sensitive to the very issues raised by contemporary philosophical and biblical hermeneutics.[35] Augustine, having seen the possible levels of meaning contained in the biblical text, was able in his own time to engage the questions of Scripture in a way that threw light upon the concerns of his own world.

David Q. Liptak's Biblical-Catechetical Homily on the Beatitudes and Moral Living[36]

Liptak's catechetical homily on the Beatitudes is a short and very general exposition on the Beatitudes compared to Augustine's homily which attends to details in treating each and every beatitude. Nevertheless, Liptak's homily likewise engages the questions arising from the biblical text to make them bear upon the issues of the day. For example, he mentions a group of celebrated men and women in history who had lived the spirit of the Beatitudes—from Francis of Assisi to Elizabeth Seton, from Boniface to the Mohawk Indian Kateri Tekakwitha. The Beatitudes, therefore, is no set of unreachable moral imperatives but can be lived by the most ordinary of human beings.[37]

By the very catechetical nature and intent of his homily, Liptak obviously appeals to an authoritative interpretation of the biblical text. Moreover, like Augustine, Liptak's treatment of the Beatitudes begins with certain allegorical presuppositions such as when he points out that the Lord's ascent on the mountain is highly reminiscent of Moses receiving the Law on Sinai. Jesus, therefore, inaugurates the

[35]See Schneiders, "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics," 37.

[36]David Q. Liptak, *Biblical-Catechetical Homilies for Sundays and Holy Days* (New York: Alba House, 1980).

[37]Liptak, *Biblical-Catechetical Homilies*, 79.

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New Law, and with it, a new age, a New Testament—on a mountain that is symbolic of God's-presence-in-authority.[38]

Liptak likewise provides a rather general historical underpinning for the Beatitudes, especially the first one which constitutes the heart of this pericope. He altogether refrains, however, from giving a thorough historico-critical analysis throughout the entire biblical text. Apparently Liptak simply wants to give a historical and theological grounding of the beatitude in the Old Testament.[39] This he demonstrates by citing the original Hebrew phase for "God's Poor"—*Anawim Yahweh*—and describing how God progressively and consistently "manifested his preference for the oppressed and the downtrodden." Liptak also mentions (almost by way of footnote) the Greek equivalent of the word "conversion"—*metanoia*—which is characteristic of "God's Poor," that is, of their total dependence on divine providence.[40] Here Liptak clearly differs from the method of Augustine which hardly provides any amount of historical contextualizing to the Beatitudes and is content with simply citing Old Testament texts to support certain insights being expressed.

Nevertheless, Liptak, like Augustine, is clearly sensitive to the spiritual and theological implications of the text. This is adequately expressed when Liptak identifies the deeper dimensions of the symbolism of the "mountain." Not unrelated to Augustine's concept of the "higher precepts of justice," Liptak argues that the Beatitudes far exceed even "the most lofty principles and values conceived of by the most brilliant of mortal men."[41] And as the Lord inaugurates the New Testament on a mount, he would later on seal it on another, the

[38]Liptak, *Biblical-Catechetical Homilies*, 78.

[39]In doing so, however, Liptak seems to walk in the same direction as the more historical methods of biblical interpretation, and that is, to imply that what the text meant then in its original historical context is what it necessarily and actually means today. See Liptak, *Biblical-Catechetical Homilies*, 79.

[40]Liptak, *Biblical-Catechetical Homilies*, 79.

[41]Liptak, *Biblical-Catechetical Homilies*, 78.

https://publications.lst.edu/

mount of Calvary. Moreover, God's blessings, Liptak says, are especially directed to those who hunger and thirst for His righteousness in total self-abandonment to the divine will.[42] The theological presuppositions and propositions are clear enough.

Conclusion

Given these brief observations on the respective presuppositions, style, and basic orientation of each homily, the following conclusions can be made:

First, it is clear that both homilies presuppose that the biblical text as a whole presents itself as testimony of religious witness and not simply as a historical document to be subjected to thorough critical scrutiny.[43] While Augustine's historical contextualization of the Beatitudes is conspicuously lacking, if not altogether absent,[44] Liptak attempts to provide some measure of sensitivity to the historical context of the Beatitudes, albeit in very general terms.

Second, both homilies display an explicit affinity to a rhetorical sense of Scripture. The two homilists draw the meaning out of

[42]Liptak, *Biblical-Catechetical Homilies*, 78–79.

[43]This is consistent with the standards set forth by *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) for modern Catholic exegesis, that is, "to discover and explain not only the literal meaning of the words, i.e., that which the sacred writers intended and expressed, but also their spiritual significance …" (cited in Josef Neuner & Jacques Dupuis, eds., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 6th rev. ed. [New York: Alba House, 1996], 107).

[44]Grant notes, however, that Augustine himself believed that the exegete must determine the authorial intention of a particular biblical text and not present his personal ideas. Furthermore, rigorous philological training is necessary in scriptural interpretation and the exegete should distinguish between "literal and figurative statements." See Grant & Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 79. For obvious reasons, however, medieval exegesis did not have the same scientific capacity as modern exegesis to reconstruct the original meaning of the scriptural text. See Schneiders, "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics," 37.

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the biblical text while being conscious of two elements, namely, 1) where their listeners are coming from and 2) the horizon of the text. Although the latter is seemingly more highlighted in Liptak's homily than in Augustine's, the thrust of the two homilies is not so much to explain the text in the historico-critical and structural sense as it is to understand it for the benefit of both preacher and audience.

Third, given the more rhetorical style of both homilies, meaning is uncovered in the very performance of the text to uncover the "world in front of it." While both essentially seek to understand the text within the wider context of previous traditional interpretations set forth by magisterial authority, the homilies attempt to articulate certain theological presuppositions and implications.

One presupposition involves a theological approach to Scripture that looks not behind, in, or in front of the text but above it. This approach downplays "anthropological insights and skills."[45] Meaning, therefore, "imposes itself on the listener" from above as it were, that is, from the revelatory act of God as this is articulated in the text. Hence, revelation transcends the words of the Bible and the limits of human understanding. The saving meaning-event of divine revelation, then, is more than linguistic and can never be totally encased in language. However, this does not mean that God's Word is encountered apart from the character of Scripture as inspired human witness through which His Word is revealed to faith and encountered continually as saving event in ways that are always new. The Protestant theologian Karl Barth is a chief proponent of this position.[46]

The other presupposition speaks of a more theological approach to biblical hermeneutics. Schneiders, for instance, affirms the insight

[45]The works of John Dominic Crossan, for instance, use cultural anthropology instead of the religious context of his community to reconstruct the world of Jesus. This tends to overlook the impact the Hebrew Scriptures had on Jewish religious consciousness. See, for example, Crossan's *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994) and *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

[46]Bailey, *Hermeneutics for Preaching*, 193–196.

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of theological exegesis that Scripture as human witness is time-bound but that the theological approach to Scripture may well provide the "common ground between the historical period in which the text was composed and the contemporary period in which it is being interpreted."[47] Thus, when one reads Augustine's homily more in light of the theological statements that he seems to make, it would appear that he is coming from a perspective that is consistent with the insights above. Notwithstanding the "analogous jump" that Liptak apparently makes from the text's ancient meaning to the present one, his optic is also more consistent with the theological approach to Scripture. This is in view of inspiring, and hopefully effecting, some existential change in their respective audiences. Indeed, Scripture is not merely a testimony of events past but a means of witnessing to the saving self-disclosing act of God in the present and in the future.

Reconstruction or Mediation?

Is the Bible a "static, essentially unchanging reality, by divine decree and guidance immune to process?"[48] Is the meaning of its many truths rigidly fixed, accessible only by way of faithful historical reconstruction? When we speak of sacred tradition and sacred Scripture as one sacred deposit of the word of God,[49] for instance, do we more or less see tradition simply as a "container" of divine revelation, and the Church as mere custodian of sorts, mainly safeguarding the word of God from interpretative adulterations?

Human understanding, it is said, is not so much a matter of reconstruction as it is a process of mediation.[50] To understand the

[47]Schneiders, "Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Literal Sense of Scripture," 724–725.

[48]See Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (Oak Grove: Winston Press, 1981), 609.

[49] Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* 10, in Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966), 117.

[50]Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1989), 290.

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Bible in its many textual forms, then, means not to view it in some "purely objective," detached fashion but to experience it precisely as an ongoing, living, dynamic event. This means that we should do well not to overcome the temporal gulf that separates past (in its original, historical context) from present, but to see both as essentially constituting a single process. That distance is precisely the ground that makes any kind of understanding possible at all. Ecclesiologist Joseph Komonchak writes:

> There are, it is true, objective representations of what the gospel is in the bible, the tradition, the liturgy, customs, and institutions of Christianity; and the possibility for unity amid all the diversity of the churches rests on a common acknowledgment of their authority. But the unity of the Church is realized effectively only when these objective representations of the gospel are personally appropriated by concrete groups of men and women as they go about the always concrete task of making sense of their lives. The gospel is not a principle of the Church in the abstract, but only as interpreted and appropriated in concrete and existential problematics ….[51]

The discovery of meaning, however, is "never finished; it is in fact an infinite process."[52] The world is always mediated by meaning. To discover the divine presence in the Bible is to always see it in new ways, to experience it in new forms, disclosing and rediscovering ever new meanings within the ground of the Church's own ongoing and living tradition.

[51]See Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Church is a Communion," *Liturgy* 3 (1983): 7–11.

[52]Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 298.

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