Biblical Foundations of Spirituality

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Introduction

The title for the symposium represented in this volume of essays is derived from an important claim of the Second Vatican Council that marked, for Catholics, a recognition of a reality that had been largely obscured for us by the polemics of the Counter-Reformation, namely, that Scripture is indeed the soul of theology.¹ I say “for Catholics” because the churches of the Reformation retained a sense of the centrality of Scripture in Christian life, worship, and thought that the Catholic Church seemed to lose sight of during the four centuries that followed the Reformation. So, for Catholics, the Council’s insistence that Scripture is the soul of theology as well as its proclamation that Scripture is the pure and perennial source of the spiritual life² constituted a reclaiming of our authentic heritage after a four-hundred-year period of biblical aridity if not drought.

Three presuppositions underlie my presentation. First, I want to be clear about what I will and will not be discussing in this

². DV VI:21 in Flannery, Documents, 762.
lecture. Second, I will say what meaning of the term "Christian spirituality" I will be discussing. Third, I will specify the meaning of the term "biblical spirituality" as I am using it here.

So, first, regarding my topic. "Biblical Foundations for Spirituality" could suggest a discussion of what the Bible, especially the New Testament, says about Christian spirituality, e.g., what it tells us about discipleship, suffering, or the imitation of Christ, but that is not what I plan to discuss with you. I want to address a more foundational question, namely, how the Bible, whatever it says about various topics in spirituality, functions in Christian spirituality.

Second, let me clarify the meaning of "Christian spirituality," that much used, abused, and confusing term in contemporary religious and theological discourse. The fundamental meaning of "Christian spirituality" is the lived religious experience of believers as they attempt, over time, to integrate their life within the framework of the ultimate values of Christianity, namely, a developing relationship to the trinitarian God of Jesus Christ within the community called Church in service to the Reign of God in the world. Notice that this definition does not refer to any particular collection of spiritual practices that a Christian might engage in. Nor does it refer to a series of religious episodes, even mystical ones. It refers to the ongoing engagement of the believer in the personal and personalized living of the faith as that faith is held and proclaimed, celebrated and practiced within the community that we call Church. A second meaning of the term "spirituality" is the academic study of that lived experience. For the purposes of this discussion, I am concerned with the first meaning, the lived experience itself and specifically the role of the Bible in that experience.

Third, I want to specify the meaning of "biblical spirituality." There are a number of possible and valid meanings for this term but two are of particular concern here. First, the term can refer to

the spirituality that comes to expression in the Bible, i.e., the lived experience of God to which the Bible bears witness. This is an historical and literary sense of the term and all other meanings of the term are based on this one, so let me expand a bit on this subject.

The spirituality of the first Christians, as of Jesus, was the spirituality of the Old Testament. Essentially, this spirituality was a response, through the living of Torah within the community of Israel, to God’s liberation of the People from slavery in Egypt, God’s gift to them of the Promised Land, and God’s covenant with them by which they became a People. But very soon after the Resurrection Jesus’ disciples began to experience their relationship with God, with one another, and with the surrounding culture, in other words, their spiritual life, in the light of what they had experienced with the pre-Easter Jesus and now were experiencing, personally and as communities, in the risen Jesus interpreted against the background of the Jewish scriptures. Almost immediately they began to testify to their experience of the risen Jesus in preaching and in worship and, within about two decades, they began to commit their lived experience of faith, i.e., their Christian spirituality, to writing. So the Christian Bible eventually consisted of what we call the New Testament read within the canonical context of the Old Testament. The result of this gradual formation of the Bible is that within the Christian Bible there is a plurality of spiritualities, i.e., witness to several distinctive religious experiences within a common faith tradition. For example, we find prophetic, deuteronomistic, sapiential, and apocalyptic spiritualities in the Old Testament as well as Pauline, Johannine, and synoptic spiritualities in the New Testament. Neither the theological topic of what is foundational to all these spiritualities nor the topic of spiritualities (in the plural) in the Bible is my subject in this paper although that material is basic to and presumed in what I am discussing.

A second meaning of "biblical spirituality," and the one with which I will deal, is an existential meaning of the term. In this sense, biblical spirituality refers to a biblically influenced spirituality. This meaning relies upon the careful study of the spiritualities articulated in the Bible, i.e., on the historical and literary material just referred to, but it refers specifically to the engagement of the reader, both the individual and the community, with the Bible, especially the New Testament, an engagement which nourishes, shapes, and enriches the spiritual life of the reader in such a way that the reader's spirituality becomes "biblical" in character.  

Biblical spirituality in this sense refers to the spirituality of the reader/interpreter rather than the spirituality articulated in the text.

This second meaning itself can be understood in two ways. A reader's biblical spirituality can mean the person's spirituality as it is shaped and governed by his or her engagement with the biblical text, i.e., the spirituality that is the product of biblical prayer, meditation, liturgical participation, ministerial involvement, and so on. But the existential meaning of the term "biblical spirituality" with which I am concerned in this essay is not so much the product of engagement with the biblical text but the process of transformative engagement. My specific question is "How does the believer use the biblical text to foster her or his engagement with God, in Christ, within the Christian community?" What role does (or can) the Bible play in a person's growth and development in the spiritual life? And how does it play that role? So our topic is how the Bible functions, or could function, or should function in the spirituality of the Christian.

The Locus of Biblical Spirituality:
The Bible as Sacred Scripture

Before we can talk about the role of Scripture in the faith life of the Christian, we have to ask why the Church does, and why we

5. Although for practical reasons I will ordinarily speak of the individual reader, it should be kept in mind that the community is also a reader of the text and that its reading has a certain normative priority in relation to the individual's reading.
should, regard the Bible as foundational for our spirituality. Why does the Church hold that any valid Christian spirituality is foundationally biblical? Is this merely an historical "tic," a matter of ecclesiastical habit, or even an expression of prejudice against other sacred texts such as the Koran or the Bhagavad-Gita, or, even worse, a way of controlling thought and behavior by assigning normativity to a single ancient text and thereby precluding the intrusion of "modern" concerns or ideas into the faith or practice of the contemporary Christian? In other words, our first question has to be "What is Scripture?"

This question, "What is Scripture," is the title of an important work by the late distinguished Harvard scholar of religions, Wilfred Cantwell Smith.\(^6\) Remarking that all of the great world religions have a body of canonical or normative texts that they regard as sacred, he raised the question of what made these texts special. Although his book-length answer, based on his remarkably comprehensive knowledge of all the texts in question, cannot even be summarized here, we can pull out what we need for our discussion by saying that what he concluded was the following. First, Scripture as such is not a physical book and, second, the text, whether written or oral, which becomes Scripture for a community does not have some special ontological properties that make it different from other books. As books, the Hebrew or Christian Bible, the Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Sutras, are like any other books. They can be read and understood by any properly prepared reader, whether or not that reader is a participant in the religious tradition that regards that text as sacred.

Smith concluded that, for all intents and purposes, a book or text, e.g., the Bible, becomes Scripture when it functions sacramentally in a religious community, i.e., when it mediates the encounter between the believers, personally and as a community, and the Transcendent, however the latter is understood. In other words, the character of the Bible as Scripture is quite analogous,

for Christians, to that of the host as Eucharist. The piece of bread used in the eucharistic celebration, if analyzed chemically, would be a piece of bread like any other. What makes this bread different and special is its role in the eucharistic celebration in which it becomes the mediation of the real presence of Jesus for the community. So, we have to ask the question: what do we believe about the Bible that makes it, for us, Sacred Scripture? What is it that grounds our use of this text to mediate our encounter and engagement with the Transcendent, with God in Christ, in hopes of personal and communal transformation? Put simply, but metaphorically, it is that we believe that in some sense this text is the "Word of God."

We need to unpack this metaphor because unless we understand it in a very nuanced way we will inevitably fall off the theological log connecting Scripture to Christian spirituality to the right or to the left. To the right lies fundamentalism, a conviction that the text is literally the words of God dictated to the biblical authors, absolutely inerrant since God can neither deceive nor be deceived, and the text, therefore, is invested with absolute divine authority. To the left lies the hyper-liberalism, if not cynicism, that says the Bible is not really the Word of God but simply a book like any other book which Christians, traditionally, have invested with special reverence even though there is no objective foundation for this preferential treatment. For such a person the works of the mystics, great novels, or the sacred texts of other traditions have just as much claim on our faith and are just as valuable as aids to spirituality as the Bible. In other words, what we do or do not believe about the nature of the Bible as Sacred Scripture has immediate practical import for our spirituality.

The traditional affirmation that the Bible is the Word of God is a metaphor, not a literal statement, and it intends to designate this

7. Vatican II, DV, actually made this same point: “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord, in so far as she never ceases, particularly in the sacred liturgy, to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ.” See Flannery, Documents, 762.
text as playing a special role in the process of divine-human com-
munication that we call “revelation.” Both the metaphorical char-
acter of the linguistic expression “Word of God,” and its referent
“revelation,” require discussion.

A metaphor, as Sallie McFague among other theologians and
philosophers of language have made us critically aware of in
recent decades, is not a linguistic decoration that merely makes
discourse more interesting or beautiful. Metaphor is a linguistic
strategy for expressing realities that cannot be expressed literally.
When we use a metaphor, such as “God is our father,” we are try-
ing to express something very important, namely, God’s originat-
ing relationship to us with its personal and affective overtones,
that we cannot express by some (supposedly) literal metaphysical
statement like “God is the efficient and formal cause of rational
beings as such.” What we must always keep in mind about meta-
phors is that while they are expressed as positive affirmations—
God is our father—they always include an unexpressed negation
that is equally or more important than the affirmation—God is
not our Father. Only if the negation is fully present and active
does the affirmation make sense. Only someone who actually un-
derstands the metaphorical character of this statement realizes
that “God is our mother” is just as true, and in the same sense, as
“God is our father.”

Conversely, the person who takes the paternal metaphor liter-
ally, i.e., the patriarchal fundamentalist, would consider it untrue
if not blasphemous to say “God is our mother” because that

8. Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language
(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) esp. chs. 1 and 2; Models of God: Theology for an
Ecological, Nuclear Age (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) esp. ch. 2; Amos N. Wilder,
University Press, 1971) orig. 1964; Paul Ricoeur, Interpretation Theology: Dis-
course and the Surplus of Meaning (Fort Worth: The Texas Christian University
Press, 1976) esp. ch. 3 on “Metaphor and Symbol.”

York: Harper Collins, 1997) 110, makes this point very well as follows: “Metaphor
is the way language carries itself past its own powers, to enter new realms . . .
initially all language emerges from just such metaphorical thinking.”
would contradict the literal masculinity of God. And the hyper-liberal cynic would regard the metaphor as simply a way of speaking that carries affective meaning for people who like to think of the Transcendent in familial terms but which is actually theologically naïve and probably useless.

“Word of God” is a metaphor, not for the Bible, which is literally a book, but for divine revelation that Christians believe is somehow related to this book and its use in the community. We use the metaphor “Word of God” because there is no literal expression to capture the mysterious function of this text in the experience of divine revelation. But we have to bear in mind that the internal tension of metaphorical construction is ever present and active in this expression. The Bible is the Word of God and the Bible is not the Word of God and both poles of this dialectic are crucial.

This brings us to the central question concerning the referent of this metaphor, namely, what do we mean by revelation? Only if the Bible is somehow normatively related to divine revelation can it claim to be Sacred Scripture, the mediation or sacrament of a special relationship between God and us. Even more important, only as such a mediation can it function as formative and normative of our life with God, our spirituality, both personal and communal. Any meaningful text, especially religious or spiritual classics, can enrich one’s life, help one become a better person, or challenge one to personal growth and development. But what we, as Christians, claim about the Bible as Sacred Scripture is that this text plays a unique and efficacious role in our spirituality that no other text does or can play because it is actually the sacramental means of communication between us and God.

It may be helpful to start by saying what we do not mean by “revelation.” Revelation is not the communication by God to us of some mysterious or otherwise unavailable information. Revelation is not propositions addressed to our intellect telling us how reality, human or divine, is and what we must do to respond appropriately. Revelation is a two-way process of communication that therefore involves at least two subjects who are mutually
speaking and listening. As we know from our experience of self-revelation to another person whom we love, what is shared in the process of revelation is not simply information but ourselves. We can reveal ourselves in words, or actions, or attitudes, or in any of the myriad ways we make our interiority, our subjectivity, available to another. The listener listens not only with the ears but with the heart. What is heard is not just what the speaker says but who the speaker is. For this very reason wise people are very selective about self-revelatory communication. Once we have invited another, admitted another, into our life that person has a relationship to us, for good or for ill, forever. Self-gift is not something which can be rescinded even when it is rejected or betrayed. Jesus' reproach to Judas, "Is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" (Luke 22:48) is one of the most poignant expressions of this fact.

Why, then, given its potential danger, do people interact in this self-revelatory way? Quite simply for love. The purpose of mutual self-revelation is to build, together, a shared life, a world of "we" which is not merely two lives juxtaposed, "I" plus "you," but two lives intertwined so as to compose a common life, a third reality of communion. The fruit of loving, mutual self-revelation is friendship in all its many forms including, at the extreme, lifelong commitment even unto death.

When we speak, then, of divine revelation we are not speaking of God's disclosure of difficult to understand cosmological, psychological, or theological facts but God's self-gift to us. Revelation, human or divine, is the initiation of a shared life. Christians believe that God has willed to invite us into the interiority of the life of God, to build a world of "we" with us, to share with us all that God is, and even to take our humanity into the inner life of the Trinity in the person of Jesus who makes that life our own. Consequently, when we speak of revelation we are not speaking of propositions to be understood or remembered. We are speaking of an adventure into God. And we are recognizing that this is not simply something we desire; it is what God has initiated in regard to us.
But, if God is to communicate God’s very self to us, if divine revelation as communication is to be engaged in by us, God must speak in a human vernacular, in language we can understand, because revelation is not and cannot be one way. If God’s speaking (and remember “speaking” is a metaphor) is to be revelatory, it has to be received in our hearing. And we only hear in “human.” That is our language. This is another way of saying that divine self-communication must be symbolic, “enfleshed” in some way, in order for us to understand it.

The first symbolic self-revelation of God, of course, is creation itself. “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his [God’s] handiwork” (Ps 19:1) because God, their creator, expresses God’s self in these works. The intelligence, power, beauty, and love of God are first manifest in our own existence and that of the universe we inhabit. But within our tradition we also recognize a more explicitly personal involvement of God with us in the history of Israel. In the story of God’s Chosen People, of God’s engagement with them in their history of liberation and covenant, of fidelity and infidelity, we learn more of who God is, how God loves, what God means in human life. Certain persons in the community of Israel, prophets, kings, and sages, articulated that experience of God’s life with the Chosen People in words and symbolic actions and other ways. God’s gift to Israel of the Torah was a definitive “wording” of this acted-out revelation in a particular human language, Hebrew, the human language of this particular people.

The Christian experience is rooted in the fundamental revelation that is creation and incorporates the revelational experience of Israel. But it is specified by, definitively shaped by, and finds its originality in, the experience of Jesus of Nazareth as God’s personal presence in their midst by the first Christians, Jews by birth and religion, who followed him during his earthly career and came to believe in his conquest of death through their experience of his resurrection. As these first Christians lived this resurrection faith, this lived experience of Jesus alive in their midst and within them, they bore witness to that experience and eventually wrote
that witness, in the lingua franca of their day, Greek, into the books we call the Gospels, the Epistles, the Acts of the Apostles, and the book of Revelation, i.e., the New Testament, which was joined to the Jewish Scriptures now seen as the Old or first Testament.

This means that the Word of God, the primordial sacrament or symbol of divine revelation, for the Christian is not creation, the history of Israel, or even the Bible. It is Jesus. Jesus is the Word of God incarnate, God’s definitive and total self-gift to humanity. Vatican II recognized this when it declared, after four hundred years of claiming that there were two sources of divine revelation, Scripture and tradition, that there is a single source of revelation, namely, Jesus Christ to whom Scripture within tradition bears witness. Our task then is to inquire into the relation of the Bible to this primordial sacrament of divine revelation, namely, Jesus, and how the biblical text can mediate the relation between the reader and Christ and through him our ongoing relationship with God that we refer to as spirituality. In other words, we are asking how the Bible can become truly Sacred Scripture for us, how it functions in our spirituality.

Before undertaking a consideration of that topic a few implications about the Bible that emerge from the foregoing realization that Jesus is the primordial instance of divine revelation, God’s self-gift to humanity, need to be made explicit. First, as we have just said, if Jesus is the primordial instance of revelation, then the Bible is not. We can tend to think that the metaphor “Word of God” applies primarily to Scripture because the Bible is actually a written text, real human language, words, whereas Jesus is a flesh and blood human being. So, we need to keep ourselves aware that just as revelation is not primarily about communication of information but about communication of oneself, so the Word of God is not primarily a text but the person of Jesus, risen and alive among us.

Second, the biblical text witnesses to Jesus. The text exists to mediate our relation to Jesus but it is a human mediation. It is a

10. See DV I:1–6 in Flannery, Documents, 750–53.
human witness to divine self-revelation, and this double character of the biblical text has implications. Because it is human witness, it has all the features of human witness. It is not only rich and beautiful and true, but it is also limited, contextualized, biased, sometimes erroneous, ambiguous, conflictual, or even self-contradictory. These disconcerting qualities do not come from its relation to revelation but from its relation to its human authors, from the fact that it is human witness. This text is an ancient document from a distant past, reflecting an unfamiliar culture, treating many things and persons and ideas and events that are not part of our experience, and written in languages that most of us do not command. And this text contains much that is problematic for contemporary Christians who have undergone, as a people, some two thousand years of moral and intellectual development since this text was written. The acceptance in the biblical text of slavery and war, anti-Semitism, androcentrism and sexism and even misogyny, and other attitudes and behaviors that modern Christians cannot accept derive from the fact that this is human witness and no human witness is free of the limitations of human experience or of the human context in which it was produced.

But this text is human witness to divine reality, i.e., to God present to us in the risen Jesus. Because of this divine character it has the capacity to draw us into the divine life that Jesus shares with God and in which he enables us to participate. The question then becomes, how can we engage this admittedly limited and flawed text that, nevertheless, witnesses to divine reality, in such a way that it becomes truly revelatory for us, enabling us to become ever more truly disciples and collectively the People of God in this world?

The Key to Biblical Spirituality: Interpretation

The deceptively simple answer to the question of how we can engage the biblical text in such a way that it can function transformatively in our lives is “interpretation.” It is the process of interpreting the text that transsubstantiates the letter of the text into salvific event
in our lives. Just as a piece of paper with writing on it becomes a love letter in the fullest sense of the word when the person addressed reads it as the writer intended it to be read, as a musical score becomes actual music when it is played by a trained artist, as a conversation becomes a unitive experience when the parties understand each other, as a role in a play lives when it is played by a talented actor, so the biblical text becomes revelatory, becomes Sacred Scripture for us, becomes truly (although metaphorically) "Word of God" when we interpret it well.

Obviously, each of these potentially living communications has a different character, a different "body" so to speak. A love letter is made up of written words; a musical score is made up of notes; a conversation is made up of oral exchange; a play is made up of action and dialogue. We do not play a letter or act out a violin concerto. The mode of interpretation is governed by the nature of the material to be interpreted. The Bible is a text, and so what we think a text is will govern how we think it should be interpreted. For much of the post-Enlightenment period, until the late twentieth century, biblical scholars tended to understand these texts as inert semantic containers. They believed that the biblical authors intended to say certain things and put those intended meanings into the biblical texts from which that meaning could be extracted by anyone who could exegete the text properly. Contemporary philosophy of language and writing as well as contemporary literary scholarship have made us very aware that this is not the case.\footnote{11 For a good overview of the history of biblical interpretation followed by an introduction to contemporary hermeneutical theory, see Robert M. Grant with David Tracy, \textit{A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible}, 2nd ed. revised and enlarged (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).}

Even though it is true that a text was assuredly written by some agent, either an individual at a particular time (e.g., Paul writing to the Corinthians) or a community through successive redactions over a more or less extended period of time (e.g., the Gospel of John), once the text is written it has a relative autonomy in relation to its author's intentions. The text, in other words, now means whatever it can or does mean in interaction with a succession of
competent readers. It's meaning is not limited to or coextensive with what the author intended. Students learn this to their chagrin when they try to explain that what they wrote in their essay answer is not what they meant. But the teacher grades what the text actually says, not what the student meant. If a text is well written, authorial intention will have some influence on the subsequent interpretations but, in fact, the text now has a life of its own.

Because of this fact, a text can be de-contextualized and re-contextualized with subsequent significant modifications of meaning. For example, "all men are created equal" is no longer limited in meaning to the referent intended by the framers of the Declaration of Independence in the eighteenth century. By "all men" those colonial authors meant free, white, property-holding, adult males. In their historical and social context that is all that "men" could have meant in relation to the notion of equality. But as that text has been re-contextualized in subsequent periods of American history, it has grown in meaning to include women, children, the handicapped, people of color, sexual minorities, and others. Or, to take a biblical example, the Song of Songs in the Old Testament was probably originally a collection of secular love songs. But read in the context of Israel's covenantal relationship with God, it became the drama of the love life of the Chosen People with their God.

Once the Old Testament became part of the Christian Bible, this same text was understood as a celebration of the relationship of God and humanity in the Incarnation, and later of the relationship between Christ and the Church. In other words, the property of a text by which it can actually "grow" in meaning even though the marks on the page do not change, what Paul Ricoeur called its "surplus of meaning," is what allows classical texts in general and the biblical texts in particular, to mean more, and more deeply, as

13. For an introduction to and history of the interpretation of the Song of Songs, see Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 3–118.
the Church continues to ponder these texts in prayer, liturgy, preaching, teaching, and praxis.14

The pondering that we, individually and as community, expend upon the biblical text is what we call interpretation. It is important to realize that interpretation is not simply exegesis or even criticism.15 Exegesis is a necessary and indispensable first step to interpretation, whether one is equipped to do the exegesis oneself or relies on the work of professional biblical scholars. The exegete of any text asks, “What does the text say?” It is what we do in ordinary conversation when we check out whether what we thought we heard our interlocutor say is actually what was said. We might ask, “Are you saying that you are in favor of the proposition?” We cannot plumb the implications of the person’s position until we know what it is. But once the text is established, once we know what has been said, the much more difficult task of interpretation, of getting at what the text means, must begin.

The common sense assumption that what is said and what it means are identical is simply mistaken. There is no such thing as “face value” meaning. For example, what is the meaning of this two syllable sentence, “She’s out?” What has been said is clear. “She” denotes a female subject, “out” is the opposite of “in,” and the copulative predicates the latter of the former. But what the sentence means depends on whether it was said in the context of a baseball game, a business office, an operating room, a poker game, or a discussion of lesbianism; whether it was said by an umpire, a secretary, an anesthetist, an opponent, a friend, a homophobe, or a liar; whether the speaker is informing or condemning or mocking or winking. Interpretation relies on all kinds of clues: context, relationships, tone of voice and facial expression, situation of the hearer, knowledge of culture and idioms, and so on, in determining what the text means. In short, all human discourse is symbolic

and therefore ambiguous and open to misinterpretation on the one hand and multiple valid interpretations on the other.

What, then, does it mean to interpret a biblical text? It does not mean to extract a pre-existing meaning that had been put into the text by the author and which, once extracted, becomes normative for the believer. It means to actualize the text as meaning in and for the present.

First, by reading, praying, preaching, teaching, or writing, we actualize the text, i.e., we make the text active in the present. By engaging the text, performing it like the violinist playing the music encoded in the score, or the actor playing the role encoded in the script, we allow the text to become an event in the now. The sentences in the text, the competence and imagination of the reader, and the context of the present time mutually interact in the process of actualizing the text. The meaning is not a substance or a static cognitive content but an event in which the reader is taking part around the issues of her or his present situation, in particular, her or his current relationship with God. That engagement changes the reader, positively or negatively. We cannot really engage another person, a great text, beautiful art, new ideas—in other words, we cannot engage in the event of meaning however it is mediated—without coming back to ourselves to find ourselves changed, different, somehow transformed.

Second, the event that occurs, that which comes into being when the interpreter engages the text, is what we call meaning. In this interaction there is both an “objective” pole, the text which pre-exists my encounter with it and that has certain features that derive from the process which produced it, and a “subjective” pole, the originality and individuality of the reader who is not only not the same as other readers but is, her- or himself, never the same twice. By way of example, if each of the three tenors sings the same aria, “Toreador,” it will be recognizable as the same aria but the individuality of Placido Domingo, Jose Carreras, and Luciano Pavarotti will influence their unique interpretations of it. Furthermore, each of them will do it somewhat differently each time he sings it.
The third aspect of interpretation then comes into view, namely, that interpretation is always the actualization of meaning in the present. We can speak of an interpretation, i.e., of the product of the act of interpretation. But interpretation itself is an act. It mediates the ancient text into the present context, into our own time and place. Even when we are reading an historical novel, we spontaneously read it in terms of and as relevant to our own situation. That is why, as we read, we feel fear, care what happens to the characters, take sides between causes, and so on. But when we are reading a text like the Bible we are deliberately recontextualizing it in our own time and place, even as we recognize its own historical setting. As the reader resituates the text in the present, virtualities of the text emerge that could not possibly have been understood or available to the author or the original audience. And later readers also bring problems to the text that were not problems for that ancient population. Even among people interpreting the same text in roughly the same historical or cultural setting, there will be variety among interpretations, and the same person's interpretation will change as the person changes from one reading of the text to the next.

The implications of this description of interpretation for our engagement with the biblical text, i.e., for biblical spirituality as a process, are numerous and profound. For one thing, the biblical text is never exhausted. One can return to it again and again because, even though there is a certain objectivity to the text (it is not a Rorschach inkblot that means anything anyone wants it to mean or thinks it means) it becomes real meaning (as opposed to potential meaning) only in interaction with an actual reader in a real context. A man and a woman might read the text quite differently; so might a Catholic and a Lutheran; so might a gay person and a married parent; so might an artist and a businessman and a political activist and so on. I will surely read the text today differently than I did as a high school sophomore. It will even mean differently for me next year when it comes around again in the lectionary and is preached on by a different minister. As we grow and deepen in our spirituality we engage the text differently and
the meaning that emerges further changes and deepens us so that
our next encounter will be richer still.

This is as true of the community’s engagement with the text as it
is of the individual’s. This helps to explain how it is that the Christian
community, which for eighteen hundred years regarded slavery as a
legitimate part of good social order, now says, on the basis of Scrip-
ture, that slavery is absolutely contrary to God’s will; or why we as a
Christian community in which patriarchy has, from the beginning,
been regarded as God’s plan for humanity, are now beginning to see
that it is not only not the case that God created men superior to
women but that that very notion was and is a mark of the sinful and
false consciousness that we are called to repudiate and eradicate.

The Work of Interpretation: Biblical Spirituality in Action

If, then, interpretation is what allows the text to grow, the hear-
ers of the word to change, and the community itself to be trans-
formed, how do we go about this work of interpretation? In other
words, what does biblical spirituality look like in practice? It be-
gins in a firm conviction about some basic principles. First, we
must be convinced that God really does want to relate to us. As the
Council said, “In the sacred books [God] . . . comes lovingly to
meet [God’s] children, and talks with them.”16 God is not some-
where outside our experience detachedly watching us struggle.
God has chosen intimate involvement with us, one form of which
is a book, a text, which the Christian community has recognized
as Sacred Scripture because it has, throughout our history, wit-
tnessed in the community to God’s loving concern and engage-
ment with us. Consequently, the text of Scripture is meant to be
understood, not to be reverentially consigned to a bookshelf or
even to an elite group of interpreters who tell the rest of the
Church, second hand, what God wants them to know.

The second conviction flows directly from the first. The work
of interpretation belongs to the whole Church, to the whole
people of God. It is not reserved to biblical specialists or to clerical

16. See DV VI:21 in Flannery, Documents, 762.
elites. Only when the infinitely various experience of the whole Church is interacting with the biblical text will all its virtualities come to light.\(^\text{17}\) And since it will never be possible to exhaust that experience, our work of interpretation can never cease and must not be turned over for safekeeping to some corps of officials.

Third, all interpretation of Scripture is provisional. We must return constantly to this perennial source of wisdom to see what we did not or could not have seen before. But as we engage in personal interpretation, we must stay actively involved in the dialectical relationship between individual and community. When one’s personal interpretation runs counter to the accrued wisdom and practice of the Christian community, one has reason to reexamine that interpretation. But, on the other hand, one way the gift of prophecy functions in the Church is through the original interpretation of Scripture by individuals who call the community to engage its deeper tradition beneath the surface of “what we are currently in the habit of doing.”\(^\text{18}\)

Finally, we have to take seriously Jesus’ promise not to leave us orphans but to come to us in the Spirit of Truth who will lead us into all truth (cf. John 14:18 and John 16:13). The promise to lead us implies that we have not yet arrived at the whole truth. Revelation goes on as long as the community celebrates Eucharist, engages in transformative praxis, and prayerfully interprets the Scriptures. There is more that we need to understand, more that we need to do. And under the driving and consoling power of the Spirit, the Church can keep moving into the absolute future of God.

With these convictions in place we, as individuals and as communities, shouldering our responsibility to interpret anew the biblical

\(^{17}\) DV II:8 in Flannery, Documents, 754–56. The Constitution insists that the “authentic interpretation” of the Word of God is entrusted to the magisterium alone but recognizes that insight into the meaning of Scripture is achieved by the life and activity of the community and that the magisterium itself is “not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant.”

\(^{18}\) Particularly good examples of this prophetic function of interpretation have occurred in the twentieth century in the work of feminist biblical scholars and the use of Scripture in liberation theology and pacifist resistance.
text as Scripture, i.e., as Word of God for this time and place. This work takes place in a variety of ways that open up different perspectives on Scripture. Central in our experience as Church interpreting the Word is preaching, which is the mediation of the meaning of the text to a particular community, especially in the context of Eucharist where the Word, that is, Jesus, is encountered in both text and meal. If the Scriptures are effectively preached and faithfully heard the community will grow, will be gradually transformed into Church. And that community will come again to the fountain of the Word, not only refreshed but stronger and more able to courageously face new challenges of which the biblical authors could not have dreamed.

This will lead to a second way of interpreting Scripture, namely, praxis. Praxis is the living out of the meaning of Scripture in transformative action and then cycling back to the text to see how our lived experience illuminates the text and how the text criticizes and affirms our practice. The committed Christian is constantly turning Word into deed in personal choices, in family and professional life, in service of the disadvantaged, in integrity and courage in the face of persecution, in the continuous effort to be Christ's body in this world.

Third, and foundational to both the communal sharing of the Word in liturgy and the personal and communal doing of the Word in praxis, is the personal consuming of and communing with the Word of God incarnate in personal prayer. Whether in leisurely reading in depth that savors the meaning and faces the challenges of the text, meditation that reverently sucks the marrow from what could be the dry bones of an ancient text, or contemplation in which the meditation is subsumed in union, personal engagement with the biblical text on a regular, even daily, basis is or should be central to the spirituality of any mature Christian.

But we must also face, especially today, the fact that many parts of the Bible are highly problematic for many Christians. The Bible's glorification of war, the permission of genocide, the degradation of women, mass murder of enemies, slavery, expendability
of children, racism, anti-Semitism, and "divinely sanctioned" capital punishment are some of the issues in the Bible that are problematic today. Even when we make due allowance for the fact that these texts are human witness composed in ancient times, that our moral vision has been developing since the dawn of humanity and is still developing, and thus that our ancient ancestors could not have had our convictions about many of these matters, we are still shocked and repulsed by many things we find in the Bible. How can we deal with this experience of alienation from the biblical text?

One way, which, unfortunately, has been chosen by many of our contemporaries, is to reject the Bible out of hand as an outdated and irredeemable relic of bygone, and underdeveloped, civilizations. And among believing Christians who continue to regard the biblical text as Sacred Scripture, there are two other approaches which also subvert the revelatory power of the text for contemporary spirituality. One is the fundamentalist approach that demands a "blind submission" to the text even if it is plainly contrary to what a developed Christian consciousness can countenance. The fundamentalist says, "If 'wives be subject to your husbands' is what the text says, then either organize your family that way or find another religious tradition." The hyper-liberal approach, on the other hand, says that if anything in the Bible does not resonate well with our current thinking, put it aside as irrelevant. So, even though Jesus told the parable of the eleventh hour workers (cf. Matt 20:1-16) that seems to imply that people who work less long or less hard should be paid a day's wage along with those who worked longer and harder, we enlightened capitalists know that the only efficient, to say nothing of fair, way to run a business or an economy is to pay people according to their production.

What these examples make clear is that interpreting the biblical text in order to allow it to function as Sacred Scripture, as Word of God for us today, is a commitment to struggling with the text, like Jacob wrestling with the angel and refusing to let go until he had received a blessing (cf. Gen 22:24-26). We have to both challenge the text in light of what we, as a community of believers, have
come to know through the Gospel-inspired praxis of two thousand years of Christianity and be willing to let the text challenge us when it calls into question not gospel principles but our ideologies, our power structures, our hierarchies, our self-interest.

Ideological critical theories such as feminism, sociological criticism, and new literary approaches have, in recent years, equipped us with principles and strategies for responsibly challenging the text. Not all readers are equipped to use these techniques themselves, but the work of biblical scholars is now readily available in commentaries, accessible thematic studies, and in Bible study materials and adult education courses. A serious practice of biblical spirituality requires strenuous and continuous effort just as a life of prayer and service of one’s neighbor does.

Conclusion

In this brief essay I have tried to suggest that biblical spirituality as a process is based on the faith conviction that the biblical text is sacramental, a mediation of the ongoing communication between the believer and God that we call revelation. It is constituted by the practice of interpretation by which we allow the human text which witnesses to divine reality to become event as meaning in and for the present. This engagement of the text, both individually and communally, involves a strenuous effort, aided by the resources of professional biblical scholarship, to break through the cultural strangeness and even the moral limitations of the text to the life-giving Word of God that can address us even in offensive human words just as God’s presence can manifest itself to us in suffering and sin. Jesus himself, in John’s Gospel, challenges us to persevere in this work when he says to those who had begun to believe in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31-32).