



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

The Use of Scripture in the New Evangelization:

Reclaiming the Story

My task is to reflect upon the contribution of Scripture to the New Evangelization. The thesis I will develop is the following. People live their lives in light of narratives that help them to understand the story of their own life. Therefore, those who evangelize must present others with a powerful and credible narrative that will clarify and illuminate the nature of human existence. Scripture offers just such a narrative in the story it tells of Israel, Jesus, and the Church: a narrative that shows us where we have been, who we are, and where we are going.

Living in Light of the Story

Consider for a moment why movies, literature, art, and pop culture are so important. On the one hand, they entertain us. But on the other, they are always telling us stories that capture our imagination. These stories are important because they help us to understand the story of our lives. And so, when we read novels, listen to music, look at art, or watch movies, we insert ourselves into the story world they create to understand something of the story of our life.

Christianity has a compelling narrative inscribed into its architecture, music, and especially its Scriptures. But today we live in a world of competing narratives: secular stories as well as religious ones, narratives that de-construct meaning as well as narratives that create meaning. Whereas formerly Christianity could present its holy men and women as models to be imitated, today we live in a world that models itself after entertainers and sport figures; we live in a world of competing narratives, and all of them are vying for our allegiance.

Presenting a Credible Story

If Christianity is to evangelize in the 21st century, it will have to present a credible narrative of human existence. In saying this I am not suggesting that we must create a new narrative, as if the old one had failed. The story that Christians have told and must continue to proclaim remains a powerful narrative of salvation. But it is a narrative that needs to be presented in a way that our contemporaries can see the story of their life in the story we tell. To be a good narrative, the story must have a beginning, middle, and a conclusion. It must explain who we are by reminding us where we have been and where we are going. It must provide us with models we can and want to imitate. Most importantly, it must clarify the meaning of human existence.

Reading Scripture as Narrative

How can Scripture contribute to the New Evangelization? Whereas an earlier generation was interested in getting behind the text to determine its historical reliability, contemporary biblical scholars are interested in the narrative world of the text, by which I mean that story that Scripture tells. For example, they read the OT in terms of three great narratives: (1) the narrative of the Pentateuch that recounts the origins of Israel; (2) the narrative of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings that recounts the rise and fall of the monarchy, and (3) the narrative of Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles that tells the story of how Israel was reconstituted. Likewise, scholars read the NT in terms of the narratives that the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles tell about Jesus, Israel, and the Church. They even point to the underlying narrative that Paul presupposes in his letters, a narrative that begins with Adam, recounts the promises made to Abraham, finds its fulfillment in the appearance of the Christ, and looks to that moment when death will be destroyed, and God will be all in all.

Reading Scripture as Narrative and the New Evangelization

Reading Scripture as a narrative provides us with a way to understand our lives in light of the narrative that Scripture tells. This renewed appreciation of the narrative dimension of the biblical text has important implications for the New Evangelization. *First*, it reminds us that Scripture *is* a narrative—a story that begins with creation and ends with its restoration; a story in which people can discover the meaning and purpose of their lives; a story that roots us in the past and gives us hope for the future. *Second*, this narrative approach provides us with an example of how we can evangelize today. For by becoming familiar with the scriptural narrative, we find new ways to tell an old story; we find new ways to explain the problems we face and how to respond to them; and we gain new insight into how we ought to live.

Two Examples of Biblical Narratives

Allow me to present two examples of biblical narratives that are suggestive for evangelization. The first is a sermon of Paul; the second is a Pauline letter.

The Acts of the Apostles: In the Acts of Apostles, Luke recounts a sermon that Paul gives at Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:16-41). This sermon is important because it represents the kind of sermon that Paul regularly gave when he entered a synagogue to preach. It begins with a history of Israel that includes its sojourn in the land of Egypt, its wandering in the wilderness, its conquest of the Promised Land, the period of the judges, the rise of the monarchy, and the anointing of David as king. Nothing, however, is said about the fall of the monarchy or the exile. Instead, Paul immediately moves to the story of Jesus, whom he identifies as the promised descendant of David. He then recounts how God reversed the action of the inhabitants of Jerusalem who asked Pilate to put Jesus to death by raising Jesus from the dead, thereby fulfilling the Second Psalm, “You are my son; this day I have begotten you.”

This example illustrates that Paul evangelizes by telling a story that enables his audience to make sense of the present in light of its history. The narrative clarifies a present event—the crucifixion of Jesus—by explaining that Jesus was the climax of Israel’s history. In doing so, the sermon enables the audience to understand their lives in light of a new story that reinterprets the story of Israel. I am not suggesting that we must repeat this narrative, but we should learn from it. Just as Paul gave meaning to what happened in his day by relating the story Jesus to the story of Israel, so we must do something similar. Scripture summons us to understand our lives in the light of its own story. It invites us to tell its story in new and compelling ways so that people can find the meaning of their lives in its story.

Paul’s Letter to the Romans. My second example comes from Paul’s Letter to the Romans. On first appearance, it may appear that Romans is an unlikely place to find a story. But as I noted earlier, even the Pauline letters presuppose a narrative. In the case of Romans, the narrative can be summarized in this way. God’s good creation has gone astray. Although God created humanity to share in the divine glory, Adam transgressed God’s commandment with the result that Sin—which Paul understands as a powerful cosmic force—entered the world. With Sin came another cosmic force, Death, which results in eternal separation from God. Although the Gentiles knew something of God from the created world, they chose to worship the creature rather than the Creator. And although Israel enjoyed the gift of the Law, it did not obey the law. Like the Gentiles, Israel found itself under the power of Sin, which frustrated its every desire to do God’s will. The result was that humanity was in a predicament of its own making from which it could not free itself.

But at the right time, when humanity was weak and alienated from the Creator, God revealed his saving justice in the crucified Christ, thereby justifying and reconciling humanity to

himself. The new situation in which humanity finds itself, then, is this: It is already justified and reconciled to God because of what God had done in Christ, and so it can confidently hope that it will be saved. The present experience of the Spirit assures humanity that it is destined for resurrection glory. For, just as God raised Jesus from the dead, so God will raise those who enjoy the gift of the Spirit. What has happened to Christ will happen to redeemed humanity.

But there is more to the story. It is not simply humanity that will be redeemed; it will be the entire creation as well. When the justified are raised from the dead, creation will be set free from the futility to which God subjected it when humanity sinned. The future of humanity and creation, then, are intertwined. For, only when humanity is saved at the general resurrection of the dead will creation attain its God-given goal.

But there is still more to the story. Although the vast majority of Paul's fellow Israelites failed to believe in Jesus as the Christ, Paul is confident that their failure is part of a larger plan to bring salvation to the Gentiles and ultimately to Israel itself. Thus, at the end of his discussion of Israel in Roman 9–11, the Apostle reveals a mystery to his Gentile audience: “a hardening has come upon Israel in part, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and thus all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:24-26).

Notice what Paul's story presupposes. *It is a story* that begins with creation and ends with its restoration. *It is a story* that presupposes the fall of humanity and the disobedience of Israel and concludes with the redemption of humanity and the restoration of Israel. *It is a story* that explains the power of Sin and Death. *It is a story* that reveals the saving justice of God and the unfathomable mystery of God's plan. *It is a story* that enables people to live in hope because they know they are justified and reconciled to God, and so destined for resurrection glory. *It is a story* that includes the salvation of the individual, the community, and the whole of God's

creation. *It is a story* that helps us to understand the story of our lives so that we can live with hope and joy in world that still suffers from the aftershocks of Adam's sin.

Conclusion

I suggest that Scripture can contribute to the New Evangelization in the following ways. First, it reminds us that we must provide people with a narrative that will help them understand the story of their lives. We must provide them with a narrative that explains who they are, what God has done, and what God is doing. We must provide them with Scripture's story that gives them a profound and abiding sense of hope.

Second, the outline of this narrative is already found in the sacred texts we proclaim every week. But the narrative will only come alive if we understand and present it in a credible way. Our task, then, is to understand the narrative anew in light of our time and our place.

Third, if we hope to proclaim the gospel in a world of competing narratives, we must proclaim a narrative that enables people to understand the full dimension of salvation: the salvation of the body as well as of the soul, the salvation of the community as well as of the individual, the salvation of creation as well as of humanity. In a word, we must proclaim a vision of salvation that includes the whole of God's good creation.

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