The Presentations: Some Reactions

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This has been a formidable experience, this being in first-hand contact with so many of the men and women who are shaping U.S. students, especially seminarians, today. The following observations are meant to serve as a kind of convenient source for recalling the contents of the papers given. There is a wealth of material represented in the papers, but it may strike different persons in different ways: one person’s valuable tip may be another person’s item for non-consideration, at least for the moment. (The published version of the conference will be most useful in the years ahead as each of us comes up against challenges heretofore not experienced.)

Dr. Peter Williamson’s “Scripture Across the Curriculum” is a gold mine of concrete suggestions for making Scripture obtain a purchase in the life of a seminarian. Knowledge of something intrinsically valuable normally leads to an appreciation of the values in Scripture. And Dr. Williamson’s suggestions undoubtedly are designed to increase knowledge of something which is clearly intrinsically valuable. From my experience as a purveyor of Lectio Divina and as a retreat master I would make one additional suggestion: that the seminarian be encouraged to pick and choose
among the texts of Scripture so as to amass a few basic texts which speak to his heart. This is not meant as a suggestion to keep the seminarian from being exposed systematically to the entire Bible and to keep being exposed on a regular basis. But it is psychologically impossible to take every text of Scripture to heart so that it really enters into the Christian’s identity. Mother Teresa had one text which entering into her Christian identity in the words “I thirst” from John 19,28. She gave it an applied meaning according to which Jesus thirsts for souls. This Scripture text dominated her life and dominates the life of her sisters. They do not limit their knowledge of Scripture to this text, but they do let this text dominate their Christian existence in a characteristic way: the words “I thirst” is in plain view in every one of their chapels.

Msgr. Michael Magee’s “Combining Synchronic and Diachronic Methodology in Teaching the Pentateuch” is an eminently practical guide to the use of the diachronic method in the presentation of the meaning of the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch is a vast area to cover in a semester course. If I were assigned to teach the Pentateuch in one semester I would certainly try out Msgr. Magee’s approach. He remarks that not all the seminarians were convinced that such historical-critical scholarship was useful for pastoral purposes. This
view seems to me to be a useful starting point for future discussions. I personally find the historical-critical method useful pastorally for indicating a possible date for the formation of the Pentateuch in its present form. But I have to admit I have not really used it in any significant way in my own pastoral use of the Pentateuch, which has not been insignificant.

Abbot Denis Farkasfalvy’s comments on “Inspiration and Incarnation” offer challenging material for, among other things, a rethinking of biblical theology. But I was especially intrigued by his statements: “Usually oral tradition precedes scripture, but tradition also keeps the scriptures secure and well defined and stabilized. Tradition also serves as the live interpretive framework of God’s word while the written texts offer a more objective standard of authenticity, precision, solid verbal expression and accurately focused memory.” I personally am interested in the part that the liturgy plays in the relationship between scripture and tradition and think that this perspective may help clarify the interrelation between the revelation which came in Jesus Christ and believers throughout the centuries.

Professor Kelly Anderson makes effective use of the liturgy in her presentation “How the Liturgy of the Hours Provides an Effective Means for Teaching the Book of Psalms.” This strikes me as an
ingenious way to help the seminarian prepare himself for the life-long participation in the Liturgy of the Hours. Speaking from personal experience, I would have appreciated greater direction in my own preparation for such a participation.

Fr. Chris Ciccarino’s contribution, “‘This Found Book’ (2 Kgs 22:13): Lessons in Biblical Renewal from Josiah” contains a number of thought-provoking statements. For example: “Reform began in the Temple where, in spite of the loss of the word, in spite of all the evils in the kingdom, authentic worship continued to go on, offered and accepted. Real reform is always ecclesially-oriented. . . Real reform builds on what has gone before.” Again the liturgy comes in as a carrier of tradition anchoring the use of the written word. I found his emphasis on obedience and such virtues as patience, perseverance, and personalism at the end of his presentation quite moving.

Fr. Scott Carl’s thoughts on “Historicity and the Genre of the Gospels: A Look at the Gospels” opened up an entirely new perspective for me on the perennial challenge of historicity as regards the understanding of scripture. The mention of Cardinal Bea and historicity as regards the gospels brought back memories of my first years at the Pontifical Biblical Institute during all four sessions of Vatican II. At one point I was given the charge of distributing to the
council fathers the text of a booklet which Cardinal Bea had written on this very topic. An approach to the historicity of the gospels based on them as \textit{b\'\o}i of Jesus seems to me to offer intriguing possibilities. We are here exploring the whole world of literary genres, an aspect of the study of Scripture which first opened the world of modern study of the bible when I was a young Jesuit seminarian on the plains of Kansas over fifty years ago.

Dr. Caroline Nolan’s contribution, “An Integrative Approach to Teaching Scripture in Catholic Seminaries: Combining the Four-Fold Method of Catholic Exegesis with the Four Pillars of Priestly Formation” came across as based squarely in her experience in teaching in her seminary in Canada. But at the same time she has isolated factors which are common to seminary teaching everywhere: lack of academic preparation, the presence of foreigners, and a higher proportion of converts than in the past. Her use of Mark 1, 16-20 was simple but effective in helping the historical, literary, theological and pastoral elements in the teaching of scripture meld with the four basic pillars of priestly formation—human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral. My own experience indicates to me that the spiritual pillar is of crucial importance in the preparation of future priests. How many
priestly tragedies could have been avoided if spiritual formation in seminaries had been attended to with greater attention!

Msgr. Richard Henning’s essay “The Eschatological Context of Paul’s Encounter with the Jewish Community in Rome and Accusations of an Anti-Jewish Bias in Acts” presents a stimulating approach to answering the charge of anti-Semitism laid against the author of Luke-Acts. His point is that the strong polemical language directed at Jews in Luke-Acts, particularly in Paul’s encounter with Jewish leaders in Rome as depicted in Acts 28, indicates an internal theological debate rather than the rejection of an entire class of persons. If this polemic is viewed through the lens of Luke’s pronounced eschatological concern about the urgent need to make a decision with regard to Jesus, this more benign interpretation of the polemic is possible. This is a truly suggestive contribution. For me his contribution furnishes the attentive seminarian a concrete example of how texts should be read with great care, a care which precludes interpreting them in the light of polemics present instead of polemics past. A good exercise for any person intent on learning to read scripture in a discerning way.

Fr. Francis Martin’s offering is an erudite disquisition placing astute observations about contemporary hermeneutics in the context of
rabbinic imagery, all under the over-arching presentation of God’s revelation in Christ. His point is that a certain prophetic grace is required to understand the Scriptures. This is an immensely suggestive thesis, for it contradicts the post-Enlightenment negation of any relation to the transcendent, objective or subjective, for the attainment of truth. This negation of the transcendent is what constitutes secularism which, as I understand it, is the crucial problem facing the Church in the contemporary world on a global scale. Fr. Martin’s generous bibliography gives ample leads for following up his insights. Would that the gist of his paper were an explicit given in all intellectual endeavors in a Catholic ambience today. Not to mention pastoral ministry.

Fr. Rory Pitstick’s thoughts on “Vocation as the Meaning of Life in the Letters of St. Paul” I found most rewarding. It is my experience in decades of dealing with Mother Teresa’s sisters that any time I mention “vocation” they are all ears. This is because they constantly live the connection which Fr. Pitstick makes between vocation and the meaning of life. The challenging nature of their life leaves them no choice to do otherwise: their extreme austerity of life makes their vocation and its relation to what life is all about stand out in the starkest of dimensions. Fr. Pitstick’s generalization, “anything
experienced in life is ultimately meaningful only to the extent that it relates to one’s vocation” rings true in my experience. This is not an encomium of self-centeredness. Quite the contrary. It is an encomium of self-transcendence, for self-transcendence is at the heart of every Christian vocation. To trace Paul’s adventure in the world of self-transcendence is what Fr. Pitstick challenges the seminarian to by his listing of the Pauline texts involving “call”. It is an eminently practical and eminently mystical way of entering the mind and heart of the great apostle to the Gentiles.

Fr. Andreas Hock’s study on “The Book of Revelation and Discourse Analysis” is a carefully-argued reminder that biblical exegesis needs to be done in blocks of sentences. In his paper the world of modern linguistics enters the scene. His presentation was to me a reminder of the importance of structural analysis for establishing perspectives. Unless a given text is placed in the proper perspective, its interpretation can never be adequately framed. But I still maintain that the abstract discussion of formal elements in a text are in the final analysis inadequate for the understanding of that text until they are linked with content. Only with content does form come into its own, just as only with form is a nuanced identification of content possible. In doing exegesis oneself, or in understanding the exegesis of others, a
dialectic between form and content seems to me to be the only possible way to precede, short of being enlightened by some source extrinsic to the text. While the precise terminology of contemporary linguistics is undoubtedly of considerable help in arriving at a more exact understanding of what a text means, it seems to me that the mastery of such terminology is no small obstacle for the average teacher of Scripture.

Dr. Tim Gray’s reflections on homiletics and the academic study of scripture (“We Proclaim Not Ourselves: Integrating Academic Study of Scripture with Homiletic Preparation”) focuses attention on a crucial aspect in the preparation of every seminarian. Proclaiming God’s word orally is at the heart of what it is to be a priest, just as proclaiming God’s word is at the heart of the message of the Gospel. The practical steps he outlines at the end of his presentation could be supplemented by two suggestions of a practical nature, it seems to me. The first seems so banal that it might be appear at first glance to be naïve, but in my experience it is anything but: when you speak, be sure that you are being heard and understood by everyone you are speaking to. This demands projection of the voice, clarity of pronunciation, knowledge of how to use a microphone, and persistence until you get it right. Secondly, attention to bishops and
priests noted for their homilies is highly desirable. There are persons who have learned to put it all together. These persons can serve as models for us all. Placed in the context of Dr. Gray’s most valuable suggestions, these two remarks help round out a vade mecum for aspiring homilists.

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As I reflect in my room in Rome three months after this wonderfully enriching experience in St. Paul I am continually reminded of the first center of concern indicated in my introductory talk: the relation of my Catholic faith to my study and presentation of the Bible. Amid all the challenges which we Scripture people face, this remains for me paramount. My Catholic faith is not a vague movement of credulity welling up within me. True, its origin is in the world which transcends my understanding. But its effect on me as mediated by the magisterium of the Church is quite definite, and in its definiteness there is light. My faith as I understand it should never be something which I prescind from, for my faith is not something which is extraneous to my being but something which goes into making my identity. And as such it is something which illumines constantly if I but know how to heed it. But knowing how to heed our faith as a personal and communal reality is something which we can never
sufficiently master. To me this is the truth which underlies my everyday existence, and it is a truth which I have endeavored to convey in this the inaugural meeting of the Msgr. Jerome D. Quinn Institute of Biblical Studies at the St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity.