Sowing the Word
Scriptural understanding has flourished since Vatican II, but challenges remain.
By Pheme Perkins

As the Synod of Bishops reflects on the challenge in the Second Vatican Council’s “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” (*Dei Verbum*) to integrate the Word into the liturgical and spiritual life of God’s people, it should also appreciate the substantial gains made since the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* was published in 1943. Today’s problems ought not obscure all that has been achieved. The working paper prepared for the synod does not affirm these foundations clearly. They should be the basis for moving forward. I single out here four areas of accomplishment: restoration of liturgical balance, renewal of Catholic spirituality, development of Catholic biblical scholarship and participation in ecumenical dialogue. As a result of these developments, Catholics who have grown up in the post-Vatican II church now assume that Scripture is as fundamental to a Christian life as are the sacraments.

Celebrating Our Accomplishments

Liturgyal Balance. Such liturgical reforms as the new Lectionary, the location from which the Word is proclaimed, and participation by members of the worshiping community as lectors have enhanced the importance of the Word. A celebration that allocates equal time to the proclamation of the Word and to the Eucharist provides an appropriate balance. At celebrations where the children leave for their own liturgy of the Word and return for the Creed or the presentation of the gifts, one sees those who have heard God’s Word being gathered to receive the Word (Jesus) present in the sacrament. Parishioners who drift back to our parishes after a few years attending Protestant services speak of having felt incomplete without the Eucharist. Bible reading, sermons, music, prayers and social engagement with others might be of superior quality in other Christian congregations, but receiving the body of Christ remains essential to the Catholic soul.

The funeral ritual marks another pastoral gain in liturgical renewal. Engaging family members or the persons who are terminally ill in selecting the readings for a funeral Mass allows a deeper affirmation of our belief that “in death life is not ended” than do routine platitudes. Many of the seniors in our parish’s weekly Bible study group have selected readings for their own funerals already. Non-Catholic family and friends accustomed to the blander fare of memorial services often are surprised by the proclamation of the Word during the Catholic funeral liturgy. That liturgy incorporates the Word as part of the believer’s sacramental life, which began with baptism and was nourished by the Eucharist.

Spirituality. Scripture has also played a key role in revitalizing Catholic spirituality since Vatican II. Translations of the Psalms based on a scholarly understanding of their language and poetic forms, along with revised readings for the Office of Readings, make the Liturgy of the Hours educative, schooling in the Word all those who pray it. Whether they participate in an eight-day retreat or a day of recollection, Catholics find reflection on Scripture at the heart of the process. Many lay Catholics regularly take part in summer Bible institutes or in parish-centered Scripture study programs. When asked to bring their Bibles, Catholics now produce as good a collection of well-worn Bibles as those found in Protestant churches. Most parish renewal programs have a scriptural component. Even at the mundane level of parish
committees, an opening prayer incorporates a reading of the Word, usually the Sunday Gospel.

**Biblical Scholarship.** These substantive gains draw upon the efforts of Catholic biblical scholars, who have mastered a wealth of data about biblical languages, surrounding cultures, archaeology and the literary forms in the Bible. Thanks to scholars who pursued the emerging philological and historical knowledge despite official censure prior to the mid-20th-century change in direction, Catholics were able to catch up quickly as the church recognized how important it is to hear the Word of God being spoken to those in specific historical situations. Those who are ideologically opposed to rigorous, historical scholarship allege that it undermines faith when it points to the gap between dogmatic proof-texts, the Latin Vulgate or patristic exegesis and what the Bible was saying to the faithful in its own cultural situation. The great patristic exegetes like Origen or Jerome or Chrysostom, however, would have employed our new methods just as they used the best scholarship of their own time. By ignoring the rich diversity of interpretation among patristic authors, church documents can create the false impression that the church fathers gave a single meaning to particular passages. New translations of the church fathers and historical studies of their theologies have contributed much to our understanding of how the Word of God has shaped the church. Contemporary academic commentaries include patristic commentaries on the text.

Current Catholic biblical scholarship is second to none in all areas of academic research. Exegetes have met the challenge of translating the Bible into modern languages, using the best research into ancient texts and languages. Annotated Bibles and study materials exist for use at all educational levels. Meetings of the professional associations of Catholic biblical scholars combine the highest level of technical proficiency with equally spirited discussions about making the Word available to the people of God. Even more important as the center of gravity in the church shifts away from North America and Europe, students trained in our doctoral programs from South America, Africa, Indonesia and Asia are beginning to make their own contributions to biblical research.

**Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue.** Vatican II encouraged Catholics to enter into genuine dialogue with their fellow Christians and with the Jewish community. Our ability to unite around a shared appreciation for the Word of God has played an important role in eradicating centuries of hostility. Catholics, Protestants and Jews work together on common Bible translations, annotated editions, dictionaries of the Bible and commentaries. As we create and share common resources for unlocking the meanings of the sacred text, we also acknowledge the role that each community’s liturgical and theological tradition plays in the life of faith. Ecumenical sensitivity to the special place of the Jewish people in God’s plan of salvation leaves us still struggling to find appropriate language when we speak of the “Old Testament” section of the Christian canon. Terms such as “Jewish Scriptures,” “Hebrew Bible” and “prior covenant” fill in the gaps but confuse many readers. Chain bookstores, for example, often shelve the *New Jerusalem Bible* in the Judaica section.

Churches that employ a lectionary have worked toward a common cycle of Sunday readings, and this facilitates ecumenical Bible study. My writing for Protestant homiletic services and preaching in Protestant pulpits, though, constantly reminds me that each church is different in some way. The first reading, the psalm text and even the Gospel may shift on a given Sunday. The Catholic canon, which incorporates books not found in the Protestant “Old Testament,” provides a wider range of first readings than those available in other churches. Differences aside, these ecumenical efforts have made it possible for Christians from all denominations to share faith based on the Word of God. Parishioners in my home parish sometimes bring non-Catholic visitors to our weekly Bible study; sometimes parishioners participate in opportunities provided by Protestant churches. Sharing the Word with other Christians does not weaken Catholic faith. It confirms the genuinely biblical foundations of our liturgical and theological heritage.

**Quick Fixes and Fundamentals**
With such a solid record of achievement, why call a synod of bishops to discuss the Word of God? There are several reasons. Unlike the sustained interest in Bible study among Catholic laity, clergy participation in workshops that could refresh their knowledge of Scripture has declined. The paternalistic tone of *Dei Verbum*, which imagines the celebrant initiating the faithful into the Word of God, can often sound out of date. Some Catholics at Mass have spent more time with the Sunday readings in study and/or prayer than has the homilist.

An effective homily combines several factors: exegetical insight into one of the texts read, an application that connects the Word addressed to "our ancestors in faith" with our contemporary situation, and a homilist who speaks to the people in the pews. When those requirements are met on a college campus, even undergraduates who are half asleep on Monday morning will remember at least something said at Mass on Sunday. Of course, theology majors in an exegesis course may catch a mistake if a preacher has used outdated reference materials. That too is a learning opportunity when students check out the facts. In short, the Word preached must be a Word worth opening—that is, inviting further thought, questioning and discussion.

My sister, a teaching pro member of the Ladies Professional Golf Association, proposes two options for those with a problematic golf swing: a quick fix that will get you through a round or two but breaks down in the long term, and "rebuilding the fundamentals," which will take time and dedication but lasts. With the many excellent print and online resources devoted to lectionary-based preaching, there is no excuse for failing to obtain an exegetical quick fix. The rebuilding of poor fundamentals, however, is another issue.

Even those who have never heard of golf could bear in mind a lesson from the L.P.G.A. teaching division. Ask students to articulate their issues; get them to commit to a goal and proceed accordingly. Some swing-flaws you work around. Physical problems or psychological resistance can make change impossible. For the student who needs to play well tomorrow, look for the quick fix, with the understanding that it will not last. Rebuilding from the foundations is only for the seriously dedicated and often leads to worse play as swing-changes are put in place. Getting the right clubs and using all 14 in the bag can be taxing: some are comforting; others produce anxiety.

**Miscues From the Lectionary**

Most preachers fall back on a limited repertoire of insights, social issues, pieties or stories that they tie to most any Gospel passage. Some even manage to find a link to the generic theme in the first reading. The second reading, an epistle read more or less in sequence, might as well not exist. Despite the laudable goal of introducing the faithful to their Jewish heritage and to the unique insights of the individual evangelists, the Lectionary does not come close. Its selections are a bit like playing golf with assorted clubs from the garage—okay and awful.

In other words, some of the problems for preachers and the faithful are related to the Lectionary itself. Many of the selections are too short to represent the literary and theological sense of the passage. Other selections have been sanitized by not including the harsher sections or the specific details that point to the concrete realities that the biblical author was addressing. I know from working with a weekly parish Bible study for 17 years that restoring a historical context provides the most exciting points of contact with 21st-century experience. Pious generalities get old fast. Seeing how God’s Word spoke to real people in a different time and culture is not only exciting, it often makes today’s challenges seem easier by comparison. For that reason, a few of our parishioners are convinced that in the first century C.E. they would have been Pharisees.

Since on Sundays the first reading is meant to correlate with the Gospel and the psalm text picks up a related image, there is more integration among those texts. The liturgical use of the Old Testament, however, is a heavy crosswind blowing against the Jewish faith of the biblical authors. Catholic supersessionism—the idea that the new covenant replaces...
altogether the old covenant and the church displaces the Jews as the people of God—is alive and well. From the pulpit, the Old Testament reading appears to be at most a preparation for the Gospel, not in itself a mature expression of faith. A homily can correct for the errant ball flight if the homilist makes a conscious effort to highlight the enduring value of the Jewish tradition. But more dialogue with Jewish believers on both the academic and personal level is required to sort out the liturgical difficulties of speaking about the scriptural texts we both revere. Contemporary exegesis of Paul’s Letter to the Romans provides one possibility: Paul reads Scripture as God’s promise. The Gospel does not annul the Law and prophets but shows God’s fidelity to that word of promise.

Our parish provides lectors with the *Workbook for Lectors* (Liturgy Training Publications) as a background resource. But even with this to help them, they say, “I don’t have a clue what that’s about.” Though it may offend liturgists, many of them opt out of presenting the second reading altogether. Attempting to see the text from their point of view, I have concluded that the problem is twofold. The selections are detached from the readings that surround them, and they are not rhetorically complete units. More lector training will not solve that difficulty. Truth be told, our Bible study group often shortchanges the second reading too.

Some of the problems with Lectionary selections could be fixed quickly if the Lectionary were revised to include slightly longer passages. Bigger concerns about the overall shape and depiction of Jewish faith, however, belong in the “rebuilding the swing” category.

Good players also change the set of clubs in the bag to adjust to different course conditions. In a global church the regional conferences of bishops have a major responsibility to see to it that the tools for proclaiming the Word of God are appropriate to local conditions. Since the homily has a specific function within the larger liturgical celebration, it should not be treated as a “cure-all” for problems in Catholic identity formation, catechesis or detailed knowledge of church teaching. Good preaching can contribute by highlighting identity formation and what it meant to be God’s people in biblical contexts; it can also articulate basic Catholic teaching appropriate to the readings of the day. Major renewal of faith communities with respect to other features of Catholic belief and life, however, requires sustained initiatives beyond the liturgy.

**The Word for a Global Church**

I like to remind academic advocates of multiculturalism that the Bible is not a Western, European or modern book. Scholars have worked hard to describe the diverse cultural values and understandings of human life with God found in the Bible. Recent studies have focused on how the new social and personal identities formed among God’s people freed them from slavery to dominant political powers and cultural ideologies. Many of these insights should help with a serious task facing the church in the 21st century: becoming a global faith without imposing or transferring the North American and European cultural hegemony of past centuries.

As the Synod of Bishops assembles to consider the Word of God in the life and mission of the church, it should celebrate the substantial achievements of the 20th century. The foundations of liturgical renewal, biblical spirituality, outstanding scholarship and ecumenical dialogue provide an excellent base for meeting the challenges now facing a global church. Whatever comes from the synod, one can hope that it expresses the transforming power of the Word expressed in Is 55:10-11: “As the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth….so shall my word be...It shall not return to me empty.”