
The First Biblical Congress of the Biblical Work Association

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The First Biblical Congress, entitled “The Bible as a Cultural Code of Europe,” was held in Warsaw from 28th to 30th October 2011. The congress was organized by the Institute of Biblical Studies of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (CUL) in cooperation with the John Paul II Biblical Work Association in Poland. The event was a part of the annual Autumn International Biblical Days organized by the Institute of Biblical Studies. The location was carefully chosen. Warsaw proved a suitable place for all the speakers, participants and guests, who came from all over Poland and abroad. The hospitable Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University (CSWU) campus in Warsaw provided professional staff and space for the sessions and meetings held as part of the congress program. Guest of honor and special participant in the congress was His Eminence Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, the well-known and respected Biblical scholar and Head of the Pontifical Council for Culture, who arrived from the Vatican. Inviting such an eminent guest was closely connected with the subject of the congress – “Bible as a cultural code of Europe” – an academic, interdisciplinary and pastoral exploration of the Bible as a foundation stone of Western European culture. Cardinal Ravasi, over 30 of whose books have been translated into Polish, has won recognition both for his biblical commentaries (among them for example a commentary on the Psalms) and publications on the Bible for a wider audience (see the “Bible for Everyone” series). Cardinal Ravasi is both a great Bible researcher and untiring popularizer of the biblical message through the language of contemporary literature and broadly understood art.

The congress opened on Friday with a session comprising a good 14 lectures. It was a true biblical marathon, starting at 8 a.m. and finishing at 7 p.m. The papers presented reflected the abundance and significance of their subject matter. They also showed clearly how the Bible was and remains an exceptional source of inspiration for entire generations of talented authors,

musicians, painters and writers. The first part of the session, presided over by Rev. Zdzisław Pawłowski (PhD) (Nicolaus Copernicus University Torun), was devoted to musico-literary interpretations of biblical texts. The opening lecture, given by Rev. Professor Henryk Witczyk (CUL Lublin), was entitled “Psalm 137 in the ‘An Wasserflüssen Babylon’ cantata by J.S. Bach and in ‘Nabucco’ by G. Verdi.” The speaker gave us a portrait of the two great musicians who interpreted Psalm 137, each in his own way. Bach looks for the meaning of human pain and suffering by relating them to Christ’s salvific work, while Verdi finds in the song of Jewish exiles the power of memory which invokes God, capable of transforming the night of suffering into the morning of victory. In the next lecture within the same panel, entitled “Job calls upon the Resurrected – the vision of redemption drama in ‘Messiah’ by G.F. Händel,” Rev. Marcin Kowalski focused on the libretto and musical illustration of the third part of the oratory, where one finds a masterly combination of passages from Job 19:25-26 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-22. Job’s cry for a redeemer to adjudicate his case before God is answered by Saint Paul, who points to the Resurrected Christ. Finally, in the last presentation within the panel, “‘By the rivers of Babylon’ (Psalm 137,1) – Polish reminiscences of the songs of Jewish exiles,” Rev. Professor Waldemar Chrostowski (CSWU Warsaw) demonstrated various motifs from Psalm 137 used in Polish patriotic literature of the period of Poland’s partition. The song of Jewish exiles became a lament of the oppressed and enslaved Polish nation, referring both to its past and current state and giving hope for the future.

The second session, which started before noon, was presided over by Rev. Sławomir Stasiak (Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Wrocław). This part was dedicated to the Bible’s presence in painting and film. It was opened with a lecture by Rev. Professor Ryszard Knapiński (CUL Lublin), entitled “The Bible in the exegesis of art – the Word becomes a picture.” In his presentation the speaker showed how over the centuries a transformation of the Word into a picture was carried out in European art and how it resulted in adding to the theological principle of *fides ex auditu* (faith from hearing) the rule of *fides ex visu* (faith from looking). In the next lecture, “P. Breughel’s Tower of Babel as read by a biblical scholar,” Rev. Stefan Szymik (CUL Lublin) made a successful attempt to identify biblical and extra-biblical sources of inspiration for Peter Breughel’s “Tower of Babel.” In a section devoted to film Rev. Marek Lis (Opole University) gave a lecture entitled “The Bible in ‘The Decalogue’ by Krzysztof Kiesłowski and the silence of theologians,” in which he demonstrated how Kiesłowski used the Bible for the narrative construction of his series. Finally, in the last presentation within the panel, Rev. Wojciech Popielewski (CUL Lublin) (“From ‘The Seventh Seal’ by

I. Bergman to ‘The Legion’ by C. Stewart: what is secular film art looking for in the Apocalypse by Saint John?”), described two possible approaches of contemporary film to the Apocalypse by Saint John: on one hand an attitude filled with the sense of *sacrum*, represented by Bergman, and on the other a shallow attitude, prevailing in so called “apocalyptic cinema”, which shows a world devoid of God heading toward its demise.

Both afternoon sessions were focused on the Bible in literature. The first one was presided over by Rev. Professor Antoni Tronina (CUL Lublin). In his opening presentation, “The story of Joseph in Egypt in Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and his Brothers*,” Rev. Zdzisław Pawłowski (NCU Toruń) provided an analysis of this great novel of Western literature, which witnessed a spiritual transformation and the conversion of Thomas Mann. While writing *Joseph and his Brothers* Mann came to the conclusion that religion, first and foremost in its biblical form, is mankind’s only hope for the future. The next lecture, given by Rev. Professor Waldemar Rakocy (CUL Lublin), entitled “The affirmation of Pauline teaching on justification by faith in *Faust* by J. Goethe and its entanglements in *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky,” set out to show the reception of teaching on justification by faith in Christ in the religious attitudes of selected characters depicted in *Faust* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. The speaker emphasized the deformations of the teaching in the characters portrayed by Dostoevsky and pointed to the presence of its purer form in Goethe’s work. The third panel was brought to a close with a presentation by Rev. Arnold Zawadzki (CUL Lublin) entitled “The biblical concept of ‘redemption’ in the poetry of Z. Herbert,” in which the speaker argued that Herbert’s approach to the mystery of redemption is much closer to non-biblical, Greek (pagan) tradition.

The fourth and last panel was presided over by Rev. Wojciech Węgrzyniak (The Pontifical University of John Paul II Cracow). The first lecturer was Tomasz Terlikowski, who in his presentation “The Bible in the writings of F. Dostoevsky” in a very interesting way showed an essential problem underlying the entire artistic activity of Dostoevsky: the conflict between the anthropological matrix of the Book of Genesis and the concept of man propagated by the Enlightenment. In this dispute Dostoevsky, being a believer, supports the opinion that only the Bible and its message can save the contemporary world. In the next presentation, “The Gospel according to Mark as the ‘opus classicum’ of Christian Europe’s literature,” Rev. Bartosz Adamczewski (CSWU Warsaw) argued that the Gospel according to Mark, which refers to well-known Homeric topoi, grows into an “opus classicum” for Christian Rome, trying to become for the Christians of the same significance as Virgil’s *Eneida* for ancient Romans. Another lecture, given by

Rev. Mirosław Wróbel (CUL Lublin), under the title “Biblical inspirations in the writings of J. Słowacki,” presented the attitude of our great Romantic poet to the Bible, and identified biblical references appearing in his poems and specific motifs of revival inspired by the Bible present in particular in his last “mystical” period of literary creation. The last lecture of the symposium was given by Rev. Stefan Radziszewski (CUL Lublin – Kielce). In his presentation, “‘Emaus is just an empty sound for her.’ On the path from Marxism to the Bible – a biblical portrait of Anna Kamieńska,” he sketched a spiritual portrait of one of the best-known Polish poets of the 20th century, Anna Kamieńska, showing her struggle with God and her fascination with the Bible, to which she devoted all her literary work and life.

The first day of the congress, rich in interesting events and presentations, ended late in the evening with a discussion of the issues raised in the lectures and a summary address given by the Director of the Institute of Biblical Studies at CUL, Rev. Professor Henryk Witzczyk. The whole day was a true intellectual feast both for the lecturers and the numerous participants. The abundance of topics and of connections between the Bible and culture – music, painting, film and literature – was meaningful proof of the extent to which European civilization and culture have been shaped under the influence of the Bible. The interdisciplinary character of the lectures made them interesting and intelligible not only for biblical scholars but also for specialists in other fields and for anyone interested in up-to-date readings of the Scriptures. What made the presentations even more attractive was the fact that many lecturers used various media, including music and film. As a result the 14 lectures, rather unusual for one day of an academic symposium, were well received by the audience, which was confirmed by their presence and heated discussions.

After the first very busy day, the second day was marked by joyful celebration. It started with mass celebrated in the CSWU academic church and connected with giving thanks to the John Paul II Biblical Work Association and the biblical apostolate in Poland, presided over by His Eminence Cardinal Kazimierz Nycz. After mass, at noon, members of the Biblical Work Association, having come in large numbers from all over Poland, enjoyed a performance of “Paradise Lost” by the CUL theatre group ITP in the CSWU assembly hall. Both the excellent acting and the subject of the performance proved to be a brilliant addition to the concept of reading the Bible in and through culture and were warmly received by the audience. During the performance the guest of honor and special participant in the congress, His Eminence Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, arrived on the CSWU campus. His Eminence started his stay in Warsaw with a press conference entitled “The

Gospel in the contemporary world – a source of culture or a threat?” In his speech Cardinal Ravasi emphasized the culture-creating role of the Gospel message and that the Gospel stands in opposition to popular (low) pseudo-culture devoid of values. Additionally, His Eminence answered journalists’ questions regarding specific ways of preaching and presenting the Good News in the media and in our more and more technological world. Cardinal Ravasi is of the opinion that in order to be present in the mass and electronic media the Gospel needs to find a suitable form and adapt its language not only to the audience, but also to the media themselves. The role of the Gospel stays the same – to constantly pose serious existential questions and bring about the meeting of individuals with God. At the end of the press conference His Eminence took part in a presentation of the *New Biblical Lexicon* (published by Jedność Publishing House) and expressed his recognition for the publication and the vitality of the biblical publishing market in Poland.

After the meeting with the media, a solemn session entitled “The Word in the life of Blessed Pope John Paul II according to *Verbum Domini*,” was held. Biblical scholars, numerous priests and members of the Biblical Work Association took part in this extraordinary event. It comprised two extensive presentations. The first, entitled “Blessed John Paul II – the Pope of *Sacrae Paginae*,” was given by Rev. Archbishop Mieczysław Mokrzycki. Archbishop Mokrzycki emphasized the abundance of biblical references and inspirations present in the writings, poetry, documents, addresses and sermons left by Blessed Pope John Paul II. The Pope, as a discerning reader of the Bible, not only made it a starting point for his theology and anthropology, but was also an eager promoter of the development of biblical sciences and new methods of reading the Bible in the Church. For him Scripture was an indispensable instrument for shaping the right values and attitudes and essential nourishment ensuring the growth of Christian communities.

The second presentation was introduced by the Head of the Biblical Work Association, Rev. Professor Henryk Witczyk, who provided a short biographical note on His Eminence Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi and, referring to his long years’ work in Milan, called him a spiritual heir of the “intellectual mission” of Saint Ambrose and “the mission of love” of Saint Charles Borromeo. The lecture given by Cardinal Ravasi was entitled “Biblical animation of the entire Church’s life” and was a practical reference to the apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, published in 2010, where Pope Benedict XVI called for the giving of all theology and pastoral activity a biblical character. With distinctive erudition, His Eminence, referring to both the Old and New Testament, explained the nature of the Word of God, which is simultaneously a word and an act, and is constantly seeking an embodiment and a place

to reveal itself. History is the first location of the Word's theophany. The Word creates human and individual history. It sets out in search of man, who would otherwise remain isolated in his finitude and in his "creature-ship." Finally, God's and man's freedoms meet each other and human faith responds to God's grace. In His Word God not only intervenes in human history, but He himself becomes history, through Jesus. The second area for the theophany of the Word is space (the temple), including also nature, the created world, into which God enters and on which He imposes all necessary restrictions. In transcending the Bible the Word becomes the creating Word, the Word that gives sense to our human world and fills it with its presence. And finally, the third field in which the Word reveals itself is the Church with a privileged moment of theophany in liturgy (preaching and the breaking of bread, the Eucharist).

Cardinal Ravasi's lecture made a profound impression on the audience. In token of acknowledgement for his involvement and presence Rev. Professor Henryk Witczyk gave His Eminence a painting by Stanisław Rodziński, an artist from Cracow, showing Jesus and Mary Magdalene. The second day of the congress ended with solemn Vespers.

The third and last day, started with mass celebrated by His Eminence Cardinal Ravasi for artists and scholars in Holy Cross Church in Warsaw. Afterwards Cardinal Ravasi had a meeting with representatives of Polish art and culture at Plac Teatralny in Warsaw, where he gave a *lectio magistralis* entitled "Art and faith – two windows to God". In the lecture His Eminence pointed to a close affinity between faith and art. Just like faith, true art should provoke, ask questions and bring people face to face with the Absolute. It is the aim of art to hurt, to crush the shell of appearances and thus open people to transcendent beauty and truth. Therefore, faith and art are indeed twin windows through which man can see God.

The meeting and lecture were the last points of Cardinal Ravasi's visit in Poland and left the audience with a profusion of thoughts and ideas to reflect on. They also marked the end of the First Biblical Congress. Participants had the opportunity to hear many interesting lectures showing the immense influence of the Bible on music, painting, film and literature. They also met Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, a creative scholar and pastor involved in dialogue with the contemporary world, including the world of science and culture. In his lectures and addresses the audience could observe a strategy of disseminating the Word through a broadly understood dialogue with the world of art. The congress was a great opportunity to appreciate the extent to which the Bible is our cultural code – the natural language we think in – and how truly it is a foundation stone of our European home.