

# ***DEI VERBUM MEETS HOMO LUDENS***

## **Bibliodrama in South-East Asia<sup>1</sup>**

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**T**HIS ARTICLE FOLLOWS an adventurous journey with the Word of God to Asia and the Pacific that was inspired by a young Filipina in Nemi, a small town in the Alban Hills near Rome. The Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF), in cooperation with the Missionaries of the Divine Word (SVD), run Bible courses at Nemi in English for men and women from all over the world. For seven years I have been on the staff as a spiritual director on a biblical-pastoral training course called *Dei verbum*,<sup>2</sup> together with my Dutch confrère Fr Wim Wijtten and a Filipina laywoman, Jessica Joy Candelario.

We had twice invited facilitators for a four-day bibliodrama course from Cologne to Nemi: Mrs Annette Himmelreich, a Catholic, and Pastor Christoph Fuhr, a Lutheran. Bibliodrama is a holistic method of bible reading, which creates a space where people can leave behind a narrow cognitive understanding of biblical texts. By re-enacting the events through role-play, using both the words of Scripture and improvisation, they are led to discover their own life-stories in the stories of the Bible, and to interpret and change their outlook on life. A participant at Nemi characterized it strikingly as '*Lectio divina* on stage'. As a result of our good experience with the initial courses, Jessica Joy Candelario suggested that we introduce bibliodrama to the Philippines, a plan that was accomplished within two years.

<sup>1</sup> This article originated as a presentation at an International European Congress, 'An Experiment for Directors of the Spiritual Exercises and for Directors of Bibliodrama', held in Munich, 30 September to 3 October 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The course is named after the Second Vatican Council document.

## ***A Journey with the Word of God***

*From Nemi to Manila*

In the autumn of 1998 Dr Ludger Feldkamper SVD, the Secretary-General of CBF, invited me to offer bibliodrama workshops at a south-east Asian meeting of Biblical Coordinators. I was astonished to see how a group of over thirty participants from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Europe and other places managed to immerse themselves together in the dynamic of Mark 10:46–52 (the blind man of Jericho). All the participants at this first meeting were moved and inspired by the joy in the Word of God that they discovered.

Contrary to my initial prejudice, the participants did not show any fear of losing face in front of one another. As they were relaxed by meditative dance movements, an atmosphere of openness and alertness to the power of the Word of God emerged. An astonishing transparency became apparent between the text of the Bible and the text of life itself. Sharing common experiences, the participants showed their true faces in a way that was both playful and vulnerable.

This holistic experience of the Word of God led to more invitations to the Philippines: in 1999 and annually from 2001 onwards, for six to eight weeks at a time. During these years our project expanded to include short and intensive courses, workshops and more advanced seminars. The Philippine Bishops' Conference took responsibility for



bibliodrama training for the Philippine dioceses at a national level. Their training programme is adapted to the needs and challenges of the local cultures, and to different conditions in huge parishes, schools, universities, religious communities, and *barrios* and urban squatter communities, where the participants may well be illiterate. Especially in these less fortunate areas, facilitators use bibliodrama elements which offer the opportunity to incorporate traditional movement, gesture and dance. This helps to make the Word accessible within the context of the participants' culture, so that it can provide a more strengthening and liberating experience for people living a hard life. From the grass roots to university level a broad assortment of courses is offered, all of which enable participants to experience Scripture in a holistic way.

#### *Moving South to the Pacific*

In 2001 the Church in Papua New Guinea expressed an interest in bibliodrama, sending an invitation to the Philippine Bishops' Conference via the National Biblical Coordinator of the dioceses—Fr George Ryfa SVD, a Pole who had experienced bibliodrama at Nemi and also in the Philippines. It was his plan to offer bibliodrama workshops in the more important Papuan pastoral centres, on the same model used in the Philippines. With him and with Joy Candelario I helped to accompany basic workshops and training for bibliodrama facilitators, catechists and pastoral workers. Here too I found that the local people experienced through bibliodrama a vivid, natural and deep approach to the Word of God, which encouraged me to make plans for more work in Papua. A year later Fr Ryfa and Ms Candelario gave further basic workshops at different places across the country, from which participants were recruited to become potential facilitators.

#### *The Word of God Urges Us to Move on ...*

Where would the journey go after Papua New Guinea? The answer followed swiftly when Sr Emma Gunanto, Indonesian National Coordinator for Biblical Apostolate, issued an invitation to bibliodrama facilitators from both the Philippines and Papua New Guinea. Workshops have been run in Indonesia in 2007 and 2008 by Fr Oscar Alunday and Joy Candelario. Here is a new chance, and a new challenge, for all three countries to continue the journey with the Word of God together, playing, dancing, praying and acting, within their own cultural space and beyond it.

### ***Bibliodrama Retreats***

On this long and intensive journey with the Word of God in south-east Asia and the Pacific we undertook at least four remarkable ‘spiritual experiments’: retreats based on bibliodrama—at Tagaytay and Baguio in the Philippines, and at Goraka in Papua New Guinea. What follows is an account of the two retreats that took place at Tagaytay.

In 2004 the SVD Central Province in the Philippines invited me to conduct these two retreats, each with a mixed group of thirty brothers and sisters. I knew very well that this was a challenging and risky project, and it raised a number of questions that I would need to examine and clarify with my co-facilitator, Joy Candelario:

1. How would we manage in terms of time and physical energy with thirty participants, who might also ask for spiritual accompaniment during the retreat?
2. How would Filipinos, Chinese, Europeans, Americans, both men and women, interact?
3. Would it be possible to meet the widely different expectations of the participants, who included pastors from mountains, plains and cities, grassroots missionaries, theology professors, seminarians, nurses, teachers, pastoral missionaries and superiors of religious communities?
4. How should the participants prepare for the retreat, in order to adjust and to respect each other’s needs, so that they could interact with the Word of God, both as individuals and within the bibliodrama units in large and small groups?
5. How should we go about asking brothers and sisters from this mixed religious family to approach new challenges such as role play, dance, silence, bibliodrama elements in divine service, silent prayer, and conversational sharing at different levels? How should we, as facilitators, ensure a healthy balance without causing unnecessary tensions?

6. How could the two of us conducting this spiritual experiment creatively connect the charism of the SVD and the SSpS,<sup>3</sup> the pedagogy of the accompanied Spiritual Exercises, and the process-orientated method of bibliodrama? How could we help the participants to experience the bibliodrama retreat as a source of faith and love, given that only very few of them had experienced either an Ignatian retreat or bibliodrama?

I shall return to these questions that face the facilitators of bibliodrama retreats later on. But first I would like to look more closely at a single element within the retreats, in order to help illustrate the opportunities that they offer to Asian Christians who are searching.

*Snapshot of a Bibliodrama Element within an Ignatian Retreat*

Both bibliodrama retreats started with an element called the 'Life-map of Jesus'. This uses a sequence of twelve places in Jesus' life which helps to locate the important events and allows participants to choose a particular situation as analogous to something in their own outer or inner life. A sufficiently spacious room is needed in which thirty people can sit facing each other and still have plenty of space between them to move among the imagined places. The two facilitators (one male and one female) work alternately in an equal partnership as they accompany the participants.

This exercise proved very helpful for the participants' attitude to the retreats, getting them into the mood to listen, promoting deeper awareness, and encouraging those who were overly active to hear, to perceive, and to slow down. It is an approach that helps people to get involved with Jesus of Nazareth, picking them up wherever they might be on the journey of faith. We take our time, so that everybody in the group can develop a sense of their personal yearning at that moment, and can create their own image of God.

<sup>3</sup> SVD stands for 'Societas Verbi Divini' or 'Divine Word Missionaries', known in Europe as 'Steyler Missionaries' after Steyl, the Dutch village where the society was founded. SSpS stands for 'Servae Spiritus Sancti' ('Women Serving the Holy Spirit'). Both congregations were founded by St Arnold Janssen (1837–1909).



### *The Pilgrim Dance*

The element begins with the Pilgrim Dance,<sup>4</sup> in this case with music by Pachelbel. An introduction then focuses on a series of phrases: 'to be on a pilgrimage'; 'the people of God wandering through the desert, with Moses going before and Yahweh accompanying them'; 'making a pilgrimage with Jesus, who goes before us through the desert of this world'. The participants are invited to follow the journey of Jesus, hearing and seeing, as the facilitators tell some stories about well-known biblical places concerned in his life, which are shown on a map.

'NAZARETH'—written in big letters on a sheet of paper—is the first place. The facilitator gives a few words of commentary on its name, topography, biblical history, and relevance to Jesus and his context. These conclude, crucially, with reflections on how the participants might situate themselves in the place in question.

*The name NAZARETH comes from the Greek form of the Hebrew netser—nazar: 'shoot, sprout, branch'. Nazareth is situated in a hollow on the top of a hill, fourteen miles from the Sea of Galilee, and six miles from Mount Tabor. During the time of Jesus it was just a small village*

<sup>4</sup> In the Pilgrim Dance, which is associated both with bibliodrama and with Bible enthronement, 'the participants move with their right hands on the left shoulder of the person in front of them, ... their left hands on their heart level ... forming one body of pilgrims, journeying together' (Elmer Tadeo, 'ECBA, PBS Hold Symposium on the BEC Bible', *CBCP Monitor*, 11/18 [3–16 September 2007], 11).

with 150 to 200 inhabitants. The great highway (Via Maris) from Egypt to Asia passed close to Nazareth. We know that it was the home of Joseph and Mary and Jesus, where Jesus spent most of his childhood and adulthood—thirty years of which we know almost nothing. Here Jesus learnt to pray as a child, and was brought up and instructed by his parents. He helped his father, Joseph, who was a skilled carpenter, and most probably learned himself how to make tables, chairs and many other useful things. In this place, Nazareth, Jesus began his public life. ‘He came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter’s son?”’ (Matthew 13:54) When Jesus returned and taught in Nazareth, people felt offended by his teaching and rejected him, believing that he was out of his mind, or possessed (Mark 3:21–22). Jesus was unable to work wonders because of their unbelief (Matthew 13:58). Finally Jesus decided to separate himself from his family since they did not understand him, and this was an obstacle to his preaching (Mark 3:33–34).

**What could Nazareth stand for in my life?** It could mean the family and home to which I can return; finding my roots and feeling at home; or my need to find myself. It might evoke the memory of leaving home.

**Is there a Nazareth in my life?**

Through the narrative of Jesus’ life, based on stations in his journey to Jerusalem, the participants undergo an inner movement. The form of the ‘Life-map’ awakens an empathy for Jesus and his life; the participants are taken by the hand. The complete journey is a thorough meditative imagining, which awakens yearning and the inner spiritual senses. As soon as all twelve landmarks have been established, the facilitator goes through them all again in order to deal with any questions that arise and to establish a guiding thread for the next stage.

This next stage involves inviting the participants to imagine themselves following the path of Jesus. At each station on the way they should take stock and try to sense in what direction they are most drawn. A hint may help: ‘Walk with your feet and not with your head!’ Whatever affects participants at the different places, it is up to them to decide where and from what motives they wish to linger. It is not a question of recalling biblical knowledge but of connecting to life

experience. When faith and love come into play we are directed by holistic inner feeling. The facilitator's task is to accompany and support this process.

Once all have chosen their preferred places they position themselves and wait for a facilitator to come to interview them. A conversation occurs between the two. The facilitator's first questions are simple: Where are you? What calls you to this place? Where does your path go from here? Different, or deeper, insights may follow from more questions. But generally the dialogue is brief and specific to the life of the participant. These dialogues<sup>5</sup> are meant to be heard by the whole group. Often tears flow, or there are bursts of laughter. They provide new insights into individuals' lives, directing their gaze to the past and to the present, and so allowing them to look ahead. The facilitator visits all the places that the participants have chosen, although not everybody may need to be interviewed: it is a matter of time and of how much energy people have.

A repetition of the dance follows to conclude the session. The Pilgrim Dance consciously follows Jesus' journey, passing through all twelve places. This helps to reinforce the successive experiences of the exercise through repetition, and also gives the participants a chance to move on from them. The question 'What do I take from here?' now leads into the Ignatian contemplative prayer, in which the scene is again prepared by the imagination.

#### *Answers and Challenges*

How should we now assess the questions that we asked ourselves as facilitators before the bibliodrama retreats? Were they the right questions and how were they answered?

This first bibliodrama element turned into a creative overture for the subsequent sessions of the retreats. It provided a surprising experience, for facilitators and participants alike, of how Jesus walks with us wherever we go. The questions that we asked in advance were justified, and remain relevant to conducting future bibliodrama retreats, depending on the local culture and on potential difficulties in the composition of the groups involved. But in this case there was no

<sup>5</sup> Part of 'faith communication', according to Nico Derksen, *Bibliodrama: Impulse für ein neues Glaubensgespräch* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 2005), 52–75. On the question of spiritual welfare, see 141–142.



need for concern about how the groups' membership interacted. There was constant, open emotional and spiritual participation, without points of friction or conflicts between the generations, or between men and women, or educated and less educated participants. Cultural and national differences were not an issue. On the contrary, spontaneous joy, a sense of relaxation and childlike astonishment arose over so much fraternal goodwill. The whole process of the bibliodrama retreat led to the reconciliation of differences, and to striking breakthroughs in the creative experience of the Eucharist and of community.

Inevitably with such an experiment, however, other issues arose which we had not anticipated in our initial questions. Language is and remains a challenge: in this case English was the only common language between the participants. And we found that a special discernment of the spirits is required in accompanying the Ignatian Exercises in such a context. Facilitators have to contend with desolations brought about by the fear of failure; by irritation over cultural or linguistic misunderstandings; by the fear of losing perspective in group processes (for example, making exaggerations in free bibliodrama); and by the difficulty of maintaining a balance, while working within the team of facilitators, between personal direction or accompaniment and factual instruction. Everything depends on learning from each other in prayer and in dialogue, and on keeping to the direction in which the Spirit and the Word of God want us to move.<sup>6</sup>

In the process of accompanying the participants' spiritual experience, the following basic insights proved helpful to us:

- As a facilitator I am in the service of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. I am only a student before the Lord and Master.
- I take joint responsibility for the process of transformation of the participants from without, but only to a certain extent from within.
- The decisive guidance on the inner way is controlled by the *magis*-impulse between the individual and the God of life: it does not come from the facilitator.

<sup>6</sup> See Peter Köster, who regards the one accompanying in the Exercises as having a 'pivotal function', *Sein Leben ordnen. Anleitung zu den Exerzitien des Ignatius von Loyola* (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), 84–86.

- I need enough humility, calm and commitment to accept the limitations of the participants, and my own.
- There are spiritual criteria for conducting bibliodrama retreats which help us, especially in Asia and the Pacific, to look anew at the journey with the Word of God, and at humanity.

These insights encouraged us, as facilitators, to commit ourselves unreservedly to what was developing into a particularly Asian form of encounter between the Scriptures and the search of faith, based on individual experience and deepened in community.

An important spiritual framework for our work in the bibliodrama retreats has been the missionary commitment of our order, as it is expressed in the constitutions of the SVD:

It is by listening to the word of God and living it that we become co-workers of the Divine Word. The witness of a truly Christian life, personally and as a community, is the first step in the realisation of our missionary service. People must be able to recognise that we have experienced in our own lives the kingdom that we proclaim to others.<sup>7</sup>

The biblical-spiritual criteria that are suggested here for Jesus' co-workers are especially relevant for bibliodrama and retreat work. In terms of our specific mission to Asia, the words of Luis Antonio Tagle, Bishop of Imus in the Philippines, have also been helpful. Speaking to the Asian Mission Congress held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in October 2006, he said:

A story is never just a story. A story is truly a story when told or narrated, and hopefully listened to. Nowadays, one of the names of storytelling is sharing. In *Ecclesia in Asia*, Pope John Paul II describes mission as sharing the light of faith in Jesus, a gift received and a gift to be shared to the peoples of Asia. That sharing can take the form of telling the story of Jesus. I believe that storytelling provides a creative framework for understanding mission in Asia, a continent whose cultures and religions are rooted in great stories or epics. Pope John Paul II also recognises the narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms as a preferred way of proclaiming Jesus in Asia ....<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Constitutions, 1983, adapted to the resolutions of the 15<sup>th</sup> General Chapter in 2000, *Constitutions and Directory of the Society of the Divine Word* (Rome: 2000 [1983]), 106.

<sup>8</sup> Luis Antonio G. Tagle, 'Mission in Asia: Telling the Story of Jesus', 1, available at [http://www.fabc.org/asian\\_mission\\_congress/docs/MISSION%20IN%20ASIA%20by%20Tagle.pdf](http://www.fabc.org/asian_mission_congress/docs/MISSION%20IN%20ASIA%20by%20Tagle.pdf). And see *Ecclesia in Asia*, 10 and 20.

Against the background of such a wide theological and spiritual perspective on Asia, bibliodrama is like a tiny mustard seed sown in a vast continent, that has taken root but has yet to grow into a plant. But the growth, maturing and fruitfulness of bibliodrama, in its mutually sustaining relationship with the Ignatian Exercises, is not only an Asian concern, but an international one. It depends upon close intercultural cooperation and a dialogue between the story of Jesus and the story of humanity, in order to play out the drama of the true story of Jesus of Nazareth.

### ***The Stage of Peoples and Cultures***

*Veni jocare mecum*—‘Come and play with me!’ Thus it is written on a remarkable painting by the German artist Hildegard Hendrichs. Jesus, crowned with thorns, is shown after his scourging, with inquiring, bloody eyes, almost-smiling lips and open, outstretched arms, the hands bleeding. This Jesus looks at the observer, not accusing but inviting. The invitation is incised into the wall beside him: *veni jocare mecum*. To what game does this man invite? He invites us to a game which is the truth of life, to a crucial game of love with his Father. And in so doing he draws his playfellow away from another game: of hatred, of the prosecution and condemnation of an innocent human being before the eyes of all the world. Are those who watch able to recognise what is being played out?

The title of this article, ‘*Dei verbum Meets homo ludens*’, forms a commentary on the picture and its text. The phrase *homo ludens* (‘man the player’)



originates with the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, but has been adopted by Hugo Rahner in his influential theology of play.<sup>9</sup> God's Word coming into our world, the Logos incarnated, becomes the greatest *homo ludens* on earth: 'in this game of grace Christ has actually become the playmate of man'.<sup>10</sup> I have found that bibliodrama and the Ignatian Exercises together are able to discover this playful man, Jesus of Nazareth, in human beings and to help them follow his invitation. This experience and invitation of Jesus has greatly encouraged our whole bibliodrama team in its work. Jesus as true *ludimagister* (master, and teacher, of the game) has taken us by the hand and has led us beyond our national and cultural borders. There among the Asian peoples and cultures, the 'master of the game' himself has prepared an arena for his Word and for the people eager to follow his example.

### ***The Word of God Links Peoples, Cultures and Countries***

Our long journey across continents with the Word of God is far from reaching its end. I constantly rejoice afresh to witness the spiritual experiences of people from so many different places. The hearts of men and women, of young and old, of entire communities, are filled with joy by the Word of God. Bibliodrama has the potential to open up new paths towards deeper understanding and experience for Christians who hunger to transplant their faith into their own life and culture. It offers them an alternative to the often bourgeois and commercialised 'mega-church' movement, to biblical fundamentalism, and to a bland multiculturalism imposed by globalisation. The people I have encountered on my journey are able to experience the presence of God authentically and spontaneously, and bibliodrama helps them to express their deepest feelings and emotions in community. I have heard so many of them exclaim, overwhelmed, at the power of the Word of God. At the same time, our international team that has been travelling across continents with the Word has also gained in strength and mutual trust. Team work

<sup>9</sup> See Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play*, translated by Brian Battershaw and Edward Quinn (London: Burns and Oates, 1965). Rahner offers a remarkable account of the origins of play in four parts: 'God at Play', 'Man at Play', 'The Church at Play' and 'The Heavenly Dance'. This book provides an inexhaustible store of knowledge for interpreting bibliodrama and the Ignatian Exercises, and how they complement each other and relate together at the level of theology.

<sup>10</sup> Rahner, *Man at Play*, 47.

requires a deeper source for such a project to succeed. Bibliodrama is one way to the inexhaustible well of Scripture, and to different cultures and peoples.

*translated by Martin Jäggi BMS and Julian Lock*

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