

## The African Bible Project

The experience I chose to share with you today for the theme of “Communicating with and from the margins: the contribution of religious orders” is connected to the publishing of “The African Bible.” I will start with a brief presentation of my religious Institute and the specific mission the Daughters of St. Paul perform in the Church and in society, namely: evangelization through the communications media.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, our Founder, Father James Alberione, reflecting on the political, social and religious reality of the people of his time, felt compelled and called by the Lord "to do something for the people of the new century". And the conclusion he reached was: "What could be better than to give Jesus Christ, the Truth, to this poor and confused humanity?"

It was a time in which new technologies of communication were beginning to emerge and Fr. Alberione saw them as a new way to reach out to people, near and far, rich and poor, Christians and not Christians... He was aware that many people were not going to Church any more, and therefore the best way to reach them was to touch their mind and hearts through the powerful means of communication. He described the Pauline apostle as “*a person holding the Gospel in one hand and a newspaper in the other.*”

He realized the importance of first getting to know the needs of people and to walk alongside them on their journey through life. To give continuity to the plan of action he was initiating, he founded the Congregation of the Society of St. Paul (SSP - Fathers) and the Daughters of St. Paul (DSP - Sisters).

The Daughters of St. Paul arrived in Africa in 1964: our Institute’s first foundation was Uganda, followed by Tanzania in 1970, and Kenya in 1976.

Our publishing work on this continent started in 1985, when Sr. Teresa Marcazzan arrived in Nairobi and launched a Paulines Publishing House.

The fertile soil that gave rise to our extraordinary Bible initiative in Africa was the long experience the Daughters of St. Paul had accumulated through their many years of evangelization activities among the people of that continent, in dialogue with teachers, parents and pastoral agents who constantly begged for a Catholic Bible at a reasonable price—one that included notes and commentaries understandable to the ordinary person.

As a matter of fact, when we began our mission in Africa, the only Bible available to the people and to schools at a low price was the “Good News Bible”, printed and imported by the Bible Society. But this Bible did not include the Deutero-canonical book, nor did it have explanatory notes. Another imported edition was “The Jerusalem Bible”, but it was expensive and its notes were not simple enough to be understood by people with just basic religious instruction. The New American Bible was also imported, but it too was quite costly.

During one of our sisters’ first meetings to discuss publishing projects for Africa, they resolved to listen to the people’s plea for a new edition of the Catholic Bible. They wanted to make that dream come true so they set out on the adventure of publishing a Bible for Africa that would reflect the mentality and the culture of that

Continent. They wanted it to include pastoral notes understandable to the average person, and they also wanted to offer it to the public at a modest price.

A large number of biblical scholars, both indigenous Africans and missionaries present on the continent for many years, became involved in this Project. The names of these scholars were entrusted to Paulines Publications by the director of BICAM (Catholic Biblical Centre for Africa and Madagascar), based in Nairobi.

The invitation to collaborate with this Project was sent to 150 biblical scholars in various African countries. The response was very positive and over thirty of these experts contributed in different ways to this initiative by writing introductions, commentaries and notes that resulted in the enculturated text that the people of Africa wanted.

The Bible text was selected at the suggestion of the Apostolic Nunzio of Nairobi and the friendly support of the Porticus personnel. Miss Elizabeth Sperry of the USA Bishops' Conference was the contact person who made the DSP dream come true by offering the text of The New American Bible free-of-charge for the benefit of the African people .

The Project was launched in January 1996, with the setting up of a Work Team, the appointment of Fr. Angelo Colacrai, ssp, and Fr. Zinkuratire, sss, as General Editors. Sr. Teresa Marcazzan, DSP, coordinated and supervised the whole Project, which took about four years to complete.

In 1999, the long-awaited African Bible was published. Its pages were enriched with introductions, explanations of the text, footnotes and cross-references, all prepared by African biblical scholars, illustrators and graphic designers who made it a point to reflect the specific cultural relevance of the text to African readers.

Our Paulines Publishing House in Africa did not receive the aid of any International Charitable Agencies to finance the first edition of this Bible because the agencies felt that the Project was too ambitious and thus there were doubts concerning the concrete possibility of bringing the work to a successful conclusion. Sr. Teresa Marcazzan received the financial aid needed to print the first 30,000 copies of the text from her brother, Fr. Giuseppe Marcazzan and his parishioners in Tonezza (Vicenza), Italy).

When the AMECEA Bishops held their annual meeting, the African Bible was officially presented to the Church leaders and to the representatives of the Charitable Organizations. At that point, it was clear to everyone that this was THE Bible Africa was waiting for: an enculturated Bible for ordinary people, able to offer them the tools they needed to help them understand and interpret the text, and thus identify with the Word of God and make it their own. It was a wonderful occasion for the Charitable Organizations to become aware of the evangelizing power of this new edition of the Bible and to endorse the Project, giving it the generous financial support it needed. Among these Organizations, we want to call special attention to Missio-Munich, Propaganda Fide, and Missio-Aachen.

Ten years later, with 200,000 copies of the African Bible disseminated throughout the continent and all over the world, it was possible to completely revise the critical apparatus of the text, add illustrations and supplementary notes, and publish a second edition called “The New African Bible”.

As of now, Paulines Publications Africa has distributed 350,000 copies of this edition.

As a conclusion I would like to call attention to three aspects of the Bible Project that I think are especially relevant and closely linked to the specific theme of this panel: “Communicating with and from the Margins: the contribution of religious orders”:

### **Continuity:**

When the Institute of the Daughters of St. Paul undertakes an evangelization initiative, it does so in the name of the whole Congregation. It no longer belongs to just the person who “created” or gave birth to it. This is a fundamental attitude of the DSPs and it allows us to assure our initiatives continuity, support and vitality.

### **Solidarity:**

**WITH** all the Pauline Sisters, as they are the ears, the eyes and the main contributors of the Publishing House. Solidarity **with** the local church and **with** the project’s collaborators: advisors, authors, artists, editors, graphic designers, printers and many others. Solidarity **with** the parish priests, rectors of seminaries, religious congregations, institutions, schools and universities, prison chaplains. Solidarity **with** CAMECO, which has offered us its expertise in many ways and on many projects.

**WITH** other Paulines Publishing Houses in Africa.

In fact, the publishing of this Bible by our East Africa Publishing House awakened great interest in our other Publishing Houses throughout the continent. Requests from them quickly began to arrive and in response our Nairobi Publishing House decided to grant the use of the critical apparatus of the text free of charge to them. This spirit of solidarity facilitated the publishing of the African Bible in Portuguese, Kiswahili, French, and a soon-to-be released edition in Malagasy.

### **Financial Sustainability:**

Thanks to the generosity and the financial support offered by Missio Munich, Propaganda Fide and Missio Aachen, ACN Church in Need, Cologne Archdioceses, the Paulines Publishing House created a “revolving fund” which made it possible to offer the Bible to the public at a very low price and then continue to reprint it a number of times. In fact, as a special strategy the pricing of the books is considered from a two-way standpoint: first, that price is affordable to the people, and second, that it enables the Publishing House to recover its printing costs so to ensure continuity of publishing.

As Daughters of St. Paul, we believe and can say that through all the people and organizations mentioned, and with the clear evangelization strategies adopted, we

are working for, reaching, communicating with and influencing the MARGINS of society, who are communicating with us and influencing us in return.  
Thank you.

Sr. Noemi Bergamin  
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