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***“Then their [our] eyes were opened...”* (Luke 24:31)**

## **Grassroots/Popular Bible Reading in Latin America**

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### **On the roads of Latin America - ‘...two of them were going to a village called Emmaus...’ (Luke 24:13).**

Grassroots or ‘Popular Bible Reading’ (PBR) is a space for reflection that takes as its starting point a dialogue between life and the Bible. This is the approach to the Word that is practised by the Base Ecclesial Communities. These small groups can be found in various countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. PBR is a way of reading which has become a movement that draws in Catholic and evangelical groups, communities of brothers and sisters who find themselves on the Road of reading the Word and of following Jesus. For more than thirty years now these groups have been meeting for times of regular reflection (every week, every fifteen days or every month), for training/formation, in bigger meetings and in Bible reading networks. These encounters have produced a wide range of published resources, both at the level of popular helps and of deeper exegetical studies that seek to support the process of reading.

### **Life and the Bible - ‘talking with each other about all these things that had happened’ (Luke 24:15).**

Two convictions lie at the root of the beginnings of PBR. The first is faith in the Bible as the word of God, a living word, the presence of the Spirit who transforms history. The second certainty is that the same God whom we encounter in the Bible also speaks to us through life, through the present realities of our communities. For this reason, Bible study takes as its starting point an exploration of this reality; it looks at life and asks questions that arise from historical situations, from everyday experiences, questions that will present themselves when we read the Bible texts. We talk about what’s been happening, the ‘latest news’, the pain that is present in the lives of the people. At other times people will recall the joys, the signs of hope, experiences of resistance, dreams and utopian visions.

The aim is a critical reading, a reading that seeks to analyze the roots of the problems, the power relationships that underlie situations of domination, the intellectual structures that prevent people from seeing solutions that go beyond the limitations of the present. To read these realities is to listen to the cries of the poorest women and men, those who are excluded by their economic situation, or who experience discrimination because of their social class or are marginalized for ethnic or racial reasons. These are the realities that contribute to the life stories that people share in these times of Bible study. The first step in the process of grassroots Bible reading is to listen with compassion and with a questioning / critical attitude. ‘[They] were talking with each other about all these things that had happened.’

**A liberating re-reading of the Word - ‘Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures’ (Luke 24:27).**

The starting point from which we read reality will shape the reading and interpretation of the Bible text. In the process of PBR, it is the world of the poor, their needs, disappointments and dreams, that is the starting point for reading reality and the text. It is clear that something similar is going on in the story of the Emmaus disciples. Why were the walkers on the Emmaus road unable to understand their lives, their mission, the death and resurrection of Jesus in the light of Scripture? What was it that kept their eyes closed? Why were they unable to recognise in Jesus the Messiah they were hoping for? Perhaps because of the way they were reading their own reality and what they had understood of the messianic promises. In Jesus’ time, the messianic hope was shaped by two different readings of the Messiah. There was the Messiah who would come as king, surrounded by glory and power. The other image of the Messiah was that of the servant, the suffering servant. There on the road, they were filled with disappointment at not having encountered in Jesus the Messiah of glory and power: ‘...we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place’ (v 21).

Luke presents us with a Jesus who embarks on a re-reading of the Bible, explaining the reality, explaining what had happened, on the basis of ‘his’ interpretation of the texts, drawing on the witness of Moses and the prophets. The re-reading that Jesus does is not the official reading of the religious systems of his time. Others could take the same texts and offer a different interpretation. PBR understands that every interpretation of a text is a re-reading. The text is always rich in meaning and open to a range of interpretations. The act of reading implies the momentary closing of the text in response to the demands of each specific situation within which the text is read. This is why it is important to be aware of the situation within which the reading takes place, because this will determine the interpretation of the text.

In Latin America the interpretational situation is shaped by the community dimension - so we talk about reading communities. We affirm that the community is the context (literally ‘the lap’) in which the meaning of the text can rest and express its full implications. This is a passionate reading in which people study the text and explore it deeply with body, soul and emotions... ‘Were not our hearts burning within us?’

Over the years in which PBR has been practised, the interpretive community or those individuals who have interpreted the text, have become more diverse and the community has become enriched. At the start, in the 1960s and 70s, it was the poor, the economically marginalised who were the focus for our approach to reading reality and the text. The texts that were most read in these first stages were Exodus, the prophets and the stories of Jesus’ way of life in the Gospels. Without abandoning this interpretational focus, in the 1980s and 90s, historical events and social movements contributed to other faces from the world of the poor becoming more visible. We began to understand how marginalization and poverty come about through exclusion on the basis of gender, culture and age. From then on, PBR has been enriched by the different faces or individuals who seek to read the Bible on the basis of their specific realities. So women, indigenous people, people of African descent, young people and rural people have been engaging in PBR.

The richness that these groups bring lies in the range of ways they approach a text. It's not just a matter of discovering the liberating dimension of the Bible texts; it's also a matter of recognising the ambiguities of some texts in relation to people's lived reality. Besides recognising these ambiguities, the reading of the Bible by these groups also seeks to value the religious expressions of different cultures as ways in which God is manifested. This can feed ecumenical and interfaith dialogue as it offers a space of mutual respect, of valuing the other, of strengthening solidarity as we seek to build worlds and societies that are more just and more humane. This process has presented enormous challenges to PBR in Latin America in recent years. In freedom and with authority we face these challenges, encouraged by the Spirit of the Risen One. We insist on the need to go on seeking a liberating re-reading of the Scriptures, just as Jesus did with the Emmaus disciples.

**A liberating commitment, eyes opened, mission accepted - '...their eyes were opened' (v 31); '...they got up and returned to Jerusalem' (v 33).**

The starting point for reading the Bible is to listen to reality; its arrival point is commitment to transformation of life, of reality. We read the Bible so as to live better lives, in ways that demonstrate greater solidarity, greater fellowship, that seek more justice and quality of life for all. This commitment is about life in all its material nature, commitment to seek dignity of life for the poor. It is in the breaking and sharing of bread that Jesus is known. This is commitment to seek more just structures in society, to discover new meanings in life and therefore to break with the counter-values of the dominant society. The moment of commitment invites us to seek in the stories and traditions of our peoples, that wisdom, those signs and symbols and attitudes that have been historically denied and stamped out by the idolatrous spirit of neo-liberal globalization. PBR affirms the transformation of history and seeks to revive hope in the building of the kingdom of God. It affirms a sense of new horizons where women and men, children, young people and old can live together in joy as daughters and sons of God.

## **Summary**

**For a reading that makes our hearts burn...**

**One** fundamental attitude - to LISTEN TO reality and to the Bible text;

**Two** directions to look - one at real LIFE and the other at the BIBLE;

**Three** important places: the COMMUNITY, as the locus for reading and experiencing the text; our REALITY as the permanent challenge that we must take on and seek to transform; the BIBLE as light and resource for feeding our lives.

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