

Integrity and Corruption in the Bible: President's Address and Presentation of the Convention Theme

Welcome and Acknowledgements

With joy and gratitude to God, I welcome all here present to the Twelfth Annual Conference of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN). I welcome, in particular and with gratitude, his Lordship, Most Rev. Dr Jude Ayedéji Arogundade, the Catholic Bishop of Ondo Diocese, represented by the Vicar General, Very Rev. Fr. Dr Anthony Ojo, for graciously accepting to host us in the Diocese and at this Domus Pastoral Centre. Our faithful CABAN Bishop member, Most Rev. Dr Martin Olorunmolu, Bishop of Lokoja and Chair of Biblical Apostolates and Evangelisation of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), you are most welcome. Your Excellency, Most Rev. Dr Francis Folorunsho Alonge, Bishop Emeritus of Ondo Diocese, we are very happy to have you with us. Very Rev. Fr. Victor Onwukeme, immediate past Superior General of the Missionary Society of St Paul (MSP), you are a founding member of CABAN. You attend our conferences regularly and present papers. You show that administration and research are not mutually exclusive. Thank you.

I thank you, the people of God, who have come to listen with us at this Conference to what the Spirit will teach us. From the number of paper presentations lined up, we know that the Spirit has a rich banquet for us. Beloved CABAN members, it is great encouragement to see you here, to know of the sacrifices you have made to be here, despite the lurking fears about the risks of travelling in different parts of Nigeria. Without your presence, there would be no CABAN Conference 2019. God will bless you for keeping CABAN alive and active by your active presence.

Lastly, we sincerely thank Rev. Fr. Dr Anthony Ojo, a founding member of CABAN and Chair of the Local Organising Committee (LOC), for the work he did with the LOC in preparing for this Conference. Fr. Ojo, you and your team of collaborators liaised with the Executive of CABAN to ensure smooth preparations for the conference. Thank you, Rev. Fr. Joseph Ogodo, Director of the Domus Pacis Institute, for warmly welcoming us from the beginning and promising that we will have all we need for this conference. Fr. Anthony Ewherido, thank you for your zeal

in exploring and finding us this venue for CABAN 2019, and for asking Fr. Ojo to set up and chair the Local Organising Committee. This Committee worked with our seasoned Secretary, Fr. Luke Ijezie, and the CABAN President in preparing for the Conference. You did well, Fr. Ewherido, once you finally found this venue, to ask Fr. Ojo, as the one on the spot, to take over the responsibility of chairing the LOC, a task which the last Assembly in Abuja had entrusted to you. This is a good example of collaborative ministry. May God bless you.

0. Brief Elaboration of the Conference Theme

0.1. National and International Contexts of the Theme

Someone described the theme of our conference, “*Integrity and Corruption in the Bible*”, as a bombshell. Integrity in the Bible, yes; but can we speak of corruption in the Bible, the word of God? The members of the Executive Committee struggled with the same problem in choosing this topic. If corruption occurs in and through human beings, then in so far as there are human beings in the Bible (and there are myriads of them), corruption is bound to occur among them. We chose this theme in order to discern what the Bible, God’s written word in human language and contexts, says about integrity and corruption; and to distinguish between integrity and the corrupt practices of humans in this same Bible. Ultimately, how does the Bible guide and challenge us today to deal with the evil of corruption through its liberating message, especially the message of the prophets and most especially, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the prophet of prophets?

Corruption and the fight against it are household words in Nigeria and globally. So far, this fight seems to be limited to embezzlement of public funds and failure to declare personal assets by politicians, civil servants and people in public office. Yet corruption permeates all sectors of society (religion and church included). While there is much talk about corruption and its eradication, little is said about promoting integrity in all citizens as antidote to corruption and a sound means for eradicating it. Corruption is carried out by humans; until the humans who are corrupt and who practice corruption (not merely their corrupt acts) are treated as central in the fight against corruption; until they are helped to regain their true identity as people created in God’s image and likeness, irrespective

of religion, creed, nationality or any such considerations, corruption will continue in all sectors of our society, promoted even by the very people who claim to fight it.

In Nigeria, for instance, politicians who are guilty of corruption and are liable to be prosecuted by the ruling party (currently the All Progressives Congress, APC), quickly change parties to avoid being probed and prosecuted. They carry their endemic corruption into a new party that already has its own corrupt members. Thus, they make corruption the foundational structure of the party while parading themselves as an anti-corruption party. People groan about multiple forms of corruption in the Church by pastors and some lay leaders: mismanagement and embezzlement of Church funds and exploitation of God's people in all kinds of ways, including the payment of tithes and levying charges for the administration of the sacraments, sacramentals and diverse blessings, all in God's name.¹ Does the Bible endorse such practices? Can a corrupt system cure the nation/nations of corruption or win the fight against corruption?

Recent events in Africa and beyond prove that Nigeria does not have a monopoly of corruption. We Nigerians and Africans generally speak openly of our national and continental weaknesses. Others hide theirs and promote their positive image in the media; the good they think they have. After we had chosen our conference theme, we learnt through www.aciafrica.org and its regular electronic newsletter,² of the commitment of the Kenyan Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) to

¹ For a documentation of such practices in the Catholic Church see, for instance, Teresa Okure, "Abuses of the Bible by Some Catholic Pastors Who Terrorize and Traumatize the Lay Faithful by Their False Interpretation of the Bible"; Commissioned Paper (and topic) given at the Biennial Conference of Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) and the Major Superiors of Nigeria (CMSN), Diocesan Conference Center, Bishop's Court, Effurun, Warri, Delta State, 11-13 September 2014.

² Aciafrica (initially tagged ACI Africa), the Association for Catholic Information in Africa, is a continental Catholic news agency at the service the Catholic Church in Africa officially launched on 17th August 2019 with its headquarters in Nairobi. It is a project of EWTN Global Catholic Network, with Fr Don Bosco Onyalla as Editor-in-Chief.

tackle the evil of corruption in their country, starting from within the Church.³

The Kenyan Bishops drew the inspiration of their anti-corruption campaign from the invitation by Pope Francis during his visit to the country in 2015, and his “appeal especially to the young people to overcome and not be swallowed by this evil”. The campaign aimed at awakening both “the baptismal calling and the consequences of being a Christian... called to fight evil and to stand for what is right” and through that in-house approach to “awaken the general conscience of all those people who believe in God”.⁴

The concrete measures taken in the “Subukia Pastoral Declaration on Corruption” to effect the fight against corruption from within the church included:

- “The establishment of a corruption complaints desk in all Catholic Churches across the country to keep a record of reports of corruption that the public may wish to make”.
- “The renewal of “baptismal promises in all our Churches on Sundays, using the specific formula that highlights the rejection of the evil of corruption”.
- “The declaration of “a shift from cash to electronic transactions in order to have details of the donor” and safeguard against the possibility of “some politicians providing ill-gotten money to Churches during fundraising events”.

The Bishops included themselves in making a personal commitment to the campaign:

- “Each Bishop read, signed and handed over a personal declaration to the Chairman of KCCB as a sign of commitment that they will spearhead the Bishops’ collective

³ Mercy Maina, “Fighting ‘curse’ of Corruption in Kenya among Bishops’ Commitments at Saturday National Prayer Day” at the Village of Mary Mother of God Shrine, Subukia, Nakuru Diocese; aciafrica electronic newsletter of 3rd October 2019. According to this report, an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 Christians were expected to participate in the National Prayer Day; ACI Africa, Nairobi, emailing of 3 October 2019.

⁴ Idem, “Why Bishops in Kenya are Taking a Radical Move against Corruption”, ACI Africa, Nairobi.

initiative of fighting against corruption in their respective ecclesiastical territories”.⁵

Subsequent news of the campaign showed how individuals, civil societies and religious groups joined the Bishops in the campaign.

Worth noting is that the Kenyan Bishops anti-corruption campaign is located in the call by Pope Francis to fight the global scourge of corruption. CABAN wants to link his call to fight corruption to his initiative in commissioning the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) to prepare a document on what it means to be a human being, regardless of creed or anthropological considerations. This document promises to be the human counterpart of *Laudato Sí*; instead of focusing on the Earth our Common Home, it will focus on our common identity as human beings across the globe.⁶ I mention this document here, without prejudice to the findings of the PBC, because conscience constitutes the common denominator of what it means to be human. It also constitutes the intrinsic and primary guide for living a life of integrity or of corruption if integrity is ignored.

It is within the above national and global contexts that CABAN situates its Spirit-inspired conference theme, *Integrity and Corruption in the Bible*.⁷ As biblical scholars, we are privileged to be able to explore in

⁵ Idem., “What Bishops in Kenya Resolved to Do in Fighting against Corruption”, ACI-Africa, emailing of 8th October 2019.

⁶ The expected document from the Pontifical Biblical Commission was published in Italian after our Conference with the title, *Che cosa è l'uomo? Un itinerario di antropologia biblica* (30 September 2019) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019). Though dated 30 September 2019, this document was not released till 16 December 2019; cf. the interview of Father Pietro Bovati, SJ, the secretary for the Commission with Vatican News, “Pontifical Biblical Commission examines question: What is man?”, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2019-12/pontifical-biblical-commission-examines-question-what-is-man.html>”; accessed 3 January 2020; to date (date of accessing the website) the only available version is the Italian. See further, “‘What is Man?’ (Ps 8:5). An itinerary of biblical anthropology available only in Italian” <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/what-is-man-an-itinerary-of-biblical-anthropology/>, accessed 17 April 2020.

⁷ Fr Dr Jean Bosco Martand, an African member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC), reported at the Biennial Congress of the Pan-african Association of Catholic Exegetes (PACE) held at Pope Paul II Pastoral Centre, Garki Abuja (September 1-8,

depths the Bible (loved and cherished by all Nigerians and Africans, irrespective of religion) so as to gain gospel, faith-based understanding of integrity and corruption and offer true, sustainable solutions to the evil, which seems to be endemic in all sectors of Church and society in our country, continent and world. The wide range of topics chosen by CABAN members from different books of the Bible indicate the extent to which corruption and the call for integrity exist in this Holy Book and its challengingly saving message for today.

0.2. A Brief on Integrity and Corruption

Corruption may be described as all actions done in the dark to deceive and cheat others. They include falsehood, dishonesty, moral corruption, bribery, political corruption (rigging elections), corruption in religion, in inter-personal and community relationships and transactions, 419 activities, the idolatry (including making self a god and accepting to be made one by others), using God, the Bible and the teachings of Jesus and the Church in the self-serving service to Mammon, exploiting others, especially the trusting, unsuspecting and innocent people to enrich the self. It embraces deceitful human abuses of all kinds.

The plethora of dictionaries definitions of corruption (with its allied words: corrupt, corrupting, corrupted), and of integrity (with its allied words: perfection, simplicity understood as absence of double dealing) give insight on what is at stake in these terms:

- **Corruption:** 1. crooked, immoral and perverse; 2. depraved, dishonest and venal (corrupt politician); 3. rotting, putrid; 4. containing mistakes (e.g., corrupt text).
- **Corrupting** (verb transitive): 1. to ruin or undermine integrity and honesty; 2. to make morally impure; 3. to taint, contaminate; 4. to cause to become rotten, spoil. Corruption comes from the Latin "*corrumpere*".⁸

2019) that when the document appears, Pope Francis would ask all Catholic institutions to study and contribute to its scope. CABAN is one of these institutions.

⁸ This and the next set of definitions on integrity are from the *Miriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Third Revised Edition.

- **Integrity** (honesty), uncorrupted (from the Latin *integritas*: soundness, true, real, solid, complete, lacking nothing; e.g., textual integrity). Comprehensive meaning: “firm adherence to a code of standard values”, “state of being unimpaired”, perfection.

To the above definitions of corruption may be added its synonyms: “dishonesty, dishonest dealings, unscrupulousness, deceit, deception, duplicity, double-dealing, fraud, fraudulence, misconduct, lawbreaking, crime, criminality, delinquency, wrongdoing, villainy”.⁹

The Kenyan Bishops in their campaign noted above, described corruption as “‘the sin of a rotten heart that rots all human relations’, a ‘rejection of truth and honesty’ and ‘the rejection of God’s laws’”.¹⁰

The NRSV Concordance¹¹ has several references to corruption and its related words: corrupt, corrupting and corrupted, mostly from the OT. Things that are corrupt and corrupted include human beings who “deeply corrupted themselves” (Hos 9:9); who are “abominable and corrupt” (Job 15:16); those “who say there is no God are corrupt” (Psa 14:1; 53:1); humans make “their ways” (Gen 6:12; Ezek 9:19) and “their deeds” (Ezek 20:44) corrupt; people can corrupt wisdom (Ezek 28:17) and the covenant (Mal 2:8) for the sake of gain. For Ecclesiastes, “a bribe corrupts the heart” (Eccl 7:7). Humans extend corruption to creation “the earth was corrupt” (Gen 6:11, 12).

The NT references to corruption are few. Peter, in his Pentecost address to devout Jewish dwellers in Jerusalem “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5), urges his audience to save themselves from “this corrupt generation” (Acts 2:40). This is in contrast to Christ who even in death did not “experience corruption” (Acts 2:27). Ephesians urges the converts to forsake their former way of life, their “old self corrupt and deluded by its lusts” (Eph 4:22). The pastoral letters speak of people with

⁹ From a Google search on corruption.

¹⁰ See note 3 above.

¹¹The *NRSV Exhaustive Concordance*. Including Apocryphal and Deuterocanonical Books. Complete and Unabridged. With Editorial Consulting and Introduction by Bruce M. Metzger (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991; revised 2010).

“corrupt mind and counterfeit” (2 Tim 3:8); of those who are “corrupt and unbelieving” and of “minds and consciences” that are corrupt (Tit 1:15). Paul protests that he and his companions have “have corrupted no one . . . have taken no advantage of anybody” (2 Cor 7:2).

These biblical entries attribute corruption to lack of integrity in persons, and their actions. The reference in Acts to Jesus’ body (understood) not seeing corruption through death (Acts 2:27) heightens the innate character of corruption. Lazarus’ body, according to his sister Martha, was subjected to corruption: disintegration and stench after four days (cf. John 11:29). Paul’s stance draws attention to corrupt methods of preaching the gospel, one which distorts the message and exploits others for personal gain.

Integrity, on the other hand, is a property of humans, made “in God’s image and likeness” (Gen 1:26, 27; 5:1-2), which God saw to be “good, beautiful, perfect” (Gen 1:27, 31). God’s endowment of humans with integrity happened before ever any law was given. Concordance references to integrity (Heb *tom*; *tummah*) are largely in texts that do not relate directly to the Torah (e.g., Gen 20:5, 6; Prov 11:3, 19:1, 7; Job 2:3, 9). Proverb, by nature, is the native wisdom of a people. Yet today this God-based and God-endowed integrity has all but vanished from the land.

What emerges from these biblical examples is that corruption and integrity are qualities of persons, with or without a written law. As such, corruption and integrity form the meeting point for Christians, Moslems, African traditional religionists and adherents of other religions. They are also the meeting point of developed and developing countries. We may each revisit our traditional cultures to see where they stand with regard to corruption and integrity.

In Ibibio language, with its kin languages Efik and Anang, corruption, as applied to persons and their activities, is not a readily defined concept. A person of integrity (*owo unen*) is one who is forthright in him/herself and in his/her dealings with others, one who does what is right (*anam unen*). It is difficult to think of its opposite (a corrupt person). I asked ordinary people and professors and linguistics of the language; they had the same difficulty in readily finding its opposite in the pure traditional setting of

the language. *Owo mbubik* is a wicked person; one who does harm to others (*anam mbubik*), not one who is corrupt in himself or herself. In my continued search, a member of CABAN gave me the Efik word for a corrupt person “*owo nwo*”. The word itself is onomatopoeic (*woh woh*); it registers the looseness, the disintegration, lack of solidity in the character or fabric of the corrupt person. Though the term exists in the language, it is not as common in daily usage as is a person of integrity, *owo unen*; one who is upright, truthful, solid, reliable, and dependable.

Corruption may be compared to a virus like HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), which, if not arrested, slowly becomes AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) in one's body and system. It assimilates itself into the immune system, like chameleon. When the medication is administered against it, the immune system thinks it is being attacked and so attacks the medication instead of the virus. That way the virus is protected. Meanwhile, it gradually gnaws at and eats away the immune system itself that God gives to fight foreign bodies. Eventually the immune system collapses; the result is full blown AIDS.¹²

Conscience is a person's God-given moral immune system. Corruption weakens and may eventually kill this immune system first in the person, and subsequently in community, nation and world. The moral immunity of the family, communities (including church communities) nation, and world depend on the moral immunity of individuals who form these communities. Our Conference theme is addressing a reality which belongs to the fabric of the human being as one created in God's image and likeness. The gift of life and the ultimate responsibility for living it is that of the individual.

The wisdom literature corroborates this truth. This literature deals with the gut level shared wisdom of a people, not based on religious laws and decrees. Wisdom way of speaking, especially the parabolic and proverbial way of speaking, is typically African. Biblical wisdom

¹² For my works on this subject, see Teresa Okure, “HIV/AIDS and Africa: The Real Issues”; in *The Church and HIV/AIDS in West African Context*; Proceedings of Sixteenth CIWA Theology Week, 14-17th March, 2005; edited by Ferdinand Nwaigbo, *et al*, Port Harcourt: CIWA Publications, 2005. 66-94; the study on HIV AIDS was first presented at the CAFOD Consultation on HIV/AIDS, Bertoni Centre, Pretoria, April 14-17, 1998; and later at Durban 1999.

literature sets integrity antithetically against corruption using concrete, not philosophical images. A few examples will suffice:

- “The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them” (Prov 11:3).¹³
- “Better the poor walking in integrity than one perverse of speech who is a fool” (Prov 19:1)
- “Better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked in one's ways even though rich” (Prov 28:6).
- “Surely oppression makes the wise foolish, and a bribe corrupts the heart” (Eccl 7:7).

The examples from the Book of Proverbs underscore that integrity is a way of life. Integrity guides one's life to make it prosper. One lives or walks in it. Corruption, its opposite, is synonymous with crookedness, perversion, engaging in treacherous ways and dubious dealings. These *dis-values* gradually destroy a person as does HIV/AIDS. We recall here Jesus' word about what makes a person unclean; not what goes into the stomach from the outside, but what comes from within, from the heart (the seat of one's life and being). From the heart come all kinds of *kabu kabu* (shady) activities “that render a person unclean”, or better, that reveal that a person is unclean (Mark 7:14-15). Elsewhere he says “a sound tree cannot bear rotten fruit” and vice versa (Matt 7:17-18). Corrupt persons have unclean spirits living in them; not the Spirit of the living God, the spirit of wisdom which is pure, holy, translucent, dependable, *et cetera* (cf. Wis 7:22-8:1).

In the example from Ecclesiastes (7:7), corruption, though not so named, is the opposite of integrity. Oppression here can stand for corruption in two ways. If one engages in it, one becomes foolish, though by nature one is created to be wise. Conversely, if the wise are oppressed by corrupt people and succumb to it, they in turn become foolish. The second part of the verse is very blunt: “a bribe corrupts the heart”. Some translations render “bribe” as “gift”: “a gift corrupts the heart” (NJB). A genuine gift, given out of love, cannot corrupt the heart, the seat of one's

¹³ This verse is the text on our conference posters and flyers.

life. Rather it enhances one's life.¹⁴ A bribe comes from dishonest hearts and lives; it corrupts the heart and life of the one who gives and the one who receives the bribe. As said earlier, "Bribery and corruption" go together in the discourse.

There are many other examples in the Bible to illustrate the truth about integrity and corruption. The examples given here occur mostly in the sapiential literature. They invite us to come to grips with the fact that integrity and its antithesis corruption affect the fabric or integral life of persons irrespective of their religions, nationalities, colour, gender, and so forth. The presentations at this Conference explore these themes in different biblical works, both in the Old and New Testament. These presentations do not claim to have covered the different aspects of the biblical message on integrity and corruption. Their aim is to raise the awareness that the Bible has much to say on integrity and corruption. Since this is the word of God who created all human beings long before religion appeared among humans, we need to return to it to seek understanding and draw from its many examples the resources we need to fight and eradicate corruption in our world today.

The book of Revelation reminds us that at the end of time, when God ushers in "the new heaven and new earth", this new heaven and earth will have no shady lights where corruption can hide and do havoc like HIV and AIDS (Rev 21:1). Furthermore, those who practise corruption in any of its forms will find no place in this renewed creation: "Nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood" (Rev 21:27). We may not be able to totally eradicate corruption till this happens. Our responsibility is to practice integrity and urge each other and all others to do the same so that integrity and God's kingdom, reign or values, may come and operate on earth as it is in heaven, as we pray daily in The Lord's Prayer.

¹⁴ "God loved the world so much that he gave his Son" to save and redeem the world (John 3:16). God gives out of God's reality and substance since "God is Love" (1 John 4:8, 16). All are beneficiaries of this unsurpassable gift that demonstrates God's incredible and unfathomable love for us (1 John 3:1-4).

0.3. Corruption and Integrity in Biblical Studies

I end this elaboration on our conference theme with a word about corruption and integrity in biblical studies. While searching for the meaning and types of corruption, I made an interesting discovery which I consider as having particular relevance for us biblical scholars and pastors generally.

In 2015, Princeton University professor Kevin M. Kruse, advances [sic] the thesis that business leaders in the 1930s and 1940s collaborated with clergymen, . . . to develop and promote a new hermeneutical approach to Scripture that would de-emphasize the social Gospel and emphasize themes, such as individual salvation, more congenial to free enterprise.¹⁵

As scholars we may say this view is open to debate. Yet Jesus says, “By their fruit you shall know them”. Honesty would make us agree that biblical studies in the period reviewed by the author parted company with the social dimension of Scripture, especially those of the prophets and Jesus’ social challenge to his contemporaries. The rise of Spirituality as a theological discipline in the last decades is due, in my view, to the need to bridge the gap or address this divorce of life and spirituality from the study of theology and the Scriptures. This observation on corruption in biblical studies (diverting it into the service of mammon or free enterprise) brought about corruption in how the Bible itself was viewed as one of the classical literatures.

A similar study by Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* makes the same point.¹⁶ The work demonstrates how, during the Reformation and Renaissance, Scripture ceased to be the sacred book of the Church and became the book of the academia. The Reformation scholars then forged the rules on how the Bible was to be studied in line with the rediscovered classical literature. I have reviewed and quoted this book severally because I find in it a justification of my

¹⁵ Excerpt from a Google search on “corruption”.

¹⁶ Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and my review of the book in *RBL* 02/2012.

fundamental dissatisfaction with the presuppositions underlying most contemporary biblical methodologies.¹⁷ The scholarship seemed to have emptied Scripture of its meaning by divorcing it from life. How can we study the word of God spoken in life to living persons to challenge them to stop being corrupt persons and become persons of integrity, God's covenanted people, yet demand that the study should concentrate only on the text and its redaction and sources, for instance, and ask no life questions: that of the authors and the audience to which the texts were addressed for life-transforming responses; except to debate about the different layers of their audiences?

The historical critical method clearly did much to liberate the Church exegesis from another type of what one might call corrupt exegesis, the tendency to moralise and spiritualise the reading of the biblical works in an anthological approach that ignored the historical contexts of the texts. In the process, it did worse in many ways by introducing what one might call atheism into biblical studies, that is, a study of Scripture that does not ask or concern itself with faith questions. Yet all biblical works were faith-based works, written from faith for faith, to impact lives and elicit faith response from the audience.

I mention this corruption in biblical studies because we, Africans in general, and CABAN members in particular, need to pay heed to how we study Scripture, not to slavishly espouse existing corrupt biblical methodologies, on the one hand; or introduce other types of corrupt biblical methodology, on the other hand. This could be by ignoring the meaning of the text as addressed to its original audience. When we bypass the social context and life situation of the audience to which the text was addressed, we may make it say what we want it to say to please our audience. The Church is clear that inspiration in Scripture lies primarily "in the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind".¹⁸ Efforts to discover their message as addressed to their covenanted community constitute the primary level of integrity in biblical exegesis.

¹⁷ This contention formed the "thesis" of my study, "'I will open my mouth in parables' (Matt 13:35): A Case for a Gospel-Based Biblical Hermeneutics", *NTS* 46/3 (2000) 445-463; commissioned by the SNTS at its first ever meeting in the southern hemisphere in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2000.

¹⁸ The Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, no. 12.

We study Scripture with the mind of the Church which gives us ample room to study Scripture with integrity. In that way, we help the Church “to grow and mature in its understanding of Scripture”.¹⁹ We pay as close attention to this as we do to establishing the integrity of the text itself. Indeed, attention to the theology, the message of the book (to avoid the word text), may help us to decide what is the most probable meaning when we encounter corrupt texts.

In sum, on the one hand, our Conference theme invites us to explore the responsibility each human being has to be a sound and solid human being, a person of integrity. From this foundational integrity, one acts in a way that drives out corruption; because to be corrupt is primarily to be anti-self, to do damage to oneself. When one is corrupt, whatever one does becomes corrupt, anti-social and anti-religion. What is at stake in our Conference theme is the subject matter (corruption and integrity), not the use of the words “corruption” or “integrity” in the Bible. On the other hand, our Conference theme invites us to beware of and guard against possible corruption in how we read the Bible. The theme has wide and deep dimensions. What we do during this Conference may just be the beginning, which we can later build into the envisaged project of what it means to be a human being.

May we stay open and tuned to the Holy Spirit, leading us to the complete truth of Scripture! Not only at this conference, not only on this topic, but always in all our studies. Then we will be sound scholars, who study the Bible with integrity and discover in it the ways and means of living a life of integrity and encourage others to do the same. Then integrity will serve as effective biblical antidote to a life of corruption in our Church, nation and world.

Sr. Teresa Okure, SHCJ

President CABAN

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¹⁹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no 40.