

Father Cantalamessa's 5th Lent Homily 2016 (18 March 2016)

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'We are getting ready to celebrate Easter. On the cross Jesus "has broken down the dividing wall of hostility... for through him we both have access in One Spirit to the Father" (Eph 2:14, 18).'

Here is the fifth Lenten homily given this year by the preacher of the Pontifical Household, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa.

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Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, ofmcap.

Fifth Lenten Sermon 2016

THE PATH TO UNITY AMONG CHRISTIANS

Reflections on Unitatis redintegratio

1.The ecumenical path after Vatican II

Modern hermeneutics has familiarized us with Hans-Georg Gadamer's principle of the "history of effects" (Wirkungsgeschichte). According to this method, to understand a text we need to take into account the effects it produced in history, placing oneself within that history and dialoguing with it. [1] This principle is highly useful when applied to the interpretation of Scripture. It tells us that we cannot fully understand the Old Testament except in the light of its fulfillment in the New, and we cannot fully understand the New Testament except by the fruit that it has produced in the life of the Church. Historical-philological study of "sources," the influences a text has undergone, is therefore not enough by itself. We also need to take into account the influences the text itself has exercised. It is a principle that Jesus had much earlier formulated, saying that every tree will be known by its fruit (see Lk 6:44).

With the appropriate adjustments, this principle—as we saw in preceding meditations—can also be applied to the texts of Vatican II. Today I would like to show how it can be applied in particular to the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, which is the topic of this meditation. Fifty years of journeying and progress in ecumenism can demonstrate the vitality in this text. After recalling the profound reasons that led Christians to seek unity among themselves again, and after taking note of the spread of a new attitude among Christians of different churches, the Council Fathers express the purpose of the document this way:

The Sacred Council gladly notes all this. It has already declared its teaching on the Church, and now, moved by a desire for the restoration of unity among all the followers of Christ, it wishes to set before all Catholics the ways and means by which they too can respond to this grace and to this divine call.[2]

The fulfillment or fruits of this document have been of two kinds. On the doctrinal and institutional level, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity has been established. In addition bilateral dialogues with almost all the Christian confessions have been initiated with the goal of promoting a better reciprocal understanding in comparing our positions and overcoming prejudices.

Alongside this official and doctrinal ecumenism, an ecumenism of personal encounters and reconciliation of hearts has arisen since the very beginning. In this regard some famous meetings stand out that have marked the ecumenical journey during these fifty years: the meeting of Paul VI with the Patriarch Athenagoras, the innumerable meetings of John Paul II and of Benedict XVI with various leaders of Christian churches, the meeting of Pope Francis with the Patriarch Bartholomew in 2014, and finally, a few weeks ago, the meeting in Cuba with Kirill, the Patriarch of Moscow, that opened up a new horizon for the ecumenism.

This spiritual ecumenism also includes many initiatives in which believers from different churches meet to pray and proclaim the gospel together—without any intention of proselytizing and with people remaining completely faithful to their churches. I have been blessed to participate in many of these meetings. One of them has remained particularly vivid in my mind because it was like a visual prophecy of what the ecumenical movement should be leading us to.

In 2009 there was a large demonstration of faith in Stockholm called the “Jesus Manifestation.” On the last day, believers from various churches, each coming from a different street, processed toward the center of the city. Our small group of Catholics led by their local bishop also processed down a street

praying. Once at the center, the separate procession lines broke up and merged into one crowd that proclaimed the Lordship of Christ—a crowd of 18,000 young people and of astonished bystanders. What was intended to be a demonstration “for” Jesus became a powerful demonstration “of” Jesus. His presence was almost palpable in a country that is not accustomed to that kind of religious demonstration.

These developments from the document on ecumenism are also a fruit of the Holy Spirit and a sign of the new Pentecost that was prayed for. How did the Risen One convince the apostles to be open to Gentiles and to welcome them into the Christian community? He led Peter to the home of the centurion Cornelius and made him witness the coming of the Spirit on those in attendance with the same manifestations that the apostles had experienced at Pentecost: they spoke in tongues and glorified God with loud voices. Peter could only draw the conclusion, “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us, . . . who was I that I could withstand God?” (Act 11:17).

The risen Lord is still doing the same thing today. He sends his Spirit and his charisms, often with the identical external manifestations, on believers of quite different churches, including those whose beliefs we had thought were the furthest from ours. How can we not see in that a sign that he is urging us to welcome and acknowledge them as brothers and sisters even if we are still on the journey to more complete unity on the visible level? In any case this is what converted me to a love for Christian unity, although I had been accustomed by my studies in the period before the Council to regard the Orthodox and Protestants only as “adversaries” to refute with our theological arguments.

2. One year from the fifth centenary of the Protestant Reformation (1517)

During Lent last year, I tried to show the results of the ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox East on the theological level. I collected those meditations in a short book called “Two Lungs, One Breath,” and the title itself indicates what we are striving for and in large part has already come to pass.^[3] At this time I would like to turn our attention to the relationship with the other great partner in the ecumenical dialogue, the Protestant world, not to enter into historical and doctrinal questions but to show how everything is impelling us to move forward in the effort to restore the unity of Western Christianity.

One circumstance makes this effort particularly relevant. The Christian world is preparing to celebrate the fifth centenary of the Reformation in 2017. It is vital for the whole future of the Church for us not

to miss this opportunity by remaining prisoners of the past or limiting ourselves, in more irenic tones, to determine the rights and wrongs of both parties. It is the moment, I believe, to make a qualitative leap forward, like a ship arriving at the lock of a river or a canal that allows for forward navigation at a higher level.

The situation has changed profoundly in these last five hundred years, but as always it is hard to take due notice of it. The issues that provoked the separation between the Church of Rome and the Reformation in the sixteenth century primarily included indulgences and the way in which justification takes place for the unrighteous. But, can we say that these are the problems today by which the faith of people stands or falls? In a conference held at the Center for Unity in Rome, Cardinal Walter Kasper correctly observed that while the number one existential problem for Luther was how to overcome a sense of guilt and find a gracious God, today the problem is instead the contrary: how to restore to people today the true meaning of sin since they have entirely forgotten it.

I believe that all the centuries-old discussion between Catholics and Protestants about faith and works has ended up making us lose the main point of the Pauline message. What the apostle wanted to affirm above all in Romans 3 is not that we are justified by faith but that we are justified by faith in Christ: it is not so much that we are justified by grace as it is that we are justified by the grace of Christ. Christ is at the heart of the message even more so than grace and faith.

After having presented humanity in its universal state of sin and damnation in the two preceding chapters of Romans, the apostle has the unmitigated courage to proclaim that this situation has now radically changed “through the redemption which is in Christ,” “by one’s man’s obedience” (Rom 3:24, 5:19).

The assertion that this salvation is received by faith and not by works is present in the text and was the most urgent thing to bring to light in Luther’s time, when it was obvious, at least in Europe, that the issue at hand was faith in Christ and the grace of Christ. But this truth holds second place, not first place. We made the mistake of reducing to a theological problem internal to Christianity what was for the apostle instead an affirmation of far-reaching and cosmic significance. We are being called today to rediscover and proclaim together the very heart of the Pauline message.

In the description of medieval battles, there is always a point at which, after the archers, the cavalry, and all the rest of the army had been overcome, the fight was focused on the king. That was the point at

which the final outcome of the battle was determined. For us as well the battle is around the king . . . the person of Jesus Christ is what is at stake. From the point of view of evangelization, we need to return to the time of the apostles. There is analogy between our time and theirs: they were facing a pre-Christian world, and now in the West we are facing a largely post-Christian world.

When the apostle Paul wants to summarize the Christian message in one statement he does not say, “We proclaim this or that doctrine to you.” Instead he says, “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:23), and “We preach . . . Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Cor 4:5). This is now the true “*articulus stantis et cadentis Ecclesiae*,” the article by which the Church stands or falls.

This does not mean ignoring all that the Protestant Reformation has produced that is innovative and valid—whether in the area of theology or of spirituality—especially with its reaffirmation of the primacy of the word of God. It means rather allowing the whole Church to benefit from its positive achievements once they are freed of certain excesses and hardening of positions that were due to the overheated climate of that time, and to political interference and subsequent polemics.

One significant step in this direction has been the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification signed on October 31, 1999, between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation.[4] In its conclusion it says,

The understanding of the doctrine of justification set forth in this Declaration shows that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics. In light of this consensus the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding of justification described in paras. 18 to 39 are acceptable. Therefore the Lutheran and the Catholic explications of justification are in their difference open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding the basic truths.[5]

I was present when this agreement was proclaimed in St. Peter’s Basilica during Solemn Vespers presided over by John Paul II and the archbishop of Uppsala, Bertil Werkström. One observation the pope made during his homily struck me. If I remember correctly, he expressed this thought: the time has come to stop making the doctrine of justification by faith a topic of fighting and dispute among theologians and seek instead to help all baptized people have a personal and liberating experience of this truth. From that day on, every time I have had the opportunity in my preaching, I have not stopped trying to help brothers and sisters have this experience.

Justification by faith in Christ needs to be preached by the whole Church and with greater vigor than ever. No longer in opposition to “good works”—an issue that has been dealt with and resolved—but in opposition, rather, to the claim by the secularized world that it can save itself through science and technology or through spiritual techniques people invented. I am convinced that if Luther and Calvin and the other reformers were alive today, this would be the way they would preach the justification freely given through faith! One book that caused a stir says,

Modern societies are built upon science. They owe to it their wealth, their power, and the certitude that tomorrow far greater wealth and power still will be ours if we so wish. . . . [Nevertheless,] armed with all the powers, enjoying all the riches they owe to science, our societies are still trying to live by and to teach systems of values already blasted at the root by science itself.[6]

The “systems of values already blasted at the root” are of course religious systems. Jean-Paul Sartre, coming from a philosophical point of view, reached the same conclusion. He has one of his characters say, “It was . . . I who accused myself today, I alone who can absolve myself; I, man. If God exists, man is nothing.”[7] It is to this kind of challenge that Christians today should respond with the doctrine that “A man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal 2:16). 3. Beyond the formulas I am convinced that the role played by formulas slows down and weighs on the ecumenical dialogue with the Protestant churches. Let me explain. Doctrinal and dogmatic formulations—which in the beginning were the fruit of vital processes and reflected the path undertaken and the truth that had painfully been reached—tend to become rigid with the passing of time and become “watchwords,” labels that indicate affiliation. Faith no longer terminates in the real thing, but in its formulation, just the opposite of what according to St. Thomas Aquinas the right path should be.[8] The phenomenon of formalism already began in antiquity once the creative phase of the great dogmas ended.[9] Only recently, for example, has it been understood that the divisions at the heart of the Christian East between Chalcedonian Churches and the so-called Monophysite or Nestorian Churches were based on formulas and on the different meanings given to the words *ousia* and *hypostasis* that do not affect the substance of the doctrine. Once this was understood, it has been possible to restore communion with and among various Eastern churches. This obstacle is particularly apparent in relation to the churches of the Reformation. Faith vs. works and Scripture vs. tradition were understandable oppositions, and in part justified at first, but they become misleading if they get repeated and maintained as though nothing had changed in 500 years. Let us take, for instance, the opposition between faith and works. It makes sense if by “good works” one primarily means (as it unfortunately did in Luther’s time) indulgences, pilgrimages, fasts, votive candles, and so on. The

contrast becomes misleading, however, if by “good works” we mean works of charity and mercy. Jesus warned us in the gospel that without them we could not enter the kingdom of heaven and he would be forced to say to us, “Depart from me” (Matt 7:23). One is not justified by good works, but one is not saved without good works. All Catholics and Protestants believe that, and that is what the Council of Trent had said. The same has to be said about opposing Scripture and tradition. It surfaces as soon as the issue of revelation comes up, as if the Protestants had only Scripture while the Catholics had Scripture and tradition. In reality there is no church without its own tradition. What explains the existence of so many different denominations in Protestantism if not their diverse ways of interpreting Scripture? And what is Christian tradition, in its actual content, if not precisely Scripture as read in the Church and by the Church?

Not even the Lutheran formula “*Simul iustus et peccator*,” “at the same time righteous and sinner,” is a real hurdle to communion. The definition of the Church as “the chaste harlot” (*casta meretrix*) and as “holy and always in need of being purified” (see *Lumen gentium*, 8) has been part of the Catholic tradition since the time of the Fathers.[10] Should not what is said about the Church, the body of Christ as a whole, also apply in some way to each of its members? The way in which this coexistence of holiness and sin in redeemed human beings is understood can be open to various and complementary explanations. In the Appendix to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification there is an explanation of the formula “*simul iustus et peccator*” which does not diverge from Catholic doctrine. It says that justification brings about a genuine renewal in the life of a baptized person—even if that righteousness never becomes an acquired possession on which a human being could base his or her relationship with God and is always dependent on the action of the Holy Spirit.

In 1974 there was news that astonished and amused the whole world. A Japanese soldier, who was sent to an island in the Philippines during the last World War to infiltrate the enemy and gather information, had lived for thirty years hiding here and there in the jungle, eating roots, fruit, and occasional prey. He was convinced that the war was still going on and he was still on his mission. When they found him, it was hard to convince him that the war was over and that he could go home. I believe something similar has happened among Christians. There are Christians on both sides who need to be convinced that the war is over. The religious wars between Catholics and Protestants are over, and we have much better things to do than fight with one another! The world has forgotten, or have never known, its Savior, the one who is the light of the world, the way, the truth, and the life, so how can we waste time arguing among ourselves? 4. Unity in charity This practical reason is not enough, however, to bring about unity among Christians. It is not enough to find ourselves united in terms of evangelization and

charitable activity. This is a path the ecumenical movement tried at the beginning, but it was soon shown to be insufficient. If the unity of the disciples should be a reflection of the unity between the Father and the Son, it should be above all a unity of love, because that is the unity that reigns in the Trinity. The three divine persons are united in their very being, not because they jointly operate whatever they do “ad extra”. Scripture exhorts us to “speak the truth in love [veritatem facientes in caritate]” (see Eph 4:15), and St. Augustine affirms that “one does not enter into truth except through love” [non intratur in veritatem nisi per caritatem].[11]

The extraordinary thing about this path to unity based on love is that it is already wide open before us. We cannot “cut corners” on doctrine because there are real differences there that need to be resolved patiently in appropriate settings. We can, however, forge ahead in charity and already be fully united right now. The true and sure sign of the coming of the Holy Spirit is not, St. Augustine writes, speaking in tongues but the love of unity: “You can be sure you have the Holy Spirit when you agree to cling to unity with genuine charity.”[12]

Let us recall St. Paul’s hymn to charity. Every phrase acquires a new and relevant meaning if it is applied to love among the members of the various Christian churches, to our ecumenical relationships:

Love is patient and kind; Love is not jealous. . . .Love does not insist on its own way [or only on the interests of its own church].It is not irritable or resentful [rather, it remembers the wrong done to others].It does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right [it does not rejoice in other Churches’ difficulties but rejoices in their spiritual success].Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (see 1 Cor 13:4-7)

It has been said, “Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction.”[13] Among Christians as well, loving one another means looking together in the same direction, in the direction of Christ. “He is our peace” (Eph 2:14). If we will turn to Christ and go forward together toward him, we Christians will draw closer to each other until we become what he prayed for: to be “one with him and with the Father” (see Jn 17:9). This can come about the same way that the spokes of a wheel fit together. The spokes begin at distant points of the circumference, but little by little as they get nearer the center, they get closer to each other until they form a single point. It happens something like what happened that day in Stockholm.

We are getting ready to celebrate Easter. On the cross Jesus “has broken down the dividing wall of hostility... for through him we both have access in One Spirit to the Father” (Eph 2:14, 18). Let us not fail to do so for the joy of the Heart of Jesus and for the good of the world. Holy Father, Venerable Fathers, brothers and sisters, I wish you a good Holy Week and Happy Easter!

_____ Translated from Italian by Marsha Daigle Williamson

[1] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum International, 2006).

[2] *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 1. All papal quotes are from the Vatican website.

[3] Raniero Cantalamessa, *Due polmoni, un unico respiro: Oriente e Occidente di fronte ai grandi misteri della fede* [Two Lungs, One Breath: East and West Before the Great Mysteries of Faith] (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015).

[4] Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. This document can be found online on the Vatican website through its title.

[5] *Ibid.*, n. 40.

[6] Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Knopf, 1971), pp. 170-171.

[7] See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Devil and the Good Lord*, X, 4, trans. Kitty Black in “The Devil and the Good Lord” and *Two Other Plays* (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 141.

[8] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa teologica*, II-IIae, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2: “The faith of the believer does not terminate in a proposition but in a thing.”

[9] See G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), especially Chapter 13, “The Triumph of Formalism,” pp. 265-281.

[10] See Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Casta meretrix,” in *Explorations in Theology*, Vol II: Spouse of the Word, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), pp. 193-288.

[11] Augustine, *The Answer to Faustus a Manichean*, 32, 18, trans. Edmund Hill, Part 1, vol. 20, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), p. 420.

[12] See Augustine, “Sermon 269,” 4, in *Sermons (230-272B) on Liturgical Seasons*, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine, Part 3*, vol. 7, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1994), p. 283.

[13] Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars [Terre des hommes]*, trans. Lewis Galantière (1939; New York: Harcourt, 1967), p. 215.

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Father Cantalamessa’s 4th Lent Homily 2016 (11 March, 2016)

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We find ourselves facing a firestorm that is apparently global about the biblical plan for sexuality, marriage, and family. How are we to act in relation to this disturbing phenomenon?’

Here is the fourth Lenten homily given this year by the preacher of the Pontifical Household, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa.

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Fourth Lenten Sermon 2016

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

in *Gaudium et spes* and Today

I am devoting this meditation to a spiritual reflection on *Gaudium et spes*, the pastoral constitution on the Church in the world. Of the various social problems treated in this document —culture, economy, social justice, peace— the most relevant and problematic one concerns marriage and family. The Church devoted the last two synods of bishops to it. The majority of us present here do not live in that state of life, but we all need to know its problems to understand and help the vast majority of God’s

people who do live in the marital state, especially today now that it is at the center of attacks and threats from all sides.

Gaudium et spes treats the family at great length in the Second Part (nos. 46-53). There is no need to quote statements from it because it repeats the traditional Catholic doctrine that everyone knows, except for a new emphasis on the mutual love between the spouses that is openly recognized now as a primary good in marriage alongside procreation.

In regard to marriage and family, *Gaudium et spes*, in its well-known way of proceeding, focuses first on the positive achievements in the modern world (“the joys and the hopes”) and only secondly on the problems and dangers (“the griefs and anxieties”).^[1] I plan to follow that same method, taking into account, however, the dramatic changes that have occurred in this area in the last half century since then. I will briefly recall God’s plan for marriage and family since, as believers, we always need to start from that point, and then see what biblical revelation can offer us as a solution to current problems in this area. I am intentionally refraining from commenting on some of the specific problems discussed in the Synod of Bishops regarding which only the pope now has the right to say the last word.

1. Marriage and family in the divine plan and in the gospel of Christ

The book of Genesis has two distinct accounts of the creation of the first human couple that go back to two different traditions: the Yahwist tradition (10th century BC) and the later one called “Priestly” (6th century BC). In the Priestly tradition (see Gen 1:26-28), the man and the woman are created simultaneously and not one from the other; male and female beings are linked to the image of God: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). The primary purpose for the union of the man and woman is seen as being fruitful and filling the earth.

In the Yahwist tradition, which is the most ancient (see Gen 2:18-25), the woman is taken out of the man. The creation of the two sexes is seen as a remedy for the loneliness of the man: “It is not good that the man should be alone: I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18). The unitive factor is emphasized here more than the procreative factor: “A man . . . clings to his wife and they become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). They are free and open about their own sexuality and that of the other: “The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:25).

I found the most convincing explanation for this divine “invention” of the distinction between the sexes in a poet, Paul Claudel:

Man is so proud! There was no other way [except inventing the sexes] to get him to understand his neighbor, to pound it into him. There was no other way to get him to understand the dependence, the necessity, and the need of another besides himself except through the existence of this being [woman] who is different from him by the very fact of her separate existence.[2]

To open oneself to the opposite sex is the first step in opening oneself to the other who is a neighbor until we reach the Other, with a capital letter, God. Marriage begins with a mark of humility: it is the recognition of dependency and thus of one’s own condition as a creature. To fall in love with a woman or a man is to make the most radical act of humility. It is to make oneself a beggar and say to the other, “I am not enough in myself; I need you too.” If, as Friedrich Schleiermacher believed, the essence of religion consists in the sentiment of dependence on God (Abhängigkeitsgefühl),[3] then we can say that human sexuality is the first school of religion.

Up to this point I have described God’s plan. The rest of the Bible cannot, however, be understood if, along with the creation story, we do not take into account the fall, especially what is said to the woman: “I will greatly multiply your pain in child-bearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16). The dominance of the man over the woman is part of the consequence of man’s sin, not part of God’s plan. With these words to Eve, God was announcing her predicament in advance, not endorsing it.

The Bible is a divine-human book not only because its authors are God and men but also because it describes the intertwining of the faithfulness of God with the unfaithfulness of human beings. This is clear especially when we compare God’s plan for marriage and family with its practical outworking in the history of the chosen people. Continuing in the book of Genesis, we see that the son of Cain, Lamech, violates the law of monogamy by taking two wives. Noah and his family appear to be an exception in the midst of the widespread corruption of his time. The patriarchs Abraham and Jacob have children by many wives. Moses sanctions the practice of divorce; David and Solomon maintain actual harems of women.

Beyond these examples of individual transgressions, the departure from the original ideal is visible in the basic concept that Israel had of marriage. Deviation from the ideal involves two pivotal points. The

first is that marriage becomes a means and not an end. The Old Testament, on the whole, considers marriage a structure of patriarchal authority oriented primarily to the perpetuation of the clan. It is in this context that the institutions of levirate marriage (see Deut 25:5-10), of concubinage (see Gen 16), and of provisional polygamy can be understood. The ideal of a shared life between a man and a woman based on a personal and reciprocal relationship is not forgotten, but it moves into second place after the good of offspring. The second serious deviation from the ideal concerns the status of the woman: from being a companion for the man endowed with the same dignity, she appears increasingly more subordinate to the man and existing for his sake.

An important role in keeping God's original plan for marriage alive is played by the prophets—in particular Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah—and by the Song of Songs. Adopting the union of man and woman as a symbol or reflection of the covenant between God and his people, they restore to first place the value of mutual love, faithfulness, and indissolubility that characterize God's attitude toward Israel.

Jesus, come to “sum up” human history in himself, accomplishes this recapitulation in regard to marriage as well.

And the Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female [Gen 1:27] and said ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one’? So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.” (Matt 19:3-6)

His adversaries were operating in the narrow sphere of hypothetical casuistry (asking if it were lawful to repudiate the wife for any reason or if there needed to be a specific and serious reason). Jesus answered them by going to the heart of the issue and returning to the beginning. In his citations, Jesus refers to both accounts of the institution of marriage, taking elements from each of them, but, as we see, he emphasizes above all the communion of persons.

What comes next in Matthew's text, the issue of divorce, also follows along the same line: he reaffirms faithfulness and the indissolubility of the marriage bond even above the good of offspring, which people had used in the past to justify polygamy, levirate marriage, and divorce.

They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to put her away?” He said to them, “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but

from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery; and he who marries a divorced woman, commits adultery” (Matt 19:7-9)

The parallel text in Mark shows that even in the case of divorce men and women, according to Jesus, are placed on a level of absolute equality: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mk 10:11-12).

With the words “What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder,” Jesus affirms that there is divine intervention by God in every matrimonial union. The elevation of marriage to the status of a “sacrament,” that is, a sign of God’s action, does not then need to be founded only on the weak argument of Jesus’ presence at the wedding at Cana and on the text in Ephesians that speaks of marriage as a reflection of the union of Christ and the Church (see Eph 5:32). It begins explicitly with Jesus’ teaching during his earthly ministry and is also part of his reference to how things were from the beginning. John Paul II was correct when he defined marriage as “the primordial sacrament.”[4]

2. What the biblical teaching says to us today

This, in brief, is the doctrine of the Bible, but we cannot stop there. “Scripture,” said Gregory the Great, “grows with those who read it” (*cum legentibus crescit*).[5] It reveals new implications little by little that come to light because of new questions. And today new questions, or challenges, about marriage and family abound.

We find ourselves facing a firestorm that is apparently global about the biblical plan for sexuality, marriage, and family. How are we to act in relation to this disturbing phenomenon? The Council initiated a new approach that involves dialogue rather than confrontation with the world and even includes self-criticism. I believe we need to apply this very approach to the discussion about marriage and family. Applying this method of dialogue means trying to see if, behind even the most radical challenges, there is something we can receive.

The criticism of the traditional model of marriage and family that has brought us to today’s unacceptable proposals for their deconstruction began with the Enlightenment and Romanticism. For different reasons, these two movements expressed their opposition to the traditional view of marriage, understood exclusively in its objective “ends”—offspring, society, and the Church—and viewed too

little in its subjective and interpersonal value. Everything was required of future spouses except that they love each other and freely choose each other. Even today, in many parts of the world there are spouses who meet and see each other for the first time on their wedding day. In contrast to that kind of model, the Enlightenment saw marriage as a pact between married people and Romanticism saw it as a communion of love between spouses.

But this criticism is in agreement with the original meaning of marriage in the Bible, not against it! The Second Vatican Council already accepted this perspective when, as I said, it recognized the mutual love and assistance between the spouses as an equally primary good of marriage. In line with *Gaudium et spes*, St. John Paul II said in one of his Wednesday teachings,

The human body, with its sex, and its masculinity and femininity . . . is not only a source of fruitfulness and procreation, as in the whole natural order. It includes right from the beginning the nuptial attribute, that is, the capacity of expressing love, that love in which the person becomes a gift and—by means of this gift—fulfills the meaning of his being and existence.[6]

In his encyclical *Deus caritas est*, Pope Benedict XVI went even further, writing profound new things regarding eros in marriage and in the relationship between God and human beings. He wrote, “This close connection between eros and marriage in the Bible has practically no equivalent in extra-biblical literature.”[7] One of the most serious wrongs we do to God is to end up making everything that concerns love and sex be an area saturated with wickedness in which God should not enter and is unwanted. It is as if Satan, and not God, were the creator of the sexes and the specialist in love.

We believers, and many non-believers as well, are far from accepting the conclusions that some people draw from these premises today, for example, that any kind of eros is enough to constitute a marriage, including between people of the same sex. However, our rejection of this acquires greater strength and credibility if it is combined with a recognition of the fundamental goodness of sexuality together with a healthy self-criticism.

We cannot omit the mention of what Christians have contributed to forming the negative vision of marriage that modern western culture has rejected so vehemently. The authority of Augustine, reinforced on this point by Thomas Aquinas, ended up casting a negative light on the physical union of spouses, which was considered as the means through which original sin was transmitted and was not even free itself of “at least venial” sin. According to the Doctor of Hippo, spouses should make use of

the sexual act for begetting children but should do so “with regret” (cum dolore) and only because there is no other way to provide citizens for the state and members for the Church.[8]

Another modern position that we can also accept concerns the equal dignity of the woman in marriage. As we have seen, it is at the very heart of God’s original plan and in the thinking of Christ, but it has often been disregarded over the centuries. God’s word to Eve, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you,” has had a tragic fulfillment in history.

Among the representatives of the so-called “Gender Revolution,” their call for the equality of women has led to crazy proposals like abolishing the distinction between the sexes and replacing it with the more flexible and subjective distinction of “genders” (masculine, feminine, variable) or like freeing women from “the slavery of maternity” by arranging for newly invented ways to give birth to children. In recent months there has been a succession of news reports about men who will very soon be able to become pregnant and give birth to a child. “Adam gives birth to Eve,” they write with a smile, but this is something we should weep about. The ancients would have defined all this with the word *Hubris*, the arrogance of human beings before God.

Our choice of dialogue and self-criticism gives us the right to denounce these plans as “inhuman”: they are contrary not only to God’s will but also to the good of humanity. Putting them into practice on a large scale would lead to unforeseeable human and social catastrophes. Our only hope is that people’s common sense, combined with the natural “desire” for the other sex and the instinct for motherhood and fatherhood that God has inscribed in human nature, will resist these attempts to substitute ourselves for God. They are dictated more by a belated sense of guilt on the part of men than by genuine respect and love for woman herself.

3. An ideal to rediscover

Not less important than the duty of defending the biblical ideal of marriage and family is the duty for Christians to rediscover and live that ideal fully in such a way as to reintroduce it into the world by deeds more than by words. Early Christians changed the laws of the state about the family by their practices. We cannot consider doing the opposite and change people’s practices through the laws of the state, even though as citizens we have a duty to contribute to the state’s enactment of just laws.

Since Christ, we correctly read the account of the creation of the man and woman in light of the revelation of the Trinity. In this light the statement that “God created man in his own image; in the

image of God he created him: male and female he created them” finally reveals a significance that was enigmatic and unclear before Christ. What connection can there be between being “in the image of God” and being “male and female”? The biblical God does not have sexual attributes; he is neither male nor female.

The similarity consists in this. God is love, and love requires communion and interpersonal communication. It requires an “I” and a “you.” There is no love that is not love for someone; if there is only one subject there cannot be love, just egotism and narcissism. Whenever God is conceived of only as Law or as Absolute Power, there is no need for a plurality of persons. (Power can be exercised by one person alone!) The God revealed by Jesus Christ, being love, is unique and one, but he is not solitary: he is one and triune. Unity and distinction coexist in him: unity of nature, will, and intentions, and distinction of characteristics and persons.

When two people love each other—and the strongest example is the love of a man and a woman in marriage—they reproduce something of what occurs in the Trinity. In the Trinity two persons, the Father and the Son, in loving each other produce (“breathe”) the Spirit who is the love that unites them. Someone has defined the Holy Spirit as the divine “We,” that is, not as “the third person of the Trinity” but as the first person plural.[9] It is precisely in this way that the human couple is the image of God. Husband and wife are in fact one flesh, one heart, one soul but are diverse in sex and personality. Unity and diversity are thus reconciled in the couple.

In this light we discover the profound meaning of the prophets’ message about human marriage: it is a symbol and a reflection of another love, that of God for his people. This symbolism was not meant to overload a purely earthly reality with a mystical significance. On the other hand, it is not merely symbolic but instead reveals the true face and ultimate purpose of the creation of man as male and female.

What is the reason for the sense of incompleteness and lack of fulfillment that sexual union leaves both inside and outside of marriage? Why does this impulse always fall back on itself, and why does this promise of the infinite and eternal always fall short? People try to find a remedy for this frustration, but they only increase it. Instead of changing the quality of the act, they increase its quantity, going from one partner to the next. This leads to the ruin of God’s gift of sexuality currently taking place in today’s society and culture.

Do we as Christians want to find an explanation for this devastating dysfunction once and for all? The explanation is that the sexual union is not occurring in the way and with the purpose intended by God. Its purpose was that, through this ecstasy and joining together in love, the man and the woman would be raised to desire and to obtain a certain foretaste of infinite love; they would be reminded of where they came from and where they are headed.

Sin, beginning with that of the biblical Adam and Eve, has damaged this plan. It has “profaned” the sexual act, that is, it has stripped it of its religious value. Sin has made it an act that is an end in itself, that is closed in on itself, so it is therefore “unsatisfying.” The symbol has been disconnected from the reality behind the symbol and deprived it of its intrinsic dynamism, thus crippling it. Never so much as in this case do we experience the truth of Augustine’s saying: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”^[10] We were not created to live in an eternal relationship as a couple but to live in an eternal relationship with God, with the Absolute. Even Goethe’s Faust finally discovers this at the end of his long period of wandering. Thinking back to his love for Margaret, he exclaims at the end of the poetic drama, “All that is transitory / is only a symbol; / what seems unachievable / here is seen done [in heaven].”^[11]

In the testimony of some couples who have experienced renewal in the Holy Spirit and live a charismatic Christian life, we find something of the original significance of the conjugal act. That can hardly be a surprise to us. Marriage is the sacrament of a reciprocal gift that spouses make to one another, and the Holy Spirit is the “gift” within the Trinity, or better, the reciprocal “self-gifting” of the Father and Son, not as a fleeting act but as a permanent state. Wherever the Holy Spirit comes, the capacity to make a gift of oneself is born or rekindled. This is how the “grace of the married state” operates.

4. Married and consecrated people in the Church

Even though we consecrated religious do not live in the married state, I said at the beginning that we need to understand marriage to help those who do live in that state. I will add now a further reason: we need to understand marriage to be helped by it ourselves! Speaking of marriage and virginity the apostle says, “Each has his own spiritual gift [chárisma] from God, one of one kind and one of another” (1 Cor 7:7). Married people have their charism and those who are “single for the Lord” have their charism.

Each charism, the same apostle says, is “a particular manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (see 1 Cor 12:7). Applied to the relationship between married and consecrated people in the Church, this means that the charism of celibacy and virginity is for the advantage also of married people and that the charism of marriage is also for the advantage of consecrated people. That is the intrinsic nature of a charism that is seemingly contradictory: something that is individual (“a particular manifestation of the Spirit”) is nevertheless meant for all (“for the common good”).

In the Christian community, consecrated people and married people are able to “edify one another.” Spouses are reminded by consecrated people of the primacy of God and of what is eternal; they are introduced to love for the word of God by those who can better deepen and “break open” it open for lay people. But consecrated people can also learn something from married people as well. They can learn generosity, self-forgetfulness, service to life, and often a certain “humaneness” that comes from their difficult engagement with the realities of life.

I am speaking from experience here. I belong to a religious order in which, until a few decades ago, we would get up at night to recite the office of Matins that would last about an hour. Then there came a great turning point in religious life after the Council. It seemed that the rhythm of modern life—studies for the younger monks and apostolic ministry for the priests—no longer allowed for this nightly rising that interrupted sleep, and little by little the practice was abandoned except in a few houses of formation.

When later the Lord had me come to know various young families well through my ministry, I discovered something that startled me but in a good way. These fathers and mothers had to get up not once but two or three times a night to feed a baby, or give it medicine, or rock it if it was crying, or check it for a fever. And in the morning one or both of the parents had to rush off to work at the same time after taking the baby girl or boy to the grandparents or to day-care. There was a time card to punch whether the weather was good or bad and whether their health was good or bad.

Then I said to myself, if we do not take remedial action we are in grave danger. Our religious way of life, if it is not supported by a genuine observance of the Rule and a certain rigor in our schedule and habits, is in danger of becoming a comfortable life and of leading to hardness of heart. What good parents are capable of doing for their biological children—the level of self-forgetfulness that they are capable of to provide for their children’s well-being, their studies, their happiness—must be the standard of what we should do for our children or spiritual brothers. The example we have for this is set

by the apostle Paul himself who said, “I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls” (2 Cor 12:15).

May the Holy Spirit, the giver of charisms, help all of us, consecrated and married, to put into practice the exhortation of the apostle Peter: “As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace . . . in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen!” (1 Pet 4:10-11).

Translated from Italian by Marsha Daigle Williamson

[1] *Gaudium et spes*, n.1. Quotations from Church and papal documents are from the Vatican website.

[2] Paul Claudel, *The Satin Slipper*, Act 3, sc. 8; see *Le soulier de satin: Édition critique*, ed. Antoinette Weber-Cafilisch (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 1987), p. 227.

[3] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, vol. 1, trans. H. R. MacKintosh and James S. Stewart (New York: T & T Clark, 1999), p. 12ff.

[4] See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael M. Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), pp. 503-507.

[5] See Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, 20, 1, 1, in *Gregory the Great*, trans. John Moorhead (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 49.

[6] John Paul II, “The Human Person Becomes a Gift in the Freedom of Love,” General Audience, January 16, 1980.

[7] Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, n. 11.

[8] Augustine, “Sermon 51,” 25, in *Sermons (51-94) on the New Testament, Part 3*, vol. 1, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), p. 36.

[9] Heribert Mühlen, *Der Heilige Geist als Person: Ich-Du-Wir* [The Holy Spirit as Person: I-You-We] (Munich: Aschendorf, 1963).

[10] Augustine, *Confessions*, 1, 1, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 43.

[11] Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust*, part 2, Act 5, in *Goethe: The Collected Works*, trans. Stuart Atkins (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 305.

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Father Cantalamessa's 3rd Lent Homily 2016 (4 March, 2016)

<https://zenit.org/articles/father-cantalamessas-3rd-lent-homily-2016-3/>

'If we do not strive to love the people we have before us, the words will easily become transformed in our hands into stones that wound and from which the hearers need to take refuge'

Here is the third Lenten homily given this year by the preacher of the Pontifical Household, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa.

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Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, ofmcap.

Third Lenten Sermon 2016

PROCLAIMING THE WORD

The Holy Spirit, the Principal Agent of Evangelization

Let us continue and conclude today our reflections on the constitution *Dei verbum*, that is, on the word of God. Last time, I spoke about *lectio divina*, the reading of Scripture for personal growth. Following the biblical plan outlined by St. James, we distinguished three successive steps: receive the word, meditate on the word, and put the word into practice.

There remains a fourth step, which is the one I would like to reflect on today: proclaim the word. Dei verbum speaks briefly of the privileged place that the word of God should have in the Church's preaching (see DV, n. 24), but it does not focus directly on preaching the word since the Council dedicated a separate document to this topic, Ad gentes divinitus ("On the Missionary Activity of the Church").

After this Council text, the discussion was taken up and updated by Blessed Paul VI in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, by Saint John Paul II in *Redemptoris missio*, and by Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium*. From the doctrinal and operative point of view, therefore, everything has already been said, and said at the highest level of the magisterium. It would be foolish of me to think that I could add anything to it. However, what it is possible for me to do, in line with the nature of these meditations, is to focus on some important spiritual aspects of the topic. To do that, I will begin with the statement often repeated by Blessed Paul VI that "the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelization."^[1]

1. The medium is the message

If I want to share some news, the first questions I ask myself is, "How will I transmit it? In the press? On the radio? On television?" The medium is so important that modern science of social communication has coined the slogan "The medium is the message."^[2] Now, what is the first natural medium by which a word is transmitted? It is breath, a flow of air, the sound of a voice. My breath, so to speak, takes the word that has formed in the hidden recesses of my mind and brings it to the ears of the hearer. All the other means of communication only reinforce and amplify this first medium of the breath and voice. Written words come next and presume a live voice, since the letters of the alphabet are only symbols that represent the sounds.

The word of God also follows this law. It is transmitted by breath. And what is, or who is, the breath or the ruah of God according to the Bible? We know who it is: it is the Holy Spirit! Can my breath animate your words or your breath give life to my words? No, my word can only be articulated with my breath and your words by your breath. In an analogous way, the word of God cannot be articulated except by the breath of God, the Holy Spirit.

This is a very simple and almost obvious truth, but it is of enormous importance. It is the fundamental law of every proclamation and every evangelization. Human news is transmitted in person or via radio, cable, satellite, etc. Divine news, since it is divine, is transmitted by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is

the genuine, essential means of its communication, and without him we would perceive only the human language in which the message is clothed. The words of God are “Spirit and life” (Jn 6:63), and therefore they cannot be transmitted or received except “in the Spirit.”

This fundamental law is what we see in action concretely in the history of salvation. Jesus began preaching “in the power of the Spirit” (Lk 4:14). He himself declared that “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Lk 4:18). Appearing to the apostles in the upper room the night of Easter, he said, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you!” And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (Jn 20:21-22). In commissioning the apostles to go into the whole world, Jesus also conferred on them the means to accomplish that task—the Holy Spirit—and he conferred it, significantly, through the sign of his breathing on them.

According to Mark and Matthew, the last word Jesus said to his apostles before ascending into heaven was “Go!”: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15; Mt 28:19). According to Luke, however, the final command of Jesus seems to be the opposite: Stay! Remain!: “Stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high” (Lk 24:49). There is of course no contradiction here: it means, “go into the whole world but not before receiving the Holy Spirit.”

The whole account of Pentecost serves to highlight this truth. The Holy Spirit comes, and then Peter and the other apostles begin to speak in loud voices about Christ crucified and risen, and their speech has such anointing and power that 3,000 people feel their hearts pierced. The Holy Spirit, having come upon the apostles, becomes in them an irresistible urge to evangelize.

St. Paul goes so far as to affirm that without the Holy Spirit it is impossible to proclaim that “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:3), which, according to the New Testament is the beginning and the summation of all Christian proclamation. As for St. Peter, he defines the apostles as “those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit” (1 Pet 1:12). The words “good news,” or gospel, indicates the content, and “through the Holy Spirit” indicates the means or the method of the proclamation.

2. Words and deeds

The first thing to avoid when we speak about evangelization is to think that it is synonymous with preaching and is thus reserved for a particular category of Christians. Speaking of the nature of revelation, Dei verbum says, “This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner

unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them.”[3]

This assertion goes back directly to St. Gregory the Great: “Our Lord and Savior instructs us at one time by His words, and at another by His works” (aliquando nos sermonibus, aliquando vero operibus admonet).[4] This law that applies to revelation at its beginning also applies to its dissemination. In other words, we do not evangelize only with words but prior to that with our works and life, not with what we say but with what we do and who we are.

Marshall McLuhan once applied his slogan “the medium is the message” in a way that, for me, is extremely enlightening. He said that only in Christ Jesus is there “no distance or separation between the medium and the message: it is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same.”[5] Such a total identification between the herald and the message could only be found in Christ, but in a derived sense it should also be true of anyone who proclaims the gospel. Here, the messenger is not the message. However, if preachers have given their lives totally to Christ, if they can say with Saint Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20), then it can be truly said of them that the medium is the message, that their very life is their message.

There is a saying in English that takes on a particular significance when applied to evangelization: “Actions speak louder than words.” A statement from Paul VI in *Evangelii in unum* that is also often repeated says, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”[6]

One of the most famous moral philosophers of the last century (whose name need not be mentioned) was seen one evening in a location and in the company of people that were not very edifying. A colleague asked him how he could reconcile that with what he wrote in his books and he answered him calmly, “Have you ever seen a street sign that began to walk in the direction it pointed to?” It was a brilliant answer, but it is self-condemning. People despise human “street signs” that point in which direction to go, but they themselves do not move an inch.

I can give a good example from the religious order I belong to of the efficacy of testimony. The major contribution, even if it is hidden, that the Capuchin Order has made to evangelization in the five centuries of its history has not been, I believe, that of its professional preachers but that of the host of

“lay brothers”: simple and uneducated doorkeepers of monasteries or mendicants. Entire populations have rediscovered and kept their faith because of contact with them. One of them, Blessed Nicola of Gesturi, spoke so little that the people called him “Brother Silence,” and yet in Sardinia, 58 years after his death, the Capuchin Order is identified with Brother Nicola of Gesturi, or with Brother Ignatius of Laconi, another holy mendicant friar of the past. The words Francis of Assisi addressed one day to the preachers among his brothers have come to pass: “Why do you boast of men converted when my simple brethren have converted them by their prayers?”[7]

One time during an ecumenical dialogue, a Pentecostal brother—not to argue but to try to understand—asked me why we Catholics called Mary “the star of evangelization.” It was an occasion for me as well to reflect on this title attributed to Mary by Paul VI at the end of *Evangelii nuntiandi*. I came to the conclusion that Mary is the star of evangelization because she did not carry a particular word to a particular people like the major evangelists in history, but she carried the Word made flesh and carried him (even physically!) to the whole world! She never preached, she said few words, but she was full of Jesus, and wherever she went she gave off such a scent of his presence that John the Baptist could sense it even in his mother’s womb. Who can deny that Our Lady of Guadalupe had a fundamental role in the evangelization and the faith of the Mexican people?

Speaking here in the Curia, I think it is appropriate for me to highlight the contribution that those who spend the majority of their time behind a desk or in dealing with completely different affairs can contribute—and in fact have contributed—to evangelization. If someone conceives of his work as service to the pope and to the Church, if he renews that intention every so often and does not allow concern for his career to take priority in his heart, then that humble employee of a Congregation contributes more to evangelization than a professional preacher who seeks to please people more than God.

3. How to become evangelizers

If the duty to evangelize is for everyone, let us try to understand what premises and conditions are involved for people truly to become evangelizers. The first condition is suggested by a word that God addressed to Abraham: “Leave your country and go” (see Gen 12:1). There is no mission or sending out without a prior leaving. We often speak about a church that “goes out.” We need to realize that the first door we need to exit is not that of the Church, of the community, of the institutions, or of sacristies; it is the door of our “I.”

More demanding than the call addressed to Abraham is the one that Jesus addresses to the person he asks to collaborate with him in proclaiming the kingdom: “Go, leave your ‘I’ behind, deny yourself. Everything belongs to me now. Your life is changing, my face is becoming your face. It is no longer you who live but I who live in you.” This is the only way to overcome the teeming mass of envies, jealousies, fears of embarrassment, rancors, resentments, and antipathies that fill the heart of the old self—in a word we need to be “indwelt” by the gospel and to spread the scent of the gospel.

The Bible offers us an image that holds more truth than entire pastoral treatises about proclamation: that of eating a book, as we read in Ezekiel:

And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and, behold, a written scroll was in it; and he spread it before me; and it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. And he said to me, “Son of man, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.” So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. And he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.” Then I ate it; and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. (Ez 2:9–3:3; see also Rev 10: 8-10).

There is an enormous difference between the word of God merely studied and then proclaimed and the word of God first “eaten” and assimilated. In the first case the preacher can be said “to sound just like a book,” but he does not succeed in reaching the hearts of the people because only what comes from the heart reaches the heart. Taking up the image in Ezekiel again, the author of Revelation brings us a small but significant variation. He says that the book he swallowed was sweet as honey on his lips but bitter in his stomach (see Rev 10:10). This is the case because before the word can wound the hearers it must wound the preacher, showing him his sin and prompting him to conversion.

This cannot be done in a day. There is, however, one thing that can be done in one day, even this very day: assenting to this perspective, making an irrevocable decision, insofar as we can, not to live for ourselves any more but for the Lord (see Rom 14:7-9). All of this cannot happen merely as the result of a person’s ascetic effort; it is also a work of grace, a fruit of the Holy Spirit. In the liturgy we pray in the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer, “That we might live no longer for ourselves but for him who died and rose again for us, he sent the Holy Spirit from you, Father, as the first fruits for those who believe.”

It is easy to know how to obtain the Holy Spirit with a view to evangelization. We only need to see how Jesus obtained the Holy Spirit and how the Church obtained him on the day of Pentecost. Luke

describes the event of Jesus' baptism this way: "When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him" (Lk 3:21-22). It was Jesus' prayer that split open the heavens and made the Holy Spirit come down, and the same thing happened to the apostles. The Holy Spirit came upon the apostles at Pentecost while they "with one accord devoted themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14).

The effort for a renewed missionary commitment is exposed to two principal dangers. One is inertia, laziness, not doing anything and letting all the others do the work. The second is to launch into feverish and futile activity on a merely human level that results in losing contact little by little with the wellspring of the word and its efficacy. This would be setting oneself up for failure. The more the volume of activity goes up, the more the volume of prayer should go up. Someone could object that this is absurd because there is only so much time. That is true, but cannot the one who multiplied the bread also multiply time? Besides, this is something God is always doing and that we experience every day: after having prayed, we do the same things in less than half the time.

Someone could also say, "But how can you remain calmly praying and not run when the house is on fire?" That is also true. But imagine this scenario: a team of firefighters who hear an alarm rush with sirens blaring to where the fire is. However, once there, they realize they do not have any water in their tanks, not even a drop. That is what we are like when we run to preach without praying. It is not the case that words are lacking; on the contrary, the less one prays the more one speaks, but they are empty words that do not reach anyone.

4. Evangelization and compassion

Alongside prayer, another way to obtain the Holy Spirit is having righteous intentions. A person's intention in preaching Christ can be contaminated for various reasons. St. Paul lists some of them in the Letter to the Philippians: preaching for one's own advantage, through envy, through partisanship and rivalry (see Phil 1:15-17). The one cause that encompasses all the others, however, is the lack of love. St. Paul says, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor 13:1).

Experience has made me discover one thing: someone can proclaim Jesus Christ for reasons that have nothing to do with love. Someone can proclaim him through proselytism or to legitimize his small church through an increase in the number of members, especially if he founded that church or it was

recently founded. Someone can proclaim him—taking literally the gospel injunction to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth (see Mk 13:10)—so as to fill up the number of the elect and thus hasten the return of the Lord.

Some of these motives are not bad in themselves. But if they are the only ones, they are not enough. They lack that genuine love and compassion for people that is the soul of the gospel. The gospel of love can only be proclaimed through love. If we do not strive to love the people we have before us, the words will easily become transformed in our hands into stones that wound and from which the hearers need to take refuge, like people who take cover in a hailstorm.

I always bear in mind the lesson that the Bible implicitly teaches us through the story of Jonah. Jonah was compelled by God to go preach in Nineveh. But the Ninevites were the enemies of Israel, so Jonah did not love them. He is visibly pleased and satisfied when he can cry out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Jon 3:4). The prospect of their destruction does not displease him in the least. However, the Ninevites repent and God spares them from punishment. At that point Jonah goes through a crisis. God says to him, almost as though he were defending himself, “You pity the plant. . . . And should I not pity that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left?” (Jon 4:10-11). God has to spend more effort to convert him, the preacher, than to convert all the inhabitants of Nineveh.

Have love, then, for people, but also and above all have love for Jesus. It is the love of Christ that ought to impel us. “Do you love me?” Jesus asks Peter. “Feed my sheep” (see Jn 21:15ff). Shepherding and preaching must come from genuine love for Christ. We need to love Jesus because only the person who is in love with Jesus can proclaim him to the world with deep conviction. People speak passionately only about what they are in love with.

Proclaiming the gospel, whether through life or words, we not only give glory to Jesus but we also give him joy. If it is true that “The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus,”^[8] it is also true that the one who spreads the gospel fills the heart of Jesus with joy. The sense of joy and well-being that a person experiences in suddenly feeling life return to a limb that was unable to move or was paralyzed is a small indication of the joy that Christ experiences when he feels the Holy Spirit bring some dead member of his body back to life again.

There is a saying in the Bible that I had never noticed before now: “Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest is a faithful messenger to those who send him; he refreshes the spirit of his masters” (Prov 25:13). The images of heat and coolness during harvest make us think of Jesus on the cross who cries, “I thirst!” He is the great “harvester” who is thirsty for souls, whom we are called to refresh with our humble, devoted service to the gospel. May the Holy Spirit, “the principal agent of evangelization,” grant that we give Jesus this joy through our words and our works, according to the charism and the office that each of us has in the Church.

Translated from Italian by Marsha Daigle Williamson

[1] Blessed Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 75, December 8, 1975. All papal quotes are taken from the Vatican website.

[2] The slogan is from Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964). This is the title for chapter 1, p. 7.

[3] *Dei verbum*, n. 2.

[4] Gregory the Great, “Homily on the Pastoral Office” [Homily 17 on the Gospels], trans. Patrick Boyle (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1908), p. 1.

[5] Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, eds. Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szklarek (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock 1999), p. 103.

[6] *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 41.

[7] Thomas Celano, *The Second Life of St. Francis*, in *The Lives of St. Francis of Assisi*, 123, 164, trans. A. G. Ferrers Howell (London: Methuen, 1908), p. 295; see also FF, 749.

[8] Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 1.

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Father Cantalamessa's 2nd Lent Homily 2016 (26 February, 2016)

<https://zenit.org/articles/father-cantalamessas-2nd-lent-homily-2016/>

‘God has spoken to us in Scripture of what fills his heart, namely, love.’

Here is the second Lenten homily given this year by the preacher of the Pontifical Household, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa.

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Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, ofmcap.

Second Lenten Sermon 2016

RECEIVE WITH MEEKNESS THE IMPLANTED WORD

A Reflection on the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei verb*

Let us continue our reflection on the principal documents of Vatican II. Of the four “constitutions” that were approved by it, the one on the Word of God, *Dei Verbum*, is the only one—along with the one on the Church, *Lumen gentium*—to have the qualifier “dogmatic” in its title. This can be explained by the fact that the Council intended with this text to reaffirm the dogma of the divine inspiration of Scripture and at the same time to define its relationship to tradition. In line with my intention to highlight just the spiritual and uplifting implications in the Council’s texts, I will limit myself here as well to reflections that aim at personal practice and meditation.

1. A God who speaks

The biblical God is a God who speaks. “The Mighty One, God the Lord, speaks. . . . He does not keep silence” (Ps 50:1, 3). God himself repeats countless times in the Bible, “Hear, O my people, and I will speak” (Ps 50:7). On this point the Bible presents a very clear contrast with the idols who “have mouths, but do not speak” (Ps 115:5). God uses words to communicate with human beings.

But what meaning should we give to such anthropomorphic expressions as “God said to Adam,” “thus says the Lord,” “the Lord says,” “the oracle of the Lord,” and other similar statements? We are

obviously dealing with speech that is different than human speech, a speech for the ears of the heart. God speaks the way he writes! Through the prophet Jeremiah he says, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts” (Jer 31:33).

God does not have a human mouth and breath: his mouth is the prophet, and his breath is the Holy Spirit. “You will be my mouth,” he says to his prophets, or “I will put my words in your mouth.” It has the same meaning as the famous verse, “Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet 1:21). The term “inner locutions,” which indicates direct speech from God to certain mystic souls, can also be applied, in a qualitatively different and superior way, to how God speaks to the prophets in the Bible. We cannot exclude however that in certain cases, as in the baptism and in the transfiguration of Jesus, there was also an external voice resounding miraculously.

In any case, we are dealing with speech in a real sense; the creature receives a message that can be translated into human words. God’s speaking is so vivid and real that a prophet can recall precisely the place and time in which a certain word “came upon” him: “in the year that King Uzziah died” (Is 6:1); “in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar” (Ez 1:1); “In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month” (Hag 1:1).

God’s word is so concrete that it can be said to “fall” on Israel as if it were a stone: “The Lord has sent a word against Jacob, and it will [fall] upon Israel” (Is. 9:8). At other times the same concreteness and physicality is expressed not by the symbol of a stone that strikes but by bread that is eaten with delight: “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart” (Jer 15:16; see also Ez 3:1-3).

No human voice can reach human beings to the depth that the word of God reaches them. It “pierce[s] to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discern[s] the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). At times God’s speech is like a powerful “thunder” that “breaks the cedars of Lebanon” (Ps 29:5). At other times it seems like “the sound of a gentle whisper” (see 1 Kgs 19:12). It knows all the tonalities of human speech.

The discourse on the nature of God’s speech changes radically at the moment in which we read in Scripture, “The Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14). With the coming of Christ, God now speaks with a human voice that is audible to the ears of the body. “That which was from the beginning, which we

have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life . . . we proclaim also to you” (1 Jn 1:1, 3).

The Word was seen and heard! Nevertheless, what was heard was not the word of man but the word of God because the speaker is not nature but a person, and the person of Christ is the same divine Person as the Son of God. In him God no longer speaks through an intermediary, “through the prophets,” but in a person, because Christ “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature” (Heb 1:2-3). Indirect discourse in the third person is replaced by direct discourse in the first person. It is no longer a case of “thus says the Lord!” or “the oracle of the Lord!” but “I say to you. . . .”

God’s speech, whether mediated by the prophets of the Old Testament or by the new, direct speech by Christ, after being orally transmitted was put into writing in the end, so we now have divine “Scriptures.”

Saint Augustine defines a sacrament as “a visible word” (*verbum visibile*).^[1] We can define the word as “a sacrament that is heard.” In every sacrament there is a visible sign and an invisible reality, grace. The word that we read in the Bible is, in itself, only a physical sign like the water in baptism or the bread in the Eucharist: it is a word in human vocabulary that is not different than other words. However, once faith and the illumination of the Holy Spirit enter in, we mysteriously enter into contact through these signs with the living truth and will of God, and we hear the very voice of Christ. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet writes,

The body of Christ is just as truly present in the sacrament that we adore [the Eucharist] as the truth of Christ is in his gospel preaching. In the mystery of the Eucharist the species that we see are signs, but what is enclosed within them is the very body of Christ; in Scripture the words we hear are signs, but the thoughts that the words carry comprise the very truth of the Son of God.”^[2]

The sacramentality of the Word of God is revealed in the fact that at times it works beyond the comprehension of the person who can be limited and imperfect; it works almost by itself—*ex opere operato*, just as we say about the sacraments. In the Church there have been and will be books that are more edifying than some books in the Bible (we only need to think of *The Imitation of Christ*), and yet none of them operates like the most humble of the inspired books.

I heard someone give this testimony on a television program in which I was taking part. He was a last-stage alcoholic who could not stop drinking for more than two hours; his family was on the brink of

despair. He and his wife were invited to a meeting about the word of God. Someone there read a passage from Scripture. One verse in particular went through him like a ball of fire and gave him the assurance of being healed. After that, every time he was tempted to drink, he would run to open the Bible to that verse, and in rereading the words he felt strength return to him until he was completely healed. When he tried to share what that well-known verse was, his voice broke with emotion. It was the verse from the Song of Songs: “Your love is better than wine” (1:2). Scholars would have turned up their noses at this kind of application of Scripture but—like the man born blind who said to his critics, “I only know that I was blind and now I see” (see Jn 9:10ff)—that man could say, “I was dead and now I have come back to life.”

A similar thing happened to St. Augustine as well. At the height of his battle for chastity, he heard a voice say, “Tolle, lege!” (“Take and read!”). Having the letters of St. Paul nearby, he opened the book with the intention of taking the first text he came across as God’s will. It was Romans 13:13ff: “Let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.” He writes in his Confessions, “No further wished I to read, nor was there need to do so. Instantly, in truth, at the end of this sentence, as if before a peaceful light streaming into my heart, all the dark shadows of doubt fled away.[3]

2.Lectio divina

After these general observations on the word of God, I would like to concentrate on the word of God as the path to personal sanctification. Dei verbum says, “The force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life.”[4]

Starting with Guigo II the Carthusian, different methods and approaches have been proposed for lectio divina.[5] They have the disadvantage, however, of having been devised almost always in relation to monastic and contemplative life and are therefore not well suited to our time in which the personal reading of the word of God is recommended to all believers, religious and lay.

Fortunately for us, Scripture itself proposes a method of reading the Bible that is accessible to everyone. In the Letter of James (Jas 1:18-25) we read a famous text on the word of God. We can extract from it a plan for lectio divina in three successive steps or stages: receive the word, meditate on the word, and put the word into practice. Let us reflect on each of these steps.

1. Receive the Word

The first step is to hear the word: “Receive with meekness,” the apostle says, “the implanted word” (Jas 1:21). This first step encompasses all the forms and ways that a Christian comes into contact with the word of God: we hear the word in the liturgy, in Bible studies, in writings about the Bible, and—what is irreplaceable—in personal reading of the Bible. In *Dei verbum*, we read,

The sacred synod also earnestly and especially urges all the Christian faithful, especially Religious, to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the “excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:8). . . . They should gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose and other aids.[6]

In this phase there are two dangers to avoid. The first is to stop at this initial step and convert a personal reading of the Word of God into an impersonal reading. This is a very considerable danger especially in places of academic formation. According to Søren Kierkegaard, a person who waits to apply the word of God to his life until he has resolved all the problems connected to the text, the variants, and the divergence of scholarly opinions, will never reach any conclusion: “God’s word is given in order that you act upon it, not that you shall practice interpreting obscure passages.” It is not “the obscure passages” in the Bible that are frightening, this philosopher said, it is the clear passages! [7]

Saint James compares reading the word of God to looking at oneself in a mirror. The one who limits himself to studying the sources, the variants, and the literary genres of the Bible and does nothing more is like a person who spends time looking at the mirror—examining its shape, its material, its style, its age—without ever looking at himself in the mirror. The mirror is not fulfilling its proper function for him. Scholarly criticism of the word of God is indispensable and we can never be grateful enough to those who spend their lives smoothing out the path for an ever-increasing understanding of the sacred texts, but scholarship does not by itself exhaust the meaning of Scripture; it is necessary, but it is not sufficient.

The other danger is fundamentalism, taking everything in the Bible literally without any hermeneutical mediation. These two excesses, hypercriticism and fundamentalism, are only seemingly opposite since both share in common the defect of stopping at the letter and ignoring the Spirit.

With the parable of the sower and the seed (see Lk 8:5-15), Jesus offers assistance for each of us to discover our condition regarding receiving the word of God. He distinguishes four kinds of soil: the path's soil, the rocky soil, the soil with thorns, and good soil. He then explains what the different types of soil symbolize: the path represents those in whom the words of God are not even implanted; the rocky soil represents those who are superficial and inconstant, who hear the word with joy but do not give the word a chance to take root; the soil with thorns represents those who let themselves be overwhelmed by the preoccupations and pleasures of life; the good soil represents those who hear the word and bear fruit through perseverance.

In reading this, we could be tempted to skip hurriedly over the first three categories, expecting to end up in the fourth category, which, despite all our limitations, we think depicts us. In reality—and here is the surprise—the good soil represents those who easily recognize themselves in each of the first three categories! They are the people who humbly recognize how many times they have listened in a distracted way, how many times they have been inconsistent about intentions they formed in hearing a word from the gospel, how many times they have let themselves be overwhelmed by activism and worldly preoccupations. These are the ones who, without knowing it, are becoming the truly good soil. May the Lord grant that we too be counted in that number!

Concerning the duty of receiving the words of God and of not letting any of them fall to the ground empty, let us listen to the exhortation that Origen, one of the greatest lovers of the word of God, gave to the Christians of his time:

You who are accustomed to take part in divine mysteries know, when you receive the body of the Lord, how to protect it with all caution and veneration lest any small part fall from it, lest anything of the consecrated gift be lost. For you believe, and correctly, that you are answerable if anything falls from there by neglect. But if you are so careful to preserve his body, and rightly so, how do you think that there is less guilt to have neglected God's word than to have neglected his body?[8]

1. Contemplate the Word

The second step suggested by St. James consists in “fixing our gaze” on the word, in placing ourselves before that mirror for a long time, in short, in meditation and contemplation of the word. The Fathers used images of chewing and ruminating to describe this. Guigo II wrote, “Reading, as it were, puts food whole into your mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up.”[9] According to St. Augustine,

“When we listen [to God’s word], we are like the clean animal eating, and when later we call to mind what we heard, . . . we are like the animal ruminating.”[10]

People who look at themselves in the mirror of the word learn to understand “how things are”; they learn to know themselves and discover their dissimilarity to the image of God and the image of Christ. Jesus says, “I do not seek my own glory” (Jn 8:50): here is a mirror before you, and suddenly you see how far you are from Jesus if you are seeking your own glory. “Blessed are the poor in spirit”: here is a mirror once again before you, and you suddenly discover you are full of attachments and superfluous things, and above all full of yourself. “Love is patient . . .” and you realize how impatient you are, how envious, how concerned with yourself. More than “searching the Scriptures” (see Jn 5:39), the issue is letting Scripture search you. The Letter of Hebrews says,

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do. (Heb 4:12-13).

In the mirror of the word, fortunately, we do not see only ourselves and our shortcomings; first of all we see God’s face, or better, we see God’s heart. St. Gregory the Great says, “What is sacred Scripture but a kind of epistle of almighty God to his creature? . . . Learn the heart of God in the word of God.”[11] Jesus’ saying, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt 12:34), is also true of God. God has spoken to us in Scripture of what fills his heart, namely, love. All the Scriptures were written with the goal that human beings would understand how much God loves them and in learning this might become enkindled with love for him.[12] The Jubilee Year of Mercy is a magnificent occasion to reread all of Scripture from this perspective as the history of God’s mercy.

1. Do the Word

Now we come to the third phase of the path proposed by the apostle James: “Be doers of the word . . . for a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing” (Jas 1:22, 25). On the other hand, “If any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like” (Jas 1:23).

Being a “doer of the word” is also what is most on Jesus’ heart: “My mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8:21). Without “doing the word” everything is illusion and

building on sand (see Matt 7:26). People cannot even say that they have understood the word because, as St. Gregory the Great says, the word of God is truly understood only when people begin to practice it.[13]

This third step consists, in practice, in obeying the word. The word of God, under the action of the Spirit, becomes the expression of the living will of God for me at any given moment. If we listen attentively, we will realize with surprise that there is not a day that goes by in which—in the liturgy, in the recitation of a psalm, or at other times—we do not discover a word about which we are forced to say, “This is for me! This is what I should do!”

Obedience to the word of God is obedience we can always give. Obedience to the commands of visible authorities only occurs from time to time; obedience in a serious matter might only be required three or four times in one’s whole life. However, obedience to the word of God is something we can do at every moment. It is an obedience that all can perform, subordinates and superiors. St. Ignatius of Antioch gave this wonderful advice to one of his colleagues in the episcopate: “Let nothing be done without your consent, nor do anything without God’s consent.”[14]

In practical terms, obeying the word of God means following good inspirations. Our spiritual progress depends in large part on our sensitivity to good inspirations and our readiness to respond. A word of God has suggested an idea to you, it has placed on your heart a desire for a good confession, for a reconciliation, for an act of charity; it invites you to interrupt work for a moment and address an act of love to God. Do not delay, do not let the inspiration pass by. “Timeo Iesum transeuntem” (“I’m terrified of Jesus passing by”), said St. Augustine,[15] which is like saying, “I am terrified that his good inspiration is passing by and will not come back.”

Let us conclude with a thought from an ancient Desert Father.[16] Our mind, he said, is like a mill; the first wheat that is put into it in the morning is what we continue to grind all day. Let us hurry, therefore, to put the good wheat of the word of God into this mill the first thing in the morning. Otherwise, the devil will come and put his tares in it, and for the whole day our minds will do nothing but grind those tares. The particular word we could put in the mill of our mind for today is the one that has been chosen for the Year of Mercy: “Be merciful as your heavenly Father!”

- [1] St. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John 55-111, 80, 3, vol. 90, trans. John W. Rettig, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), p. 117.
- [2] Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, “Sur la parole de Dieu,” in Oeuvres oratoires de Bossuet, vol. 3 (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1927), p. 627.
- [3] S. Augustine, Confessions, VIII, 29, trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), p. 202.
- [4] Dei verbum, n. 21. Quotes from papal documents are taken from the Vatican website.
- [5] See Guigo II, The Ladder of Monks: A Letter on the Contemplative Life, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981).
- [6] Dei verbum, n. 25.
- [7] Søren Kierkegaard, Self-Examination / Judge Yourself, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 29.
- [8] Origen, “Homily 13 on Exodus,” 3, in Homilies on Genesis and Exodus, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), pp. 380-381.
- [9] Guigo II, The Ladder of Monks, 3, p. 68.
- [10] Augustine, Expositions on the Psalms, 46, 1, The Works of Saint Augustine, Part 3, vol. 16, trans. Maria Boulding, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000), p. 325.
- [11] See Gregory the Great, “Letter 31, to Theodorus,” in Epistles of Gregory the Great, vol. 12, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, trans. James Barmby, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 156.
- [12] See Augustine, First Catechetical Instruction, 1, 8, vol. 2, Ancient Christian Writers (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 23.

[13] Gregory the Great, Homilies on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, 1, 10, 31, trans. Theodosia Tomkinson, 2nd ed. (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2008), pp. 200-201; see also CCL 142, p. 159.

[14] Ignatius of Antioch, “Letter to Polycarp,” 4, 1, in The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations, 3rd ed., ed. and rev. trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 265.

[15] Augustine, “Sermon 88,” 13, The Works of Saint Augustine, Part 3, vol. 3, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), p. 341.

[16] See Abbot Moses in John Cassian, Conferences, “Conference One,” 18, trans. Colm Luibhéid (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 52.

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Father Cantalamessa’s 1st Lent Homily 2016 (19 February, 2016)

<https://zenit.org/articles/father-cantalamessas-1st-lent-homily-2016/>

‘It is above all when prayer becomes an effort and a struggle that we discover the enormous importance of the Holy Spirit for our prayer life. The Spirit then becomes the strength of our “weak” prayer, the light of our lifeless prayer; in a word, he becomes the soul of our prayer.’

Here is the first Lenten homily given this year by the preacher of the Pontifical Household, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa.

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Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa

First Lenten Sermon 2016

WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH

Reflections on Sacrosanctum Concilium

1. The Second Vatican Council: a tributary, not the river

After having meditated on *Lumen gentium* in Advent, I would like to continue reflecting in these Lenten meditations on other great documents of Vatican II. I think, however, that it would be useful to make an introductory statement. Vatican II is a tributary, not the river. In his famous work *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Blessed Cardinal Newman strongly asserted that stopping the development of tradition at a certain point, even if it was an ecumenical council, would be to make it a dead tradition and not a “living tradition.” Tradition is like music. What kind of melody would it be if it stopped on one note and repeated that note endlessly? That happens when a disk is damaged, and we know the result it produces.

St. John XXIII wanted the Council to be like “a new Pentecost” for the Church. That prayer was granted at least on one point. After the Council there was a revival of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is no longer “the unknown Person” of the Trinity. The Church became more clearly aware of his presence and action. In his Homily for the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday in 2012, Benedict XVI stated,

Anyone who considers the history of the post-conciliar era can recognize the process of true renewal, which often took unexpected forms in living movements and made almost tangible the inexhaustible vitality of holy Church, the presence and effectiveness of the Holy Spirit.[1]

This does not mean we can do without the Council texts or go beyond them. It means rereading the Council in light of its fruit. The fact that ecumenical councils can have effects that are unintended at that time by those who are participating in them is a fact Cardinal Newman brought to light after the Council Vatican I,[2] but it has been witnessed many times in history. The Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431, with its definition of Mary as *Theotokos*, “Mother of God,” was intending to affirm the unity of the person of Christ, not to increase devotion to the Blessed Virgin, but in fact its clearest fruit was precisely the latter.

If there is an area in which the theology and life of the Catholic Church has been enriched in the fifty years since the Council, it is without doubt in regard to the Holy Spirit. All the major Christian denominations in recent times have affirmed what Karl Barth coined as “the Theology of the Third Article.”[3] The theology of the third article is a theology that does not end with the article on the Holy Spirit but begins with it; it takes into account not just the end product but the sequence by which the Christian faith and its creed were formed. It was in fact by the light of the Holy Spirit that the apostles

discovered who Jesus truly was and his revelation of the Father. The current creed of the Church is perfect and no one would dream of changing it, but it reflects the final product, the last stage reached by faith, but not the path that led to it. In view of a renewed effort in evangelization, however, it is vital for us also to know the path that leads to faith, and not just its definitive codification in the creed that we recite by memory.

In this light the implications of certain affirmations by the Council appear more clearly, but equally clear appear some omissions that need to be filled in, particularly concerning the role of the Holy Spirit. Saint John Paul II was already aware of this in 1981 when, on the occasion of the 1600th Anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Constantinople, he wrote the following in his Apostolic Letter: “The whole work of renewal of the Church, so providentially set forth and initiated by the Second Vatican Council, . . . can be carried out only in the Holy Spirit, that is to say, with the aid of His light and His power.”[4]

2. The place of the Holy Spirit in the liturgy

This broad premise proves to be particularly useful in dealing with the document on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*. This text arose from a need that was felt for a long time from many sides for a renewal of the forms and rites of the Catholic liturgy. From this perspective, it has had much fruit and, as a whole, has been very beneficial for the Church. Less felt at the time, however, was the need to look at what, after Romano Guardini, is called “the spirit of the liturgy,”[5] which, in a sense that I will explain, I would call “the liturgy of the Spirit” (“Spirit” with a capital “S”).

In line with the intention I stated for these meditations to underscore some spiritual and interior aspects of the Council’s texts, I would like to share some reflections specifically on this point. *Sacrosanctum concilium* devoted only a brief initial text to it, which was the fruit of the debate that preceded the final editing of the constitution:[6]

Christ indeed always associates the Church with Himself in this great work wherein God is perfectly glorified and men are sanctified. The Church is His beloved Bride who calls to her Lord, and through Him offers worship to the Eternal Father. Rightly, then, the liturgy is considered as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. In the liturgy the sanctification of the man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs; in the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the

Head and His members. From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others; no other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree.[7]

It is in the subjects, or the “actors,” in the liturgy that we are able to note a lacuna in this description today. There are only two protagonists highlighted here: Christ and the Church. There is no mention whatsoever of the role of the Holy Spirit. In the rest of the constitution as well, the Holy Spirit is never directly spoken about but is only mentioned here and there and always “obliquely.”

The Book of Revelation indicates for us the order and the complete number of the liturgical actors when it summarizes Christian worship: “The Spirit and the Bride say [to Christ the Savior], ‘Come’” (Rev 22:17). However, Jesus had already perfectly expressed the nature and innovation in worship that would be established by the New Covenant in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman: “The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:23).

The phrase “spirit and truth” in Johannine vocabulary can mean only two things: either the “Spirit of truth,” which is the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:17, 16:13), or the spirit of Christ who is the truth (see Jn 14:6). One thing is certain: this “spirit of truth” has nothing to do with the subjective meaning that is favored by idealists and romantics who think that “spirit and truth” point to a person’s hidden interiority as opposed to any kind of external and visible worship. It is not a question here of going from the external to the internal but from the human to the divine.

If Christian liturgy is “an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ,” the best way to discover its nature is to look at how Jesus exercised that priestly function in his life and in his death. The role of the priest is to offer “prayers and sacrifices” to God (see Heb 5:1, 8:3). We know now that the Holy Spirit is the one who placed the cry “Abba!” in the heart of the incarnate Word—a cry that enclosed his every prayer. Luke explicitly notes this when he writes, “In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth . . .’” (Lk 10:21). The very offering of his body in sacrifice on the cross occurs, according to the Letter to the Hebrews, “through the eternal Spirit” (Heb 9:14), that is, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

St. Basil offers an illuminating text on this point: “The way to divine knowledge ascends from one Spirit through the one Son to the one Father. [Conversely] natural goodness, inherent holiness, and royal dignity reaches from the Father through the Only-Begotten to the Spirit.”[8] In other words, on

the level of being and the coming forth of creatures from God, everything comes from the Father, goes through the Son, and reaches us through the Holy Spirit. In the order of knowledge, or of the return of creatures to God, everything begins with the Spirit, goes through the Son Jesus Christ, and ends with the Father.

In the Latin Church Blessed Isaac of Stella (12th century) expresses it in words that are quite similar to Basil's: "Just as divine gifts descend to us from the Father, through the Son and the Holy Spirit, or in the Holy Spirit, . . . so through the Spirit to the Son, and through the Son to the Father human gifts ascend." [9].

It is not a question, as we can see, of being a fan of one or the other of the three Persons of the Trinity but of safeguarding the trinitarian dynamic of the liturgy. Silence about the Holy Spirit inevitably dilutes its trinitarian character. Because of this, the point made by St. John Paul II in *Novo millennio ineunte* seems to me particularly appropriate:

Wrought in us by the Holy Spirit, this reciprocity [in prayer] opens us, through Christ and in Christ, to contemplation of the Father's face. Learning this Trinitarian shape of Christian prayer and living it fully, above all in the liturgy, the summit and source of the Church's life, but also in personal experience, is the secret of a truly vital Christianity, which has no reason to fear the future, because it returns continually to the sources and finds in them new life [italics added].[10]

3. Worship "in the Spirit"

Let us draw some practical implications from these premises for the way we live the liturgy so that it can fulfill one of its primary goals, namely, the sanctification of souls. The Holy Spirit does not authorize the invention of new and arbitrary forms of the liturgy or the modification of existing forms on one's own initiative (a responsibility that belongs to the hierarchy). He is the only one, however, who renews and gives life to all the expressions of the liturgy. In other words, the Holy Spirit does not do new things, he makes things new! Jesus' saying that is repeated by Paul, "It is the Spirit that gives life" (Jn 6:63; see 2 Cor 3:6), applies first of all to the liturgy.

The apostle exhorted the faithful to pray "in the Spirit" (Eph 6:18; see also Jude 20). What does it mean to pray in the Spirit? It means letting Jesus continue to exercise his priestly office in his body, which is the Church. Christian prayer becomes the extension to the body of the prayer of the Head. The statement by St. Augustine about this is well known:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the one who prays for us, prays in us, and is prayed to by us. He prays for us as our priest; he prays in us as our Head; and he is prayed to by us as our God. Let us therefore recognize him in our words and recognize his words in us.[11]

In this light the liturgy appears as an *opus Dei*, “a work of God,” not only because it has God as its object but also because it has God as its subject. God is not only prayed to by us but prays in us. The very cry “*Abbà!*” that the Spirit, coming upon us, addresses to the Father (see Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6) demonstrates that the one who prays in us through the Spirit is Jesus, the only Son of God. In fact, the Holy Spirit on his own could not address God by saying, “*Abbà, Father,*” because he is not “begotten” but instead “proceeds” from the Father. If the Spirit can do this, it is because he is the Spirit of Christ who continues his filial prayer in us.

It is above all when prayer becomes an effort and a struggle that we discover the enormous importance of the Holy Spirit for our prayer life. The Spirit then becomes the strength of our “weak” prayer, the light of our lifeless prayer; in a word, he becomes the soul of our prayer. Truly he “waters what is dry,” (“*riga quod est aridum*”), as we say in the sequence in the Spirit’s honor (*Veni Sancte Spiritus*).

All of this happens by faith. It is enough for me to think and say, “Father, you have given me the Spirit of Jesus; forming, therefore, ‘one Spirit’ with Jesus, I recite this psalm, I celebrate this Holy Mass, or I am simply silent in your presence here. I want to give you the same glory and joy that Jesus would have given you if he were the one still on earth praying to you.”

The Holy Spirit gives life in a particular way to the prayer of worship that is at the heart of every liturgical prayer. Its specific character derives from the fact that it is the only sentiment that we can foster solely and exclusively toward the divine Persons. It is what distinguishes *latria* (the supreme homage owed to God) from *dulia* (the reverence accorded to saints) and from *hyperdulia* (the special veneration reserved for the Blessed Virgin). We venerate the Blessed Mother, but we do not worship her, contrary to what some people think about Catholics.

Christian worship is also trinitarian. It is trinitarian in the manner in which it is carried out because it is adoration rendered “to the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit”; it is also trinitarian in its goal because adoration is given “to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit” together.

In Western spirituality, the one who most developed this theme in depth was Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629). For him, Christ is the perfect worshipper of the Father, to whom we need to unite

ourselves to worship God with a worship of infinite value.[12] He writes, “From all eternity there was an infinitely adorable God, but there was still not an infinite worshipper. . . . You are now, O Jesus, that worshipper, that man, that servant who is infinite in power, in quality, and in dignity, and who fully satisfies that duty and renders that divine homage.”[13]

If there is something missing in this vision that has given the Church such wonderful fruit and has shaped French spirituality for centuries, it is the very fact that we noted in the constitution of Vatican II: the insufficient attention given to the role of the Holy Spirit. Moving from the incarnate Word, Bérulle’s discourse goes on to describe the “royal court” that follows and accompanies him: the Blessed Virgin, John the Baptist, the apostles, the saints. What is missing is the recognition of the unique role of the Holy Spirit.

In every movement of returning to God, St. Basil reminded us, everything begins with the Spirit, goes through the Son, and ends with the Father. It is not enough to recall every so often that there is also a Holy Spirit. We need to recognize his essential role both in the process of creatures coming forth from God and in the return of creatures to God. The gulf that exists between us and the Jesus of history is filled by the Holy Spirit. Without him everything in the liturgy is only remembrance; with him, however, everything is also presence.

In Exodus we read that on Sinai God showed Moses a cleft in the rock in which he could hide himself to contemplate God’s glory without perishing (see Ex 33:21). What is that cleft for us Christians today, that place where we can take refuge to contemplate and adore God? Commenting on this Exodus passage, St. Basil tells us, “It is in the Holy Spirit! How do we know that? From Jesus himself who said, ‘The true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.’”[14]

What perspective, what beauty, what power, what attraction all of this confers on the ideal of Christian worship! In the midst of the whirling vortex of this world, who does not at times feel the need to hide in that spiritual cleft to contemplate and adore God like Moses did?

4. Intercessory Prayer

Next to worship, an essential component of liturgical prayer is intercession. In all of its prayers, the Church is interceding for itself and for the world, for the just and for sinners, for the living and the dead. This too is prayer that the Holy Spirit wants to animate and strengthen. St. Paul writes about the Spirit, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but

the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom 8:26-27).

The Holy Spirit intercedes for us and teaches us in turn to intercede for others. Doing intercessory prayer means uniting ourselves, by faith, to the risen Christ who lives in a perennial state of intercession for the world (see Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25; 1 Jn 2:1). Jesus offers us a sublime example of intercession in the great prayer that concluded his earthly life:

I am praying . . . for those whom you have given me. . . . Keep them in your name. . . . I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil one. . . . Sanctify them in the truth. . . . I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word. (Jn 17:9ff)

In Isaiah it is said of the Suffering Servant that God will reward him with “a portion among the great” because “he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Is 53:12). This prophecy found its perfect fulfillment in Jesus who, on the cross, interceded for those who crucified him (see Lk 23:34).

The efficacy of intercessory prayer does not depend on “multiplying many words” (see Mt 6:7) but on the degree of unity that one succeeds in having with the filial attitude of Christ. What is more helpful than multiplying words of intercession, however, is multiplying intercessors, that is, invoking the help of Mary and the saints. In the Feast of All Saints, the Church asks to be heard by God through “the abundance of intercessors” (“multiplicatis intercessoribus”)

Intercessors also multiply when they pray for one another. Saint Ambrose says,

If you pray for yourself, you will be the only one praying for yourself, and if anyone prays only for himself or herself, the grace obtained will be less than the grace of the person who intercedes for others. Now if each person prays for everyone, then each is praying for the others. To conclude, if you pray only for yourself, you are alone in praying for yourself. If instead you pray for everyone, then everyone will pray for you since you are included in “everyone.”[15]

The prayer of intercession is thus acceptable to God because it is the most unselfish prayer; it more closely reflects divine gratuitousness and is in accord with the will of God “who desires all men to be

saved” (1 Tim 2:4). God is like a compassionate father who has the duty to punish but who looks for all the extenuating circumstances to avoid doing it and is happy when the brothers of the guilty party restrain him from doing it.

When there are no brotherly arms raised toward him, God laments in Scripture that “he saw that there was no man, and he wondered that there was none to intervene” (Is. 59:16). Ezekiel conveys this following lament by God: “I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none” (Ez 22:30).

The Word of God highlights the extraordinary power of the prayer of a person whom God has put at the head of his people and who has God’s own attitude. One psalm says that God would have decided to destroy his people because of the golden calf “had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath” (Ps 106:23).

I dare to suggest to pastors and spiritual guides, when you sense in prayer that God is angry with the people he has entrusted to you, do not immediately take sides with God but with the people! This is what Moses did, to the point of declaring that he was willing to be blotted out from the book of life with them (see Ex 32:32). The Bible lets us know that this is exactly what God wanted so that he could “abandon the plan of destroying his people.” When we are before the people, however, then we need to side with God whole-heartedly. Very soon after his intercessory prayer when Moses was before the people, it was then that he expressed his anger: he smashed the golden calf, scattered its powdered dust upon the water, and made the people drink it (see Ex 32:19ff). Only the person who has defended people before God and has carried the weight of their sin has the right—and will have the courage—to raise his voice later against them in defense of God as Moses did.

Let us conclude by proclaiming together the text that best reflects the place of the Holy Spirit and the trinitarian orientation in the liturgy, the final doxology in the Roman canon: “Through him, with him, and in him in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever. Amen.”

Translated from Italian by Marsha Daigle Williamson

- [1] Benedict XVI, Homily at St. Peter's Basilica, April 5, 2012. All papal quotes are taken from the Vatican website.
- [2] See Ian Ker, "Newman, the Councils, and Vatican II, *Communio* 28, no. 4 (Winter 2001): pp. 708-728.
- [3] See Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 278.
- [4] John Paul II, "A Concilio Constantinopolitano," n. 7, March 25, 1981.
- [5] See Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lane (London: Aeterna Press, 2015), and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000).
- [6] Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (for the English version), eds., *The History of Vatican II*, vol. 3 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 192ff.
- [7] *Sacrosanctum concilium*, n. 7.
- [8] St. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 18, 47, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1997), pp. 74-75; see also PG 32, 153.
- [9] Blessed Isaac of Stella, *Letter on the Soul*, 23, in *The Selected Works of Isaace of Stella*, ed. Dániel Deme (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), p. 157; see also PL 194, 1888.
- [10] John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 32.
- [11] St. Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 85, 1, in *Saint Augustine: The Complete Works*, vol.III/18, trans. Maria Boulding, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), p. 220; see also CCL 39, p. 1176.
- [12] See Michel Dupuy, *Bérulle, une spiritualité de l'adoration* (Tournai: Desclée de Brouwer, 1964).

[13] Pierre de Bérulle, *Discours de l'état et des grandeurs de Jésus* (1623; reprint, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1996). See also *Bérulle and the French School: Selected Writings*, trans. Lowell M. Glendon (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

[14] St. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 26, 62 (PG 32, 181ff).

[15] See St. Ambrose, *On Cain and Abel* 1, 39, vol. 42, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), p. 395; see also CSEL 32, p. 372.

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