

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. 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." 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.”

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). 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.” 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 nuntiandi* 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.”

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 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?”

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," 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.

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