



The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church: A Theological Reflection

The theme for Catechetical Sunday 2008 is “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church.” This is also the theme for the worldwide Synod of Bishops that will take place in October 2008. As catechists, we are invited to join the universal Church in meditating on the Word of God.

The phrase “the Word of God” has many meanings for Catholics. The phrase refers to

- The pre-existent Word, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God
- God’s Word at creation, through whom everything that exists came into being
- Jesus himself, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us
- Sacred Scripture, God’s inspired Word
- Church Tradition, which faithfully echoes the Word of God to every generation

On this Catechetical Sunday we are invited to meditate on the fullness of meaning in the phrase “the Word of God,” to reflect upon our own relationship with the living Word, and to examine our role in bringing the Word of God to others.

The Pre-Existent Word

John’s Gospel begins by presenting Jesus Christ as the pre-existent Word of God:

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. (Jn 1:1)

The Word is “pre-existent” because the Word existed from all eternity, before anything or anyone existed. John’s teaching that the Word existed before creation is central to the Catholic concept of a Trinitarian God: Father, Son, and Spirit, three persons but one God.

The Word of God: Creation

The Gospel of John is not the only book of the Bible that begins with the words “In the beginning.” The book of Genesis begins, “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth” (Gn 1:1). John purposefully alludes to the book of Genesis by beginning his Gospel with the same words. John often alludes to Genesis in his Gospel because he wants his readers to see the two books in relation to one another: Genesis begins with a story about the creation of all that exists, starting with light. John’s Gospel is the

story of the spiritual re-creation that has been revealed and accomplished through Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

In Genesis, God creates all that exists through speaking the Word. “Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. . . . Then God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters’” (Gn 1:3a, 6a). Each day, God creates by speaking the Word. On the sixth day, “God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’” (Gn 1:26a). Once again, the Word was spoken and we, male and female, existed in God’s own image.

In the Gospel of John we learn that this creative word through which all that exists came into being is the pre-existent Word of God, who was present from before time: He was in the beginning with God.

All things came to be through him,
and without him nothing came to be. (Jn 1:3a)

The Word Became Flesh

This pre-existent Word, the source of all that exists, became flesh and dwelt among us:

And the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory as of the Father’s only Son,
full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:14)

The Word that became flesh and dwelt among us still dwells among us. We still recognize his glory.

Scripture: God’s Living Word

Notice that, to claim the truths upon which we are reflecting, this reflection has repeatedly quoted Scripture. Why is that? We quote Scripture as an authority in our search for truth because we believe that Scripture is the inspired Word of God, that God speaks to us through Scripture. In this sense, God is the author of Scripture.

When we claim that God is the author of Scripture, we are not claiming that God physically wrote the Bible. Originally, God chose to reveal the divine plan of salvation history to us through events, not through the written word. In terms of the salvation history that is recounted in Scripture, these events began with our father in faith, Abraham, and continued until the death of the last Apostle after Jesus’ Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension: the Paschal Mystery.

Through the centuries, people told stories about the events in which they experienced God as powerful and present. These stories were passed on through the believing community, were edited in the light of subsequent events, and finally became canonical: that is, they became accepted as inspired works that teach us what we need to know for our salvation. This Word of God is received by the Church as what we call the Bible, made up of the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Although we refer to the Bible as the Old and the New Testaments, we have only one Bible. The Bible is one story, the story of God's love for God's people. The ultimate revelation of God's love is the Word of God, Jesus Christ, who became one of us, who rose from the dead, who offers us eternal life, and who continues to dwell with us. One of the ways in which the risen Christ continues to dwell in our midst is through Scripture. This Word of God is core to the life and mission of the Church.

The Word of God in the Life of the Church: Worship

The Word of God, present in Scripture, is central to the worship life of the Church. That is why we proclaim God's Word at every Eucharistic gathering, at every celebration of the sacraments, and during the Liturgy of the Hours. We proclaim passages from the Old Testament, which foreshadows the coming of Jesus, and from the New Testament, which teaches us how God's universal plan of salvation has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We believe that the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us is present in the Word proclaimed. We believe that the Church feeds "the faithful the bread of life, taken from the one table of God's Word and Christ's Body" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 103). Through both Eucharist and Scripture, we come into intimate relationship with the risen Christ in our midst.

The Word of God in the Life of the Church: Teaching

It is the responsibility of the Church to faithfully pass on and interpret the Word of God for every generation. One way in which the Church is apostolic is by teaching what the Apostles taught about Jesus Christ. However, because each generation receives the Word of God in a different social setting than did previous generations, the Church must, through the inspiration of the Spirit, interpret and apply the Word of God to each new setting.

One of the great gifts that the Church gave us in the twentieth century was the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on Divine Revelation* (*Dei Verbum*). In this document the Church teaches us how to understand the Word of God that we have received.

We are taught to be contextualists in our interpretation of Scripture:

Seeing that, in sacred Scripture, God speaks through men in human fashion, it follows that the interpreter of sacred Scriptures, if he is to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in

mind. . . . Hence the exegete must look for that meaning which the sacred writer, in a determined situation and given the circumstances of his time and culture, intended to express and did in fact express, through the medium of a contemporary literary form. (*Dei Verbum*, no. 12)

The Church, through the centuries, guides the faithful through its teaching, rooted in Scripture. This Church Tradition, which originally gave us Scripture and now interprets Scripture in every culture and in every historic setting, is also an expression of the one Word of God.

The Word of God in the Life of the Church:

Personal Prayer

In addition to revealing universal and eternal truths, Scripture is also the living Word, a light unto our path, a way of being in personal conversation with God. Scripture, itself, makes this claim: "Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart" (Heb 4:12). For this reason, the Word of God in Scripture is core to our personal prayer lives. Through Scripture the living Word of God comes and speaks with us individually and personally.

The Word of God in the Mission of the Church

The Church not only receives, celebrates, and lives the Word of God; the Church is sent on mission to preach the Word to all nations. We are an evangelizing people. The Word of God is the source, the subject, and the means by which we proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Our model as evangelizers and teachers is Mary, in whom the Word became incarnate. We are called to be formed by the Word, as was Mary when she said, "May it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38b). We are called to be Christ-bearers, as was Mary. We are to bring Christ to all we meet.

On Catechetical Sunday we remember especially the duty and honor that is ours by virtue of our Baptism, to be witnesses of the Word of God in every aspect of our lives: in our homes, in our places of work, in how we spend our leisure time, in how we use our resources. We are to be catechists—those who echo the Word of God through time and space—to every generation.

May we be faithful witnesses to the Word of God who created us, who redeemed us, who calls us, who loves us, who nourishes us, and who guides us on every step of our life's journey. Amen.

REFERENCES

- Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000.
- Second Vatican Council. *Constitution on Divine Revelation* (*Dei Verbum*). In *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery. Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996.