

**THE WORD OF GOD:  
SOURCE AND POWER OF PREACHING**

**Preaching the Mystery of Faith  
University of Notre Dame  
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It is an honor and pleasure to be with you this morning, you who are so central to the Church mission of proclaiming the word of God to the world. The recent statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* is a strong reaffirmation of the ministry of the word, particularly in the context of the Sunday Eucharist. It follows upon a previous statement on preaching issued by the Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry thirty years ago, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, a text that has served the Church well over the past few years, as many of you who have used it in your homiletic courses can attest. But a lot has happened to the Church in the United States in the past thirty years and the time was ripe for the bishops to turn their attention once more to this central ministry of the Church.

As our program indicates, subsequent sessions in our conference will focus on some of the dimensions of the statement that reflect this new context: namely the relationship of preaching to the New Evangelization and

the necessary link between homiletic preaching and the Church's catechetical mission.

The topic I have been asked to speak on today is to focus on the biblical foundations for the Church's preaching ministry and some of conclusions we can draw from this for what we might call a "spirituality" of preaching. I will do my best to address this topic but I look forward also to your responses and insights, my brother and sisters in the preaching ministry.

### **A Consistent Theology of the Word**

One of the remarkable features of the post Vatican II church regarding our reflection on the word of God is the strong and consistent mode of reflection on what is the ultimate foundation for the church's mission to proclaim the word of God. One can draw, in fact, a straight line from the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation—*Dei Verbum*—formulated near the very end of the Second Vatican Council in November 1965, through the formulation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in 1992 in its reflection on the Creed, which in fact draws heavily on *Dei Verbum*—and on to Pope Benedict's post-synodal exhortation of 2010, *Verbum Domini*—and finally to the U.S. Bishops' statement, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* promulgated at its November 2012 meeting. This latter text, which is the

rationale for our conference, draws on all of the above mentioned documents in reflecting on the Church's preaching ministry.

There is a common pattern that runs through each of these documents. The formulation found in Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* is seminal. You may recall that this document underwent a complex and controversial process before it was finally approved by the Council fathers.<sup>1</sup> The original schema proposed at the opening session of the Council was rejected as being too abstract, too scholastic, and too rigid in its formulation. Then a *peritus* for the German bishops at the Council, Joseph Ratzinger said that the schema was "cramped: and "essentially a canonization of Roman school theology." Pope John XXIII sought a solution to the sharp divisions among the Council Fathers by appointing a commission to work on the text, a commission co-chaired by Cardinal Ottaviani and Cardinal Bea—each of whom represented polar opposite viewpoints about the document! Ultimately the document, benefiting from the educational and formative process of the Council's intervening sessions, would be approved by a near unanimous vote. The fundamentals of each of the subsequent statements I have referred to are already found in the Council's dogmatic constitution:

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion of the process in Ronald D. Witherup, *Scripture Dei Verbum* (Rediscovering Vatican II; New York: Paulist Press, 2006) pp. 1-31.

a) First and foremost the God revealed in the Bible is a God who self-communicates; a God who is not self-contained but one who wishes to reveal himself to the world. This is evident in the account of creation that begins the biblical saga in Genesis chapter 1. Through his all powerful word, God creates the universe in all of its dimensions and in all of its beauty. Above all, God creates the human being, male and female, as the summit of creation and establishes a relationship with humans.

b) Secondly, the Bible portrays the human person, male and female, as made in the divine image—therefore, as capable, indeed destined, to respond to God. Thus revelation is not an abstract notion about the transmission of truth but at its root is a relationship between God and the world he created. This relational nature of revelation is fundamental to the whole theology of the word developed in *Dei Verbum* and continuing to the present day.

c) Thirdly, the God who creates the universe and the human being does not stay aloof from his creation but is involved, although mysteriously, in human history. The long and tortured saga of Israel presented in subsequent biblical history reflects this conviction. God is present—protecting Israel, admonishing it, forgiving it, carrying it forward often in spite of itself. Although the main focus of the Bible is on God's

unique people Israel, it is also clear that the God of Israel is also the God of the Nations and the entire history of all peoples and of the universe itself is God's own arena.

d) Fourth, the culmination of human history and of the revealing word of God comes in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh and the definitive revealer of God's word to the world. Here *Dei Verbum*—and followed by each of the subsequent documents I have cited—turns to the prologue of John's Gospel, the most eloquent biblical expression of this conviction. The Word who is with God from the beginning is the Word spoken by God and perfectly expressing God's being so that the Word is God, this is the Word that arcs down into the created world and becomes flesh. In the flesh of Jesus Christ, the community sees the glory of God.

Other key texts cited in our documents that also express this conviction are found, for example, in the opening words of the Epistle to the Hebrews:

“In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe, who is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being, and who sustains all things by his mighty word.” (Hebrew 1:-3). Or the opening lines of the

letter to the Ephesians also cited by *Dei Verbum*: “In all wisdom and insight, God has made know to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth.” (Eph 1:9-10).

e) And, finally, the Word embodied and made flesh in Jesus Christ, a Word expressed in his teaching and compassionate healing, in his gathering of a community, in his giving of his life in the fullness of love, in his conquering of death and his return to communion with the Father for all time—this full articulation of God’s word of redeeming love for the world is now entrusted to the apostles and their successors. Fired by the Spirit of God sent upon the Church by the Risen and triumphant Christ, the apostolic church is commissioned to proclaim the word of God to the world and, in the spirit of that word, to form communities of life gathered in the name of Jesus and destined to be witnesses of God’s redeeming love for the world. Here is the ultimate source and authority for the preaching ministry of the Church.

This is the sequence—from the first impulse of creation through the incarnation and on to the apostolic mission of the church--that is first articulated in *Dei Verbum*, succinctly repeated in the *Catechism*, and beautifully expanded upon in Pope Benedict’s eloquent *Verbum Domini* which, taking its cue from the General Synod of 2008, reflects on the role of

Scripture in the life and ministry of the Church. And this is the same biblical and doctrinal basis for the bishops' statement on **Preaching the Mystery of Faith**.

### **The Beauty and Power of the Biblical Narrative**

We should not be content, however, to articulate the biblical foundation for the ministry of preaching in rather abstract or schematic terms. When we actually reflect on the word of God as presented by the Scriptures themselves, we are taken deep into the pulsating beauty and power of our biblical heritage and deep into the underlying meaning of our ministry as preachers of the word within the church. With your patience I would like to look through this biblical lens at the church's mission to proclaim the word of God in the midst of our unusual times.

The 'word of God'—few phrases resonate more powerfully within the biblical saga than that. The motif of God's word twists through the entire story of Israel like a powerful sinew.

From the creating word of the opening chapters of Genesis to the healing word of the Lamb who was slain in the Book of Revelation, the Bible is convinced of the overwhelming and transformative power of God's word.

At the dawn of the universe, God's word hovers over the *tohu-va-bohu*, the formless and chaotic void, and transform it into light, order, beauty, warmth, the light of the sun by day, the glow of the stars and the moon by night, the fertile earth and the marvel of the human person male and female. Astoundingly, the Bible affirms that the human being, male and female, is made in the image and likeness of God. We are shaped and formed in the deepest level of our being to be like God—to bear the divine imprint and to live the divine life.

This word of God that shaped the universe and shapes the human heart pushes out into history, forging a people and giving them a destiny. God's word has a particularly transformative impact on the leaders and teachers of God's people, ultimately laying the groundwork for the Church's mission of preaching. God's word anoints the kings and emboldens the prophets: Moses, who would lead God's people out of slavery and despair, encountering God in the burning bush at Horeb the mountain of God, hesitant and fearful as God anoints him to lead the people out of slavery. "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past or even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Then the Lord said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord. Now go and

I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.” (Exodus 4:10-12).

Or the call of the prophet Amos of Tekoa, dragooned by God into a powerful mission of justice. “I am no prophet,” he says, “nor a prophet’s son. I am a herdsman and a dresser of Sycamore trees. And the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, “Go, prophecy to my people Israel.” And so he went. Or Jeremiah, tongue-tied, hesitant—“I am only a boy,” he tells God. “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” (Jer 1:6-8). Or consider Isaiah himself, standing in the portals of the temple, overwhelmed by a sense of God’s presence and his own unworthiness, crying out, “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips...” A seraph purifies his troubled heart and lips with a burning coal from the temple brassier and then the voice of God penetrates the prophet’s dread: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” His anguish put aside, the prophet speaks: “Here am I; send me!” (Isaiah 6).

And so it would be with all of the great characters who form the biblical saga, men and women—unlikely vessels of God—hesitant and awkward, yet summoned by God’s compelling and all powerful word to

take up their mission on behalf of the people. Leading them out of Egypt and slavery; sustaining them in their desert trek; bringing them into the land of promise; purifying them in their failure; comforting them in exile; bringing them back home.

The word of God, God's call--is often disruptive, breaking into ordinary lives and asking ordinary people to bear a mission of human transformation and to experience profound and sometimes wrenching change in order to be faithful to that divine summons.

Few passages can match the fierce poetry of Psalm 29 as it hymns this power of the divine word:

“The voice of the Lord is over the waters, the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over vast waters. The voice of the lord is mighty, the voice of the Lord is majestic. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon...the voice of the Lord strikes fiery flames, the voice of the Lord shakes the desert, the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips forests, and in his temple all say, ‘Glory!’”

Or listen to the vivid imagery of the Book of Wisdom in speaking of God's punishment of Pharaoh, “For when peaceful stillness compassed everything and the night in its swift course was half spent, Your all-powerful

word from heaven's royal throne bounded, a fierce warrior, into the doomed land, bearing the sharp sword of your inexorable decree. And as it alighted, it filled every place with death; he still reached to heaven, while he stood upon the earth" (Wis 18:14-16).

Or in a different mode, what text is more beautiful than the famed verse of Isaiah 55:10-11, quoted by the way in *Dei Verbum*:

"For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats, So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; It shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.

The word of God—dynamic, powerful, awesome, filled with startling creativity and beauty—this is the sense that Israel had of God's immanent presence in the midst of their history. This is the pattern of God's self-disclosure and generous abundance that paves the way for Christian reflection on the mystery of Jesus as God's Word incarnate and, indeed, as ultimately a revelation of the mystery of the Trinity itself.

So deep and penetrating is this biblical metaphor of the word as a way of speaking of God's redemptive presence in the world that in the New

Testament it becomes synonymous with Christ and the Christian message.

Of course, John makes this point so eloquently in the prologue to his Gospel:

--God speaking at the dawn before time.

--that word so perfectly articulated that it indeed reveals

God fully,

--that word bounding into creation, into the world of

civilization, and unfathomably, beautifully, that Word becoming flesh—true

flesh, truly human. And through the human embodiment of the Word,

through Jesus the Incarnate Word, the glory of God is now revealed. Thus

every gesture of Jesus, every act of compassion, every word he speaks, and

even and especially his ultimate giving of his life for those whom he loves as

friends, reveals the God who speaks as one who will not condemn the world

but is intent that the world might live through him.

This same fundamental conviction that Jesus is the embodied Word of

God also colors the early Christian language used to describe its mission, a

mission that continued Christ's living presence in the world. The early

chapters of Acts make this point in a vivid way. Disciples, broken and

despairing are transformed by their encounter with the living word of the

Risen Christ. Peter and the twelve break out of their room of fear and

preach the word to the crowds of Jewish pilgrims who come to Jerusalem for

Pentecost. Neither threat nor imprisonment nor flogging can stop these apostles and witnesses to God's word.

Or we can think of the appearance to the two disciples fleeing Jerusalem in despair and sadness, their hopes broken by the death of Jesus—a text cited at length in the Bishops' statement on preaching and its intrinsic link to the Eucharist. The mysterious pilgrim who joins them breaks open the power of God's word, breaks bread with them, and their hearts burn within them and they return to the community in Jerusalem.

Or we think of Paul, encountering the Risen Christ, his world turned upside down in the dramatic conversion scene on the road to Damascus in the Acts of the Apostles. In his letter to the Galatians, this same Paul in later times and after much reflection would think of his encounter with the Word not as a dramatic singular event but as a mysterious call that reached him before he was even knit together in his mother's womb—a destiny that God has in store for him from all eternity. In this beautiful reflection in Galatians, Paul recapitulates the experience of Isaiah and Jeremiah before him—prophets who realized that the creative power of God's word had chosen them and shaped them from the very beginning, even before they saw the light of day. And so we have Paul and the men and women who ranged through the Mediterranean world—Paul and Silas and Barnabas and

Timothy and Lydia, and Aquila and Pricilla, and Phoebe the Deacon of Cenchreae, and Apollos of Alexandria, enflamed with the Christian message, described their work as the proclamation of the word, as the announcement of Good news, as a compulsion to speak the word of God.

Yes, think of Paul the Apostle, that passionate, driven character that he was. You can sense his bold pastoral plan in Romans 15 and other passages of his letters; he intends to move around rim of Mediterranean world, through the power of God's word planting Christian communities in places no one else has been, thereby making Israel jealous, and finally, triumphantly, handing over the entire world to Christ who will give it to God! (Paul assumed he would do this in his lifetime!)

For the sake of this mission, Paul thinks of himself as "compelled" to proclaim the word of God, the Word that is Christ. Who can forget his inexorable logic in Romans 10:

"For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the

feet of those who bring the good news!”...Thus faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.”

### **Impact on Those Commissioned to Proclaim the Word of God**

One of the special features of *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* is that it considers what are the spiritual implications of such a theology of the word of God for the one who is called to proclaim that biblical word within the preaching mission of the church? This is a valuable dimension of the bishops’ statement. I will not repeat all of that section of the document which you can read for yourself. But allow me to offer some personal reflections on some aspects of what the beauty and power of the Scriptures might require of us who are called to preach:

**a) First of all, I believe that those who are commissioned to preach from the Scriptures should absorb the rhetorical power and beauty of the biblical language.**

The term “rhetorical” is used here not in the narrow and often pejorative sense it is often used today, as when we say “that’s just rhetoric” or that’s “political rhetoric,” but rhetorical in the classical sense, meaning language and forms of discourse capable of moving the human spirit. This is the sense of rhetoric in which most of the New Testament authors themselves would have been schooled.

Most of the biblical literature understands the importance of rich symbols, of language that has power and beauty, of imagery that captures the imagination and touches the heart: Jeremiah, for example, envisioning his prophetic vocation to steadfastness as God's fashioning him into a "pillar of iron" or a "wall of brass" (Jer 1:18), while God's own elusiveness is like a "treacherous brook that does not abide" (Jer 17:18); Isaiah daring to have God shower contempt on those who trample the courts of the temple, their hands scarlet with guilt (Isaiah 1); the composer of the lament psalms who is able to shake a verbal fist at God's absence demanding to know where God is in the starkness of a night of suffering and isolation (Psalm 22); the pointed parable of a Nathan about the ewe lamb that stabs to the heart of David's guilt (2 Sam 12:1-15) or of the parables of Jesus where in Luke's Gospel as he challenges the lack of compassion on the part of the religious leaders in his three extraordinary mercy parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (Luke 15:1-32); or the expansive and indelible Pauline word portrait of charity in I Corinthians 13; or the author of the second letter of Peter asking the community to wait expectantly until "the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19); or the near mad symbolism of Revelation's heavenly vision that still fires the imagination of the artist, the prophet and the mystic.

Everyone in education today, theological and secular, is aware that despite or because of our prowess in empirical and technological matters we are in danger of creating a generation whose language is impoverished. With little exposure to classical literature or the best of the modern, with only a glancing acquaintance with the Bible itself even in many theology schools, and being force fed from an early age with the dulled technocratic or, even worse, insipid personalistic language of contemporary western society, the student preacher of today can enter the arena severely hampered.

Ken Burn's public television series on The American Civil War that first appeared a few years ago and is frequently rebroadcast captivated millions of viewers. The power of that series derived in part from the poignancy and epic scope of its subject matter and from the evocative photos of those who participated in the tragedy. But it also used, to an extraordinary degree, the power of language. As viewers listened to love letters, pages from diaries, and speeches by powerful orators such as Abraham Lincoln or Frederick Douglas, they were moved by the rhetorical power of language, much of it, by the way, drawn from the Bible. I fear that few letters from home today--and in the age of the phone and email and texting not many are written--would have similar force. Not because people do not have feelings or noble sentiments but because for many people, even

educated ones, the language required to express their deepest convictions fails them.

If I had anything to do with training preachers, I would urge them to spend more time on massive doses of reading in literature, especially poetry, and, especially of course, spending time in a reflective and prayerful reading of the Bible itself. The privilege of preaching from the biblical lectionary compels us, I believe, to develop a culture, or better, a habit of heart of biblical reading, a personal familiarity with the terrain of the biblical literature and biblical history, a passionate love of the biblical text and the ready access to it that come only from thoughtful, habitual, prolonged, thorough and deeply prayerful reading and rereading of the biblical literature itself.

Some of you will be familiar with the name of Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., a fellow Passionist, a great biblical scholar, and I am grateful to say, a personal mentor for me. Carroll published a series of books entitled “Biblical Meditations” that followed the readings of the liturgical year; they are still in print! I have a vivid memory of finding Carroll in our chapel early each morning reading the Scriptures, with his notebook in hand—moving from his meditation on the text to the

proclamation of the word. Would that all of us who aspire to be preachers of the word had a similar life habit.

**b) Preaching with a biblical character should be experientially grounded but not excessively autobiographical and not centered on the preacher.**

The statement, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* makes this point and it is a good one. Pope Benedict himself in *Verbum Domini* observed: “The homily is a means of bringing the scriptural message to life in a way that helps the faithful to realize that God’s word is present and at work in their everyday lives...Consequently, those who have been charged with preaching by virtue of a specific ministry ought to take this task to heart. Generic and abstract homilies which obscure the directness of God’s word should be avoided, as well as useless digressions which risk drawing greater attention to the preacher than to the heart of the Gospel message.”<sup>2</sup> I might add, that having had the privilege of hearing several of Pope Francis’ homilies during a recent meeting of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in Rome, I noted that his own style of preaching is very much in this mode: biblically centered, rich with imagery, warmly personal and to the point, but not drawing attention to himself.

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<sup>2</sup> *Verbum Domini*, n. 59.

The Bible itself also makes this point. The Bible is a book of the people. It is folk literature, not high literature. The sagas of Genesis and Exodus, the practical legislation of Leviticus, the chronicles of the monarchy, the war stories of the Maccabees, the oracles of the prophets, the aphorisms of Proverbs, the healing stories and parables of the Gospels, the sometimes blunt, sometimes poetic letters of Paul, were written by people who lived and felt what they spoke about. The biblical scribes trained for the Kingdom drew, indeed as Matthew's Gospel puts it, from their "treasure house" (Mt 13:52).

This is what gives the biblical materials their credibility. Handed on from generation to generation; turned over lovingly in the heart and soul of believers; earnestly prayed and pondered over--the biblical materials reflect the faith experience of those who shaped these texts. The Scriptures, therefore, have an inherent capacity to touch the faith of the reader.

The great teachers and pastors of the Bible had an eye for human experience, an appreciation for the real dimensions of the human character. For example, recent analyses of the speech patterns of the sayings, discourses and parables of Jesus reveal his strong experiential base. As one New Testament scholar said, listening to the parables of Jesus is like watching a home movie in which transcendent truth takes on vivid, human

terms. His parables reveal someone who, as storytellers must, had a penetrating and compassionate eye for the human drama, with all of its nobility, its crudeness, its suffering, its comedy. For example, the characters that fill the Gospel parables are not ideal types: along with the noble father who patiently awaits his errant son and the shepherd who risks everything for one sheep and the charitable Samaritan who cares for his natural enemy, there is the crafty steward who feathers his own nest as he faces the prospect of unemployment, the man who answers his door for his supposed friend only to be able to sleep without interruption, the judge who gives the widow her due only to be rid of her, and both the son who squanders his inheritance and ends up tending the pigs and his elder brother who resents the too lavish forgiveness of their parent who welcomes the prodigal home.

The appreciative eye for human comedy and human tragedy that characterizes the parables reflects the earth-rooted character of the Bible as a whole. It is not polite, elegant literature. It has the power of genuine human experience, of life itself.

But at the same time, the author of almost every book of the Bible is anonymous. The focus is not on the storyteller or on the author. Like most of the artisans of the cathedrals, the biblical authors did not sign their names and often drew attention to someone else as the source of their authority.

Paul might seem to be an exception; it is, after all, hard to write a letter and not have some personal referent. But even Paul, with his robust, extroverted nature used autobiography sparingly and usually in those cases where his apostolic authority was under attack and called for a vigorous personal defense. And most of the letters of Paul were not written by him alone but, as he frequently states in his opening lines, were collaborative affairs composed with co-workers.

The intensely interpersonal focus of many students of ministry and the bias of our western culture can make the self-transcendence of the preacher a difficult challenge. Managing to be personal without riveting attention on one's self is an art and a spiritual discipline not easily learned. Nevertheless, there is a way in which those who proclaim the Word can expose their personal convictions and experience without forcing the biblical message to be trimmed to their own dimensions and their own concerns. Preaching, like liturgy itself, is a public, communal act, and the scope of the preacher, like the style of the presider, must reach beyond the confines of one's own experience to make way for the varying dimensions of those who hear the word through the proclamation of the preacher.

The very authority of the word demands this: the preacher mediates the word and in so doing becomes a kind of sacramental presence enabling

the proclamation to be amplified through one believing person. This means inevitably that good preaching must be transparent, allowing the hearer to find a truth that is at once communicated in the words and gestures and life example of the preacher but, in fact, transcends any individual's horizon. For this reason, effective preaching is related to character and spirituality as much or more than it is to technique and method.

**c) Preaching with a biblical character should be expansive, evocative and visionary rather than didactic, moralistic, or trivial. Preaching is, in fact, an expression of the essential missionary character of the Church.**

The connection of the Sunday homily with the Church's call to evangelization will be taken up in a subsequent session but allow me here to make a brief comment on the nature of the biblical word and the call to mission and its impact on the spirituality of the preacher.

If the homily is to match the scope and character of the biblical text, and harmonize with the deep seriousness of the liturgy itself, then it should truly inspire and enlarge the Christian heart of the one who hears it. This is the spirit of the Church's mission to the world, the call to proclaim the word of God which is a word not of condemnation but a word of life—a word embodied and most vividly proclaimed in the person and mission of Jesus

who is the taproot—the wellspring—of all Christian ministry, of all sense of mission.

When we use the term “mission” today, we mean it of course not just in sense of mission *ad gentes*: in the image of missionary leaving home shores and bringing the word of the gospel to those who have never heard it. This remains valid, but there is a more pervasive and all encompassing sense of mission. In speaking of the commitment to mission on the part of those in consecrated life, John Paul II noted that the Christian “...has the prophetic task of recalling and serving the divine plan for humanity, as it is announced in scripture and as it emerges from an attentive reading of the signs of God’s providential action in history. This is the plan for the salvation and reconciliation of humanity.”<sup>3</sup>

When considering our mission of proclaiming the word of God, no matter what the particular modalities of our ministry might be, we must keep in mind that the object of God’s word is the transformation and salvation of the world. When I was in graduate school in Louvain, Belgium, I took a trip with a few friends to London to buy books—which were much cheaper there than on the continent. At Blackwell’s famous book store in Oxford, I found a table that contained used books, each being sold for one pound. I was

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<sup>3</sup> *Vita Consecrata*, n. 73.

thrilled to discover a leather bound edition of J.C. Hawkins book on the synoptic problem, entitled *Horae Synopticae*. Not bedside reading, for sure, but for an eager graduate student truly a find. On the ferry on the way back I pulled out the book and saw that the original owner had penned an inscription in Greek in the frontispiece. It read: *ho de agros estin ho cosmos*. “The field is the world.” Where was this quote from, I wondered? One of the ancient Greek poets? Only later did I realize, to my embarrassment, it was from the Gospel of Matthew (13:38) where Jesus explains the parable of the wheat and the weeds to his disciples! (I had been working on Matthew’s Gospel for my dissertation for many months!). The seed of God’s word, Jesus says, is directed to the world. The focus of mission is not the church, not our domestic disputes, but the transformation of the world in all its glories and anguish.

Remember the most famous quote from Council? “The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of human beings, human beings who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onwards towards the kingdom of the Father and are bearers of a

message of salvation intended for all people. That is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.”<sup>4</sup>

And if we are to proclaim the word of God to this world and in this church we must have empathy for our world. The word of God is always incarnate at a particular time and place; it is not abstract or unchanging. I am struck how in the Scriptures themselves, the word of God and the mission to proclaim that word are so woven with human modalities. We often discover the meaning of our mission to the world only in the light of current events. To put it another way, mission is shaped not just by the forceful ideals and dreams revealed in the teachings of the Old and New Testaments, but also by the mysterious stirrings of the Spirit alive in the world, shaping and moving among what may seem to be secular or impersonal realities in history. In fact the entire Biblical saga reminds us that the Spirit of God is not confined to Israel or to the church but roams the world and works through and events and people we might never anticipate.

This sense of openness to our world, in sympathy with its struggles and anguish even as we are alert to its false values and wary of its seductions, is what the Bishops’ statement—drawing on the reflections of Pope John Paul II who used this term in speaking of the priesthood—says it

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<sup>4</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* n. 1.

means to be a person of “communion.” To be aloof from our world, to take only a moralizing, negative stance toward our world, is not the spirit of Christ not does it reflect the tenor of the biblical word.

I have been struck in recent weeks by the frequent comments of Pope Francis along these lines. For the Church’s face to the world to be only negative and corrective rather than radiating a sense of tenderness and care for our world, for the Church to be absorbed only with its own life and concerns and not turned to the world, is, as the Pope put it, to risk “choking on its own stale air.” He himself repeatedly uses images of the Church as mother, as nourishing, as tender and loving, as reaching out particularly to the most vulnerable.<sup>5</sup>

For most of our Catholic brothers and sisters, the face of the Church will be most readily and frequently experienced in the words and attitudes projected in the Sunday liturgy and most intensely in the Sunday homily. The Biblical Word with which we are entrusted, the biblical word that is the word we proclaim, impels us to open our hearts in compassion and love for our people and for the world where God has placed us.

Imbibing the beauty and power of the biblical word itself; drawing on experience but not putting the focus on ourselves; being charged with the

missionary spirit of the biblical word and have it shape our relationship to our world—these are some of the ways I believe that taking to heart our call to preach the biblical word will affect our spirituality.

## **Conclusion**

The Bishop's statement concludes with words of encouragement. As priests and people close to the Church we are well aware of our problems. The corrosive and demoralizing effect of the sexual abuse crisis that continues to be a burden. The sense of diminishment that shrinking numbers and shrinking financial resources inflict on us. The polarities and struggles of our society that also have an impact on the church. The list can go on. Some of these things we cannot control even as we struggle to live lives of integrity. Yet some things we can control. We can give new life to our preaching. We can work harder at our preparation. We can strive in our prayer and study to sink more deeply into the beauty and power of our Scriptures. We can impress on ourselves and on our students that the ministry of preaching, particularly in the context of the Sunday Eucharist, is going to be the most important encounter they have with their people, and for our people that same Sunday homily is probably their most important encounter with the living word of God and with the face of Christ's church.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Pope Francis' address, "The Church as the Family of God" in his General Audience of

The Bishops' conclude their statement on preaching with a dedication to Mary. They cite the beautiful image of Ephrem and Augustine, that Mary first conceived the Word in her heart before conceiving the Word in her womb. We can too, like Mary the mother of Jesus and the first proclaimer of the Word incarnate, can strive to bear Christ in our heart and in our words for the sake of the world.

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