



Anonymous; *Saint Phillip Preaches to Queen Kandakia's Eunuch* (c. 1335); Yugoslavia;

Courtesy of ARTstor Slide Gallery (University of California, San Diego)

VERBUM DOMINI: PREACHING AND THE PERSONAL ENCOUNTER WITH CHRIST

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The Synod on the Word of God in October 2008 represented a theological and pastoral preparation for the Synod on the New Evangelization in 2012. Pope Benedict XVI begins the apostolic exhortation deriving from the former by expressing his desire “to point out certain fundamental approaches to a rediscovery of God’s word in the life of the Church as a wellspring of constant renewal” (*Verbum Domini*, §1). In the opening paragraphs he describes the experience of the gathered bishops as “a personal encounter with the Lord Jesus.” From that vantage point he proceeds to “encourage all the faithful to renew their personal and communal encounter with Christ, the word of life made visible, and to become his heralds, so that the gift of divine life—communion—can spread ever more fully throughout the world” (*VD*, §2). Not surprisingly, these aims correspond directly to those of the New Evangelization. As Pope John Paul II made clear in an address to a group of German bishops:

The new evangelization begins with the clear and emphatic proclamation of the gospel, which is directed to every person. Therefore, it is necessary to awaken again in believers a full relationship with Christ, mankind’s only Savior. Only from a personal relationship with Jesus can an effective evangelization develop.¹

At the heart of the New Evangelization is the recovery of a proclamation of the Gospel that leads people into a living relationship with Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we must reclaim evangelization as an essential and normal element of the daily life of Catholic Christians:

Over the years, I have often repeated the summons to the *new evangelization*. I do so again now, especially in order to insist that we must rekindle in ourselves the impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardour of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor 9:16). ... A new apostolic outreach is needed, which will be lived as the everyday commitment of Christian communities and groups (John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, §40).

Our efforts to strengthen the faith of both clergy and lay faithful, therefore, must extend to renewing the consistent and constant conviction to share our faith readily with others. Within this context I wish to examine what *Verbum Domini* instructs concerning preaching and its role in mediating a personal encounter and relationship with Christ. While most of what I will recount pertains to preaching in general, I have particularly in mind the liturgical preaching of priests and deacons.

Before we proceed to our topic, however, we should consider at least briefly the pastoral state of many Catholic Christians in the West:

Because many of those baptized as infants are culturally or nominally Catholic and may never have internalized their faith, they need to meet the person of Jesus Christ through a new proclamation, so that at the root of their relationship with Jesus will be an authentic conversion of heart and mind. Such a conversion is not a one-time event but an on-going process that leads one into a more radical living of the life of Christ as a gospel disciple.²

In addition to the on-going decline in the percentage of Catholics who regularly participate in the Mass, what Bishop Jacobs describes of those who do attend seems sadly true. Many church-going Catholics in the United States have been poorly catechized. Neither have they consciously entered into a personal relationship with Jesus—nor, perhaps, are they even aware of such a possibility. It is clearly time for the Church in the U.S. to reframe the goals of her pastoral ministry so as to become more intentional in fostering the kind of relationship with Christ that befits a disciple.

First of all, what is the nature of this personal encounter with Jesus? The entire aim of the Word of God is to present in a manner accessible to men and women the person of Jesus, so that we might believe in him and have life through him (cf. Jn 20:30-31):

The eternal Word, expressed in creation and communicated in salvation history, in Christ became a man, “born of woman” (Gal 4:4). Here the word finds expression not primarily in discourse, concepts or rules. Here we are set before the very person of Jesus. His unique and singular history is the definitive word, which God speaks to humanity. We can see, then, why “being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and definitive direction” (*VD*, §11, citing *Deus Caritas Est*, §1).

In this regard, “his word is not something fundamentally alien to us, and creation was willed in a relationship of familiarity with God’s own life” (*VD*, §50). That is to say, Jesus is truly available to human persons through the communication of God’s Word in the Sacred Scripture; and it is possible to enter into relationship with Him through that Word: “The relationship between Christ, the Word of the Father, and the Church cannot be fully understood in terms of a mere past event; rather, it is a living relationship which each member of the faithful is personally called to enter into” (*VD*, §51). The relationship, borne of this encounter, always takes shape in the context of and through the mediation of the Church; but it is at the same time one that is direct and personal with each believer.

We enter into this personal relationship with Jesus through the obedience of faith by which “one freely commits oneself entirely to God. ... Faith thus takes shape as an encounter with a person to whom we entrust our whole life” (*VD*, §25). This direct interaction through faith involves a real exchange between persons:

In the word of God proclaimed and heard, and in the sacraments, Jesus says today, here and now, to each person: “I am yours, I give myself to you;” so that we can receive and respond, saying in return: “I am yours.” The Church thus emerges as the milieu in which, by grace, we can experience what John tells us in the Prologue of his Gospel: “to all who received him he gave power to become children of God” (Jn 1:12 in *VD*, §51).

St. Paul describes it in these words, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). At the heart of this encounter, then, is certain knowledge, borne of faith, that one is loved personally by Jesus, and so by His Father. The exchange, furthermore, confers a new identity upon the believer, that of being a child of God. Hence, the life of a Christian possesses “a new horizon and definitive direction” (*VD* §11; cf. *DCE*, §1); he or she manifests a living consciousness of God’s love, which thus inspires the will to conform ever more perfectly to the manner of life befitting a son or daughter of God (Phil 1:27). The life of a Christian, then, flows from a new ontology, a new manner of being, rooted in an on-going response of receptiveness to the Word of God: “To receive the Word means to let oneself be shaped by him, and thus to be conformed by the power of the Holy Spirit to Christ, the ‘only Son from the Father’” (Jn 1:14 in *VD*, §50). A disciple of

Christ, therefore, lives a radically new way of life, which proceeds from a human heart conformed to the heart and mind of Jesus through the activity of the Word of God made effective by the Holy Spirit (cf. Phil 2:5).

There are a variety of contexts in which the Word of God comes alive in the hearts of persons: the liturgy, the sacraments, prayerful reading of the Scripture, and effective preaching of the Scripture. To the latter we now turn:

It is the preaching of the divine word, in fact, which gives rise to faith, whereby we give our heartfelt assent to the truth which has been revealed to us and we commit ourselves entirely to Christ: “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes from the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17 in *VD*, §25).

Or, as Pope John Paul II wrote, “Preaching constitutes the Church’s first and fundamental way of serving the coming of the kingdom in individuals and in human society” (*Redemptoris Missio*, §20). Preaching actualizes the Word of God in manner different from the liturgy and sacraments insofar as it presents the Scripture as directly in dialogue with the contemporary needs and situation of the people of God:

[W]e were created in the word and we live in the word; we cannot understand ourselves unless we are open to this dialogue... Thus it is decisive, from the pastoral standpoint, to present the word of God in its capacity to enter into dialogue with the everyday problems which people face (*VD*, §§22-23).

Our preaching, then, must present the person and saving work of Jesus as the one remedy for the root of all our everyday problems, namely, sin (cf. *VD*, §26). It must also provide the teaching, encouragement, and, at times, admonishment that will bring the Christian to maturity in Christ (cf. Col 1:28) and equip him for the work of ministry (cf. Eph 4:12).

Effective preaching, however, begins with the preacher. He must, above all, be a hearer of the Word, one who has been receptive to the message of the Sacred Scripture: “only those who first place themselves in an attitude of listening to the word can go on to become its heralds” (*VD*, §51). In this respect, the comments of Pope Paul VI are apt: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (*Evangelium Nuntiandi*, §41). Those who would proclaim the saving Word of Christ must themselves be able to present credible testimony to the person and redemptive acts of Jesus:

Testimony has two dimensions: it presents a contingent reality [i.e. one known on the word of another because what is witnessed to is an event] and it involves the witness personally in the act of testifying. . . . It is verified only by yielding to the reality witnessed to under the action of the Holy Spirit: experience of the reality mediates the experienced reality to the recipient.³

In order to communicate the person and saving work of Jesus to another, the preacher must have first-hand experience of both. That is to say, he must know Jesus intimately through the constant companionship that befits a disciple; he must regularly rely on the mercy and power of Jesus to forgive his sins and to foster virtue in his life; and he should be consciously aware of the inspiration and assistance of the Holy Spirit

in his daily life and ministry. His testimony to Jesus, then, will be based not just upon doctrine learned in theology classes but also upon his present experience of the power of Jesus in his own life. From this experience, mediated by prayer, *lectio divina* (cf. *VD*, §§86-87), regular celebration of and participation in the sacraments (the Eucharist and the sacrament of Penance in particular), and daily Christian living, the preacher will reflect that “full and unhesitating certainty that the words inspired by God are true” (*VD*, §48). Another way of saying this is that the preacher must himself be thoroughly convinced of the power of Christ, as realized in his own life, in order to be convincing in his communication of God’s Word.

The preacher must also “develop a deep, personal familiarity with the word of God” (*VD*, §80). Although there are indications of change in this regard, many priests and deacons serving today complete their seminary studies without having read the entire Bible even once. One of the Synod Fathers, making reference to Luke 2:19, coined a marvelous phrase: “Mary made of her heart a library of the Word.”⁴ By this he recommended the practice of both the regular, continuous reading of the Bible and the memorization of key Scripture texts. In doing so, he calls to mind the instruction from *Dei Verbum* that “all the clergy must hold fast to the Sacred Scriptures through diligent sacred reading and careful study” (*DV*, §25). Preachers, and indeed all who are involved in the ministry of the Word, must inculcate a ready familiarity with the sacred text through regular, continuous reading and in-depth study of particular texts, so that both its teaching and its very words may be readily employed in our pastoral ministry: as St. Peter writes, “Let him who speaks, speak as with the words of God” (1 Pt 4:11). Indeed it is not too much to ask that he read through the entire Bible every one or two years. If we wish to enhance the biblical literacy of the faithful (cf. *VD*, §84), it is essential that preachers manifest their own intimate

knowledge of the text by their easy reference to it.

In addition to a docile, prayerful heart, the preacher should be trained in the linguistic and exegetical aspects of the Sacred Scripture (*VD*, §79). *Verbum Domini* assumes that candidates for the priesthood should learn “the original languages in which the Bible was written” (*VD*, §47). Sadly, the Program for Priestly Formation in the United States allows very little room in its curriculum for the study of Greek and Hebrew; but we can, nonetheless, make sure that candidates are grounded in a theological approach and clear exegetical methodology that will enable them to draw out the riches of the text for both teaching and preaching. The biblical formation of candidates for Sacred Orders should include the “pastoral orientation [which] involves approaching the sacred text with the realization that it is a message which the Lord addresses to us for our salvation” (*VD*, §45). Implicit to this pastoral orientation is the recovery of the conviction that the Word of God is indeed “living and active” (Heb 4:12): it really has both the authority and the power to effect faith and conversion in the life of one who receives it. The collateral effects of instruction based upon historical-critical approaches to the Bible over the past few decades include a loss of confidence in the Scripture as a source of practical teaching for daily Christian living. Fortunately, new literary and theological approaches are leading to a recovery of the authority of the Scriptures for pastoral ministry. Having said this, however, a pastoral orientation should not neglect the careful exploration of the literal sense of the text by sound methods: the literal sense, namely, the meaning of the words of Sacred Scripture discovered by exegesis, is the sure foundation of the theological and spiritual interpretation of the text of Scripture (cf. *CCC*, §116). Finally, though not directly addressed in *Verbum Domini*, the preacher should also take pains to learn the rhetorical art of spoken communication so that he might learn both to speak the truth in love (Eph

4:15) and to do so in a manner readily understood and received by his listeners.

Armed with a pastoral orientation to the Scripture, the preacher will be equipped to “bring the message of the biblical text to life in a way that helps the faithful to realize that God’s word is present and at work in their lives” (*VD*, §59). The place in which this opportunity arises most often in the life of the Church is the liturgical homily; and, thus, the collection of interventions at the Synod is replete with calls for improvement of the quality of homilies (*VD*, §59). Given the pastoral situation of the Church in the West, we would be greatly remiss if we do not take advantage of the homily as a primary means to lead people into a deeper personal encounter with Christ. For this reason, Benedict XVI calls for the development of a “Directory of Homiletics,” noting, “the art of good preaching based on the Lectionary is an art that needs to be cultivated” (*VD*, §60). Indeed the development of such a directory holds promise, but in the meantime we would do well to develop means to help re-train many of our priests and deacons so that they are better equipped to proclaim the Word of God with conviction.

Regarding the content of liturgical preaching, Benedict XVI writes,

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. The faithful should be able to perceive clearly that the preacher has a compelling desire to present Christ, who must stand at the center of every homily (*VD*, §59).

By these remarks, the Pope Emeritus puts his finger on an ailment of preaching widespread at least in the United States. While descriptions of personal experience can provide testimony to the power of Christ in one’s life, many preachers deploy personal stories as allegories of vague spiritual or moral principles—giving witness not so much to the Word of God as to their own ingenuity and insight. In contrast, we are called to proclaim Christ, “a ‘divine word,’ which therefore is not ‘ours’ and cannot be manipulated, changed or adapted at will, but must be proclaimed in its entirety.”⁵ In other words, we are challenged to imitate St. Paul: “For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Cor 4:5). Far too many homilies lack even passing reference to Jesus, raising the suspicion that the preacher, though he still loves Jesus, may no longer be convinced of the power of Jesus to transform human lives. If this is the case, one is left with few options and often resorts to what are deemed “moralizing sermons.”

At the outset of the Synod, Cardinal Marc Ouellet asked, “How can we avoid the tendency towards moralism and cultivate the calling to a decision of faith?”⁶ One answer is regular proclamation of the basic kerygma:

[P]reaching too often takes the kerygma for granted, and this at a moment in Western cultures when the kerygma cannot be taken for granted. If it is, there is the risk of a moralistic reduction of preaching which may evoke interest or admiration but not the faith that saves. Preaching will not be an experience of Christ’s power. A new evangelization requires a new formulation and proclamation of the kerygma in the interests of a more powerful missionary preaching.⁷

When the Apostle Paul summarized his preaching of the Gospel, he simply recounted the basic facts of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and the transformative effect of encountering the Risen Christ (1 Cor 15:1-9). He begins, not with his own experience, but with the powerful deeds of God. Hence, his listeners, once confronted with the events of redemption, have the opportunity to respond to them. Furthermore, his preaching calls for a decision, namely, whether one will receive the love of God extended through the Paschal Mystery or not: “We have come to believe in God’s love’: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life” (1 Jn 4:16 in *DCE*, §1).

It is vital that Christ's faithful be regularly confronted with the great narrative that encompasses salvation history: God's original blessing of the human race and his commission to cooperate in establishing his created order in the world; the fall from grace by the original sin; God's preparation for the coming of the Christ; the incarnation, life, teaching, and redemptive deeds of Jesus, the Son of God; and the invitation to receive this saving work by repentance, faith, and baptism. As mentioned above, the preacher must be aware that many in his congregation may not have met the grace of their baptism with a conscious faith (cf. Heb 4:2) so as to enter into a committed, personal relationship with Jesus and the authentic conversion of life that characterizes a disciple. It behooves the preacher, therefore, to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the liturgical readings both to proclaim the kerygma and to exhort, challenge, and encourage those in his congregation who may not have done so to make conscious acts of faith in Jesus and to commit themselves to the radical daily living outlined by the Sacred Scripture.

Having made the fundamental decision to receive Jesus in faith and to commit oneself to life of a disciple, the Christian requires further assistance in order "to be conformed by the power of the Holy Spirit to Christ" (*VD*, §50). St Paul's words are a trustworthy guide in this regard: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). An effective preacher of the Scripture will teach in a manner that leads the listener to be convicted of sin, to find the right path, and to develop the habit of living in a manner worthy of the Gospel: "It is not a matter of preaching a word of consolation, but rather a word which disrupts, which calls to conversion, and which opens the way to an encounter with the

one through whom a new humanity flowers" (*VD*, §93). The goal of such preaching, furthermore, is not only that Christians might live a vibrant Christian life but also that they might be equipped to take on the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God (*VD*, §94). In this regard, the preacher must take stock of the fact that we live in a society that is not subject to the lordship of Christ: "Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect" (Rom 12:2). In order to effect this capacity for discernment, the preacher must first recover the Scriptural teaching on the obstacles to conversion: the world (1 Jn 2:15), the flesh (1 Pet 2:11) and the devil (Eph 6:11). By so doing, he will strengthen the faithful to stand fast in the faith and more effectively to wield "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph 6:13-20). Finally, such preaching demands the articulation of a sound, biblical anthropology that confronts the emotivist and reductionist anthropology of our times. In its place it will propose inculcation of the virtues of Christ as the path not only to salvation but also to human happiness. Rather than psychologized answers to sin, it will propose repentance and conversion of life based upon the power of God's Word, made alive by the Holy Spirit and assisted by genuine participation in the life of the Christian community, to effect real change in one's life.

Contemporary preaching of the moralistic kind also tends to focus more upon moral and social duties than on the grace of God which empowers them. In fact, preachers more often support their exhortations to moral duties by an appeal to psychological and social benefits than by a proclamation of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in a son or daughter of God. Preachers must indeed proclaim all that is required of a disciple of Christ, but the demands must be situated in the context of a response to the overwhelming grace

of God offered through Christ and oriented toward maturity as a disciple: “It is he whom we proclaim, admonishing everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). Stated another way: we must proclaim first the grace of God before focusing on the duties required.⁸ Conscious of the work of the Holy Spirit that infuses the daily life of a disciple, Christians will then more readily discover the joy of discipleship and truly bear in their lives all the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).

“Indeed, the word of God is living and effective” (Heb 4:12). The success of the New Evangelization depends in no small part upon a renewed proclamation of the Word of God that fosters a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and leads to a commitment to conversion of life and participation in the evangelizing mission of the Church. Those entrusted with the ministry of preaching have the opportunity to be instruments of the living Word of God that transforms human hearts through the activity of the Holy Spirit. A firm conviction of the power of the Word of God, derived from their own personal encounter with Jesus in the Scripture, will prompt the boldness and the spiritual insight needed to present the both the basic kerygma and the fullness of Christian teaching in a manner that elicits from their hearers the obedience of faith. Relying not on human “words of wisdom” but on “the power of God” (1 Cor 2:3-5), the preacher will expound the power of God’s grace available in both word and sacrament to conform the Christian more perfectly to the stature of Christ (Eph 4:13). Fully convinced of the power of God for one’s life, the Christian will more readily embrace the evangelical duties incumbent upon a disciple of Jesus Christ.



A native of Detroit, Most Rev. Michael J. Byrnes was ordained Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Detroit on May 5, 2011. He serves as episcopal vicar and regional moderator for the Northeast Region of the Archdiocese.

NOTES

1 John Paul II, *Ad limina* Visit of the Bishops of Southern Germany, December 4, 1992. Quoted in A. Dulles, *John Paul II and the New Evangelization: What Does It Mean?* R. Martin and P. Williamson, eds. (Cincinnati: Servant, 2006), 13.

2 S. Jacobs, “Preface,” *The New Evangelization: Overcoming the Obstacles*, S. Boguslawski, O.P. and R. Martin, eds. (Mahwah: Paulist, 2008), xvii.

3 F. Martin, “The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me: The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Work of Evangelization,” *The New Evangelization: Overcoming the Obstacles*, S. Boguslawski, O.P. and R. Martin, eds. (Mahwah: Paulist, 2008), 66.

4 V. Ri Pyung-Ho, *XII Synod on the Word of God*, Intervention, 10/9/2008.

5 John Paul II, *Priesthood in the Third Millennium: Addresses of John Paul II 1993*, ed. J. Socias (Princeton: Scepter, 1994), 27.

6 M. Ouellet, *XII Synod on the Word of God*, “Report Before the Discussion of the General Reporter,” 10/6/2008.

7 M. Coleridge, *XII Synod on the Word of God*, Intervention, 10/6/2008.

8 R. Cantalamessa, *Life in Christ: A Spiritual Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 2ff.