

WORD OF GOD, BAPTISM, EUCHARIST IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

“In calling upon all the faithful to proclaim God’s word, the Synod Fathers [of the 2008 General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops] restated the need in our day too for a decisive commitment to the *missio ad gentes*. In no way can the Church restrict her pastoral work to the ‘ordinary maintenance’ of those who already know the Gospel of Christ. Missionary outreach is a clear sign of the maturity of an ecclesial community. The Fathers also insisted that the word of God is the saving truth which men and women in every age need to hear. For this reason, it must be explicitly proclaimed. The Church must go out to meet each person in the strength of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 2:5) and continue her prophetic defense of people’s right and freedom to hear the word of God, while constantly seeking out the most effective ways of proclaiming that word, even at the risk of persecution. The Church feels duty-bound to proclaim to every man and woman the word that saves (cf. Rom 1:14)” (Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 95).

In the Old Testament, the Word prepares the way for the event of the Word becoming flesh. The New Testament’s Letter to the Hebrews begins precisely underlining this extreme dynamism of the Word: “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” (Heb 1: 1-2). The Word gathers us as the priestly People of God, unifying us inwardly, freeing our identity, and giving us back the awareness of universal fraternity under the gaze of a single Father. It is the Word that is placed at the origin of every relationship: “Out of the abundance of His love, [God] speaks

to men as friends (see Ex 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself” (*Dei Verbum*, 2).

Proclaiming the Gospel under any circumstances does not mean having courage, but having faith. It means believing that the frank and constant proclamation of the Word that saves, without recoiling in the face of difficulties and failures, corresponds to the deepest needs and the most universal concerns of the human heart. The Church, in her liturgy, often repeats the warning not to grow weary in this journey of faith. The word of God grows and spreads through persecutions, diasporas, rejection, or unexpected welcome (see Is 55:10-11). Faith is the certainty and conviction that the Gospel of Jesus is, for people of all times, the Truth that gives Life and indicates the Way for a life of eternal communion with God (see Jn 14:6).

“The first Christians saw their missionary preaching as a necessity rooted in the very nature of faith: the God in whom they believed was the God of all, the one true God who revealed himself in Israel’s history and ultimately in his Son, who thus provided the response which, in their inmost being, all men and women awaited. The first Christian communities felt that their faith was not part of a particular cultural tradition, differing from one people to another, but belonged instead to the realm of truth, which concerns everyone equally. . . . In fact, the newness of Christian proclamation is that we can tell all peoples: God has shown himself. In person. And now the way to him is open. The novelty of the Christian message does not consist in an idea but in a fact: God has revealed himself” (*Verbum Domini*, 92).

Believing in Jesus Christ is not a religious opinion or an ideological choice: it is a fundamental choice of life in the face of the revelation of Truth. The Christian paradox of the Cross of Jesus reveals the meaning of suffering, which is inevitable, and of the human condition, opening it to its deepest dimension and the possibility of total self-giving for life. The faith transmitted (Word of God and baptism) is always the faith of the Church and in the Church, which gives God’s own life through Christ

and the Spirit (the Incarnate Word and Eucharist). Faith is the substance of hope in eternal life (see Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 2-9).

“The Church’s faith is essentially a eucharistic faith, and it is especially nourished at the table of the Eucharist. Faith and the sacraments are two complementary aspects of ecclesial life. Awakened by the preaching of God’s word, faith is nourished and grows in the grace-filled encounter with the Risen Lord which takes place in the sacraments. . . . the Sacrament of the Altar is always at the heart of the Church’s life: thanks to the Eucharist, the Church is reborn ever anew! The more lively the eucharistic faith of the People of God, the deeper is its sharing in ecclesial life in steadfast commitment to the mission entrusted by Christ to his disciples. The Church’s very history bears witness to this. Every great reform has in some way been linked to the rediscovery of belief in the Lord’s eucharistic presence among his people” (Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 6).

The dynamic of faith is fascinating: from encounter with Christ to mission of proclaiming Christ. It is the joy of making Christ known and loved. Mission means to share with Christ his own work of evangelization: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21). The sacraments, especially baptism and the Eucharist, are effective and visible signs that really communicate the life of God in Christ and involve us in the dynamic of his mission and his passion for the life and salvation of every person. Praying the Word of God reveals the encounter with this love and it is an experience of the presence of the Lord Jesus who dwells in us together with the Father, in the Spirit. In this way, *Lectio Divina* becomes a gradual path of knowledge and interiorization that leads to transformation and the fullness of mission. The prayerful reading of Scripture, which is the living Word, makes us aware of a Presence that absorbs human time and wraps it up in the divine. Following attentive study comes meditation, allowing the Word to enter our experience and leading spontaneously to the next step of prayer as a personal dialogue with God, as an experiential way of knowledge and love, the contemplation that expands the heart in charity. The prayerful

reading of the Word is impregnated with the sacramental dimension of the Christian event, because the one who speaks communicates himself in flesh and blood, communicates divine grace and new life in water and the Spirit. The word of God meets, in the today of history, the resurrected flesh of the Lord Jesus in the sacraments of the Church and in the witness of the baptized faithful's faith, hope, and charity.

“The word of God has bestowed upon us the divine life which transfigures the face of the earth, making all things new (cf. Rev 21:5). His word engages us not only as hearers of divine revelation, but also as its heralds. The one whom the Father has sent to do his will (cf. Jn 5:36-38; 6:38-40; 7:16-18) draws us to himself and makes us part of his life and mission. The Spirit of the Risen Lord empowers us to proclaim the word everywhere by the witness of our lives. . . . This is why the Church is missionary by her very nature. We cannot keep to ourselves the words of eternal life given to us in our encounter with Jesus Christ: they are meant for everyone, for every man and woman. Everyone today, whether he or she knows it or not, needs this message. . . . It is our responsibility to pass on what, by God's grace, we ourselves have received” (*Verbum Domini*, 91).

Christ's mission knows no limits and extends to the entire world (see Mt 28:19). In view of the encounter with Christ through baptism, the Christian knows that Jesus has entered his very life, truly transforms him (conversion), and sends him. Thanks to baptism, the Word proclaimed and received by faith involves us in the flow of the revelation of God. Christian life is a process of becoming, by the action of the Holy Spirit, a reflection of Christ to the Father and to one's brothers and sisters. It is a “new life,” a baptismal involvement in the Passover of the Lord (see Rom 6), because we live “according to the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). It is a real victory over sin, a process of constant conversion in the hard struggle against sin.

Thanks to baptism, the faith of the Church, freely accepted, generates new children of God, new brothers and sisters in the family of God. The baptismal font generates because the Church is a true fruitful mother of

the Word that saves and of the Spirit that gives life. The Eucharist makes the flesh and blood of the baptized generative through their participation in the Passover of Jesus. Communion with the body and blood of Christ makes them sharers in the generative power of the love of the Father (the Holy Spirit) that unites Christ to his Church. This sacramental unity makes the Bride Church a true mother of a multitude of believers. From the earliest times, Christians understood themselves to be involved in this missionary reality of the motherhood of the Church: Jesus dared to compare his apostles to a mother suffering in childbirth but full of joy for having transmitted life (see Jn 16:21-22). Thus St. Paul, recalling that Jesus himself “was born of a woman,” said, “I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you!” (Gal 4:19).

Pope Francis has said, “Baptism is the Sacrament on which our very faith is founded and which grafts us as a living member onto Christ and his Church. Together with the Eucharist and Confirmation it forms what is known as ‘Christian initiation,’ like one great sacramental event that configures us to the Lord and turns us into a living sign of his presence and of his love.

“Yet a question may stir within us: is Baptism really necessary to live as Christians and follow Jesus? After all, isn’t it merely a ritual, a formal act of the Church in order to give a name to the little boy or girl? This question can arise. And on this point what the Apostle Paul writes is illuminating: ‘Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life’ (Rom 6:3-4). Therefore, it is not a formality! It is an act that touches the depths of our existence. A baptized child and an unbaptized child are not the same. A person who is baptized and a person who is not baptized are not the same. We, by Baptism, are immersed in that inexhaustible source of life which is the death of Jesus, the greatest act of love in all of history; and thanks to this love we

can live a new life, no longer at the mercy of evil, of sin and of death, but in communion with God and with our brothers and sisters” (Pope Francis, General Audience, January 8, 2014).

Those who are baptized find themselves saying, with Christ and in Christ, “Our Father,” because each of us is now part of the one human family, the Church. Baptism makes us children, members of the People of God, missionary disciples (see *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120), revealing to us the fatherhood of God. Mission is the form of new life in Christ as a free offering of oneself to God in the specific circumstance of the vocation of each one. Baptism makes the Christian capable of the total gift of herself by enabling her heart and her flesh for the Eucharistic sacrifice. The total gift of God in the body and blood of Jesus brings us into and involves us in his eternal movement of love: it is a true bodily communication, a true participation according to the dynamics of the Holy Spirit. The Eucharist manifests to all of creation, thanks to human freedom, the true meaning of mission: the salvation of all by communicating the Life of God so that all may live (see Jn 6 and Jn 10).

“The Eucharist reveals the loving plan that guides all of salvation history (cf. Eph 1:10; 3:8-11). There the *Deus Trinitas*, who is essentially love (cf. 1 Jn 4:7-8), becomes fully a part of our human condition. In the bread and wine under whose appearances Christ gives himself to us in the paschal meal (cf. Lk 22:14-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26), God’s whole life encounters us and is sacramentally shared with us. God is a perfect communion of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At creation itself, man was called to have some share in God’s breath of life (cf. Gen 2:7). But it is in Christ, dead and risen, and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, given without measure (cf. Jn 3:34), that we have become sharers of God’s inmost life” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 8).

“The mission for which Jesus came among us was accomplished in the Paschal Mystery. On the Cross from which he draws all people to himself (cf. Jn 12:32), just before ‘giving up the Spirit,’ he utters the words: ‘it is

finished' (Jn 19:30). In the mystery of Christ's obedience unto death, even death on a Cross (cf. Phil 2:8), the new and eternal covenant was brought about. In his crucified flesh, God's freedom and our human freedom met definitively in an inviolable, eternally valid pact. Human sin was also redeemed once for all by God's Son (cf. Heb 7:27; 1 Jn 2:2; 4:10). . . Christ's death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form" (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 9).

As a bread of life, the Eucharist establishes the sacrificial offering of oneself (see Rom 12:1-2) as a measure of the true charity and witness of the missionary disciple. Christians do not give their lives in addition to that of the Master, but offering themselves in baptism, they give themselves in the single oblation of Jesus. The Eucharist reveals the true meaning of the flesh and blood of our humanity. We received a body of flesh and blood so that by doing the will of the One who created us, we could give ourselves and bear fruit (see Heb 10). Existentially the baptismal and eucharistic gift of oneself takes place in conjugal love or in the vocation to radical virginal consecration. Both in marriage and in consecrated virginity, Christians live their mission in the free offering of themselves through their own body.

With the eucharist Jesus involves us in his own offering of himself to the Father for our sake, showing us the bond of communion he wants to establish with us, and also with his Church that he generates through the sacrifice of the cross as his bride and his body. The possibility of celebrating the Eucharist is rooted entirely in the gift that Christ makes of himself. In this way we experience that God truly "loved us first" (1 Jn 4:19). In every Eucharistic celebration we confess the primacy of the gift of Christ that makes us his Church. The causal influence of the Eucharist at the origin of the Church definitively reveals the precedence, not only in time but also in the depths of our being Christians, of his having loved us "first." He is, for all eternity, he who loves us first; his grace precedes us in the baptism undeservedly given to us and in the Eucharist freely offered to us.

“In the sacrament of the altar, the Lord meets us, men and women created in God’s image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:27), and becomes our companion along the way. In this sacrament, the Lord truly becomes food for us, to satisfy our hunger for truth and freedom. Since only the truth can make us free (cf. Jn 8:32), Christ becomes for us the food of truth. . . . Each of us has an innate and irrepressible desire for ultimate and definitive truth. The Lord Jesus, ‘the way, and the truth, and the life’ (Jn 14:6), speaks to our thirsting, pilgrim hearts, our hearts yearning for the source of life, our hearts longing for truth. Jesus Christ is the Truth in person, drawing the world to himself. . . . In the sacrament of the Eucharist, Jesus shows us in particular *the truth about the love* which is the very essence of God. It is this evangelical truth which challenges each of us and our whole being. For this reason, the Church, which finds in the Eucharist the very center of her life, is constantly concerned to proclaim to all, in season or out of season (cf. 2 Tm 4:2), that God is love. Precisely because Christ has become for us the food of truth, the Church turns to every man and woman, inviting them freely to accept God’s gift” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 2).

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