

# The pastoral use of the Word

by Nicoletta Gatti

## Introduction: The Word at the Heart of Pastoral Ministry

The Church's journey toward an authentically biblical pastoral practice has witnessed fundamental milestones over the past sixty years. From *Dei Verbum* (1965) to *L'interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa* (IB – 1993), to *Verbum Domini* (VD - 2010), from *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG - 2013) to the institution of the Sunday of the Word of God through *Aperuit Illis* (AI - 2019) and the ministry of Catechist through *Antiquum Ministerium* (AM – 2021), the Magisterium has continuously reaffirmed that the Church's proclamation—both *ad intra* in pastoral ministry and *ad extra* in evangelization—must be grounded in Sacred Scripture.

Not only the homily must be nourished by the Word of God. All evangelization is founded on it, listened to, meditated upon, lived, celebrated, and witnessed. Sacred Scripture is the source of evangelization. It is indispensable that the Word of God become ever more the heart of all ecclesial activity” (EG 174).

Yet the very fact that this message continues to be repeated indicates that the goal remains distant. In some contexts, the journey is still at the starting point: biblical pastoral ministry is reduced to adding a few symbols during the liturgy of the Sunday of the Word or producing booklets for a dedicated week. In other contexts, however, this awareness has generated interesting and innovative initiatives. Everywhere, though, development still depends much on the sensitivity of the bishop or priest in charge.

The questions guiding our reflection are, therefore, these: how biblical is our pastoral ministry? How can we rediscover the vital relationship with the Word of God that nourishes faith and transforms life?

## Reading the Word: A Transforming Dialogue

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she has venerated the Body of the Lord himself. This affirmation from *Dei Verbum* reminds us that between the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist there exists a profound and inseparable bond. Prayer through the Word has characterized the Jewish-Christian experience of God from its very origins. It is not a matter of mystical immersion into the abyss of the universe; it is not simply an encounter with the God who dwells within us, but something more: it is the encounter with a God who speaks, who emerges from silence, who becomes dialogue.

Human history, from the biblical perspective, can be described as the place where God emerges from his isolation and his silence to speak with humanity. Sacred Scripture bears witness to all this, characterizing itself as a terrain of encounter and sometimes of conflict—the space in which God engages in an intense dialogue with humanity. A dialogue at times difficult and conflictual—we think of the lamentations of Job, the imprecatory psalms, the protests of the prophets—yet always reinvented and sought after. God reveals himself as the *Other*, as the *You* who in revealing himself reveals, the *You* of relationship.

Human prayer, expressing the desire to enter this sacred space, to welcome God and to walk toward him, cannot prescind from Scripture. Every other path distances us from the One who has already spoken.

*In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son (Heb 1:1-2).*

The Son is the Word made flesh, the Logos who pitched his tent among us. To pray the Word, therefore, means to enter into this mystery of incarnation: God who draws near, who assumes human language, who accepts the limits of earthly communication to reach us where we are.

### **Walking with the Word: Scripture as a Space of Encounter**

“The Text must resist. Only those who can accept its silences will be able to hear its voice” (Fusco). This statement expresses well the meaning of praying *with* the Word: a slow, sometimes arduous, journey of two. An interpersonal relationship made of silences and words, of listening and waiting, of nearness and otherness. It is the encounter with the One who has become written Word because he ardently desires to be welcomed, meditated upon, ‘consumed’ by the praying reader.

For this reason, praying with Scripture requires time, patience, perseverance. It is not an exercise that produces immediate fruit. As Gregory the Great wrote with an image that spans the centuries, the divine words grow with the one who reads them: *quia divina eloquia cum legente crescunt*<sup>6</sup>. The Word is not a dead text to be analysed, but a living interlocutor who progressively reveals himself to those who frequent him with fidelity.

### ***The Torah: A Dialogue of Love between God and His People***

In the Jewish tradition, the term *Torah* does not simply mean ‘law.’ The Hebrew root evokes the idea of aiming at a target, of shooting an arrow toward the centre, of indicating a direction. It also has resonances with the root of the term to conceive, and can, therefore, evoke the idea of a filial existence, shaped according to the Creator’s original dream.

The *Torah* is the humble love of a God who accepts to contract himself, to ‘diminish’ assuming the weakness of human language to become dialogue. The

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<sup>6</sup> *Homiliae in Ezechielem*, I,VII,8 (CCL 142).

Word of God that reveals itself can be compared to those who received it, transmitted it, and continue to transmit it in the master-disciple relationship. The *Torah* is love that generates love. An ancient rabbinic teaching affirms: “Turn it and turn it again, the Torah, for everything is in it. Even if a person alone sits down to occupy himself with the Torah, the divine presence is with him”.

The rabbinic tradition offers us a poetic and profound image of the relationship with Scripture. The *Torah* is compared to a beautiful woman who appears briefly at the window of her house. The lover, mad with love for her, gazes intently through the frame, searching in every direction. She knows that her lover persists in frequenting her home. And what does she do? She opens just slightly the door of her remote chamber, reveals her face for an instant to the beloved, and immediately hides it again. The lover sees her and is drawn inwardly toward her with his heart, with his soul, with his whole being.

Such is the relationship with the Word: a passionate search, a desire that grows in waiting, a revelation that unveils itself little by little to those who persevere in love.

### ***The Church Fathers: Eating the Word***

The Church Fathers developed a profound spirituality of the Word, often using eucharistic language to describe the encounter with Scripture. Saint Jerome wrote:

We eat the Flesh and drink the Blood of Christ in the Eucharist and, in the same way, in the reading of the Scriptures. I consider the Gospel to be the Body of Christ: therefore, in the sacred books I seek Christ. In the reading of the Word I consume Christ, the Word broken for all<sup>7</sup>.

Saint Gregory of Nazianzus employs the same image: “When I open the Gospels with faith, I consume the Paschal Lamb”<sup>8</sup>. And again, from the patristic tradition comes this invitation:

When you open the Sacred Texts, you begin a journey of two: you and the Spirit. Cry out: Lord, come! And then, by the power of the Spirit, Christ will come. We can read the Word only heart to heart with Jesus: whoever approaches the Word takes a seat at the table of the Last Supper<sup>9</sup>.

These images—eating, consuming, nourishing oneself—tell us that the Word is not simply to be studied or understood intellectually. The Word is to be assimilated, made one’s own, allowed to become part of us, just as the food we eat becomes our body.

Origen further develops this spirituality with a suggestive image: «The more you read, the more you grow. Reading will make of your soul a new ark of

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<sup>7</sup> *Commentarium in Ecclesiasten* III, 12-13 (PL 23, 1039A).

<sup>8</sup> *Oratio I, On Easter*, III–IV (PG 35, 396–401).

<sup>9</sup> Jong Crisostome, *Homily*, 48 (PG 64, 462-466).

the covenant, which preserves within itself the eternal firmness of the one and the other Testament»<sup>10</sup>.

### **Living in the Word: Becoming a Gospel**

But the journey does not stop here. After *reading the Word*, and *walking with the Word*, we are called to *live in the Word*. What does this mean? It means allowing the Word to shape our humanity, to transform us until we ourselves become the living word of God for others.

It is the intuition of being a sign, a presence of God in the world, good news—in a way that God alone can bring about. Unfortunately, only rarely do we experience how listening to and meditating on the biblical pages can truly become ‘gospel,’ that is, good news capable of freeing us from every unrealistic, petty, or sad idea about ourselves and our destiny.

The Word asks to be incarnated in our words. It humbly requests to become a mutual gift among us. The Paul’s epistles express this forcefully:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col 3:16).

“The word of the Lord has sounded forth from you” (1 Thess 1:8).

“You are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by all” (2 Cor 3:2).

The humanity of today, even in its apparent rejection of God, even in its religious indifference, unconsciously cries out the need to see, touch, contemplate a Word made nearness, future, trust, rock, substance. As John writes in his first letter: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life... we proclaim also to you” (1 John 1:1-3).

The shared Word enables us to live out the prophetic ministry. Faced with urgent challenges arising from the world of work, from the new circumstances in which families live, from the restless condition of young people, our communities need constant training in engaging with the Word of God, to read in its light the concrete human situation.

The cry of the world is too often silenced by walls built of indifference, capable of transforming even hearts into deserts. Our mission—wherever we find ourselves—is to announce the discreet “whisper” of the Lord who already comes, already works, already transforms.

Like the seedling that sprouts unseen, so our daily witness causes hope to blossom. We are sent to be “sowers of hope” in a world imprisoned by war, where the roar of weapons seems to silence every dialogue. While violence divides peoples and fear closes hearts, together we must bear witness that another world is possible: the world of the Prince of Peace who comes, indeed, is already among us.

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<sup>10</sup> *Homilia in Genesim* IX,1 (PG 12, 210-211).

As the Scriptures repeatedly affirm, we know that the Lord will come—indeed, is coming—to redeem our labours, to beat swords into ploughshares, to make of our wounds instruments of reconciliation. He comes as forgiveness that opens wide the future, as comfort in suffering, as resurrection light that penetrates the darkness of history.

Praying in the Word transforms us into an extension of Christ's humanity in the world. We become, by grace, that Word which the world awaits without knowing it—that discreet whisper announcing that peace is possible.

### **Conclusion: Everything Is Fulfilled in You**

*Dei Verbum* 2 describes what we might call the theology of Christian prayer: God reveals himself and grants humanity the meaning of life and history in the light of the divine salvific plan. God 'empties' himself to enter into dialogue with humanity.

And at number 21, we find the affirmation that in the reading of Scripture the same contact with the Body of Christ given to us in the Eucharist takes place. The Word is the continued incarnation of the Logos.

Origen concluded his homilies with an exhortation that still resonates today with all its force: "Do not believe that these events were accomplished in the past: everything is fulfilled in you".

The Word of God is not a memory of the past. It is a present event, grace that happens today, transformation that works now in whoever receives it with faith. Every time we open Scripture, salvation history becomes present. Every time we meditate on a biblical text, God speaks to us now. Every time we allow the Word to shape our lives, we ourselves become the living proclamation of the Gospel.

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly". This is not merely a wish, but a vocation. The vocation of every baptized person to become a dwelling place of the Word, to follow the Word so that the Word may through us reach and transform the world.