

For a Word of life (Col 3:5-17)

by Adrián Taranzano

Introduction: an initiative in continuity with the Second Vatican Council

Pope Francis' initiative to dedicate one Sunday during the year to the Word of God can be understood in continuity with the concern of the Second Vatican Council and its effort not only to bring Sacred Scripture closer to the faithful, but also to make it the soul of the believer's existence. For a long time, Scripture was largely unknown or ignored. Reduced to a mere source of *dicta probantia* in theology or replaced in spiritual life by other religious literature, contact with the 'spring of living water' was lost, replaced by 'broken cisterns that cannot hold water' (Jer 2:13).

This evocative image linked to water by the prophet Jeremiah to refer to the relationship with the living God is not far from the magnificent expression of St Ephrem, Doctor of the Church and 'harp of God', who links Scripture with that source capable of quenching thirst and "hydrating" the whole of Christian life: "What you have received and achieved is your share, what remains is your inheritance. What you cannot receive at a given moment because of your weakness, you will be able to receive at another time, if you persevere. Do not strive greedily to drink in one gulp what cannot be drunk at once, nor give up out of laziness what you can drink little by little" (St Ephrem, *On the Diatessaron* 1:19).

Motto for the year 2026

This seventh year of celebration invites us to reflect on a meaningful expression taken from the Pauline tradition and formulated in the Letter to the Church of Colossae: 'Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικεῖτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως', 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly' (Col 3:16). But let us read the context of this exhortation from the letter:

Col 3

¹If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ⁵Therefore, put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶All these things bring God's wrath upon the disobedient. ⁷You also once

practised these things when you lived in them. ⁸*But now, put away all these things: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene language from your mouth.* ⁹*Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old self with its practices,* ¹⁰*and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator,* ¹¹*where there is no Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all.* ¹²*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,* ¹³*bearing with one another and forgiving each other, if anyone has a complaint against another. As the Lord has forgiven you, so also forgive one another.* ¹⁴*And above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.* ¹⁵*And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. And be thankful.* ¹⁶*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.* ¹⁷*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

Recipients of the Letter

The recipient of these words is a community in the south-west of the Anatolian peninsula, in the region of Phrygia, located about 200 km from Ephesus and near Hierapolis and Laodicea⁷. It was home to peoples of diverse cultures, and orgiastic cults were practised in the region. Religious syncretism was a reality and a threat to those who had embraced the gospel. Given that by the end of the first century the city of Colossae was no longer populated⁸, it must be assumed that the letter was written in the second half of that first century.

According to Col 2:1, the Colossians did not know Paul personally, but only his co-workers. However, the Paul of the letter understands himself to be responsible for the faith of the community and feels the urgency to propose the divine mystery in Christ in order to dispel the threat of 'philosophy' (Col 2:8) foreign to the gospel, probably from some esoteric and syncretistic Judeo-Christian group close to pagan mystery cults⁹.

Central ideas

The quotation is found in the third chapter of the current division, in a section characterised by its parenetic style. Before exhorting specific groups of people (cf. Col 3:18–4:1), the author does so in a general way (cf. Col 3:1–17).

⁷ Cf. A. Piñero, *Los Libros del Nuevo Testamento. Traducción y Comentario*, Madrid 2021, 1742-1743.

⁸ Cf. Piñero, *Los Libros*, 1743.

⁹ Cf. Piñero, *Los libros*, 1743. Cf. also M. Theobald, *Der Kolossarbrief*, in M. Ebner – S. Schreiber (eds.), *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, Stuttgart 2008, 431-445, 439-441.

It should not be forgotten that parenesis is a consequence of the gift received. In the prologue, the author has developed the Christocentric foundation of the mystery of salvation (cf. Col 1:15-20)¹⁰ and placed his own ministry and mission in that context (Col 1:24-2:5).

Who is Christ for the author? In Col 1:15-20 we find one of the most beautiful hymns in the New Testament. There he is described as the image of the invisible God, the foundation of all creation and the architect of reconciliation.

But this hymn, read from the exhortation that has been chosen as the motto for the Sunday of the Word of God, can be said that, for the text addressed to the believers of Colossae, Christ is not only the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), but also the voice and word of the ineffable God, who now becomes human voice and word. Just as the invisible God is seen in the features of Christ, so too his ineffable voice is heard in his human voice. Christ is both the image of the invisible God and the word, the human voice of the God who once spoke 'from heaven' to Israel (cf. Deut 4:36-39), but who now speaks 'from below', face to face, in his Son.

Christ is the living word that is addressed even to those who are not of the circumcision. Christ is the Word of God who does not distinguish between Jew and Greek, between male and female, between free and slave. It can be said that for the author of the letter, God has 'circumcised in Christ' (cf. Col 2:11) the Gentiles¹¹, who through faith and baptism are already resurrected.

Division of the section

We could say that the first part of the parenetic chapter presents these elements:

a) A memory of the gift: believers have been raised with Christ (Col 3:1), they have died with him and their lives are hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3), until he is revealed and makes believers share in his glory (Col 3:4).

b) Exhortation, in the second person, to put to death vices: believers must put to death all those behaviours and vices that had characterised them (Col 3:5-9), before they put on the new self (Col 3:10-11).

c) Exhortation, in the second person, to put on the attitudes of the new man: those who are reconciled are characterised by attitudes that build community (Col 3:12-14) and that culminate in love (Col 3:14).

d) Double exhortation, in the third person, to the empire of Christ's peace, understood as the vocation to which they have been called, in one body (Col 3:15) and, secondly, to the indwelling of the Word of Christ (Col 3:16), in a context of teaching and liturgical praise.

¹⁰ For a detailed and technical presentation of the structure of the letter, cf. Theobald, *Kolossarbrief*, 431-433.

¹¹ Cf. Theobald, *Kolossarbrief*, 441.

e) Final exhortation to orient one's words and deeds Christocentrically, giving thanks to the Father through him (Col 3:17).

In this already resurrected life, the exhortation to live Christocentrically is not an imposition or external commandment, but the unfolding of what has been received.

The parenthetic section begins by reminding us of this and then lists, first of all, the vices and behaviours incompatible with the new reality of the new man. But the description does not end with the behaviours to be avoided, but leads to those to be displayed.

The condition proper to new men who have stripped themselves of the old requires, above all, that they clothe themselves with compassion (σπλάγχνα οἰκτιρμοῦ, Col 3:12). The bowels express the deep intimacy of the human being. It is a beautiful exhortation that is full of consequences. It is not for nothing that the influential German theologian J. B. Metz has stated that in compassion we have the 'universal programme of Christianity'¹².

Mysticism, an existence in the Spirit, is not possible without a heart capable of feeling and suffering with, in communion with, the frailties and anxieties of others. It is important to note that the wording of the letter is parallel to that found in the canticle of Zechariah (σπλάγχνα ἐλέους, Lk 1:78) and explains the very intimacy of God. From God's heart of mercy springs his plan and saving visitation. In the letter, it is the same characteristic that resurrected believers must have with one another.

The author does not ignore conflictual relationships or the fragility of bonds. He assumes that offences and tensions exist. In the face of these, magnanimity and forgiveness are the only way forward. Therefore, the author exhorts them to forgive one another, just as the Lord has forgiven them. It is like an echo of the Lord's Prayer (cf. Mt 6:12), but while in the latter the foundation was theocentric, here the exhortation is based on the forgiveness received from the Lord, Christ.

We could almost say that he is also the firstborn of those who forgive. Those who live in him cannot remain prisoners of resentment or rancour. The letter summarises the path described in the exhortation to clothe oneself with love, with ἀγάπη, considered as the bond, the ligament of perfection (Col 3:14). The author describes it with the same expression he used earlier when speaking of the union of the head and the body, which, through joints and ligaments, achieve their cohesion. The thought is analogous to that found in relation to the 'most excellent way' that Paul eloquently describes in the hymn to love (cf. 1 Cor 12:31-13:13).

¹² J.-B. Metz, *Compassion. Towards a Global Programme for Christianity in an Age of Religious and Cultural Pluralism*, in Id. - L. Kuld - A. Weisbrod (eds.), *Compassion - Global Programme for Christianity. Learning Social Responsibility*, Freiburg – Basel – Vienna 2000, 13.

Only in this way can the author conclude by wishing that both peace and the word of Christ take deep root in each of the believers. In relation to the expression “word of Christ”, the use of the verb ἐνοικέω, “to dwell in”, is suggestive. The word of Christ is not the unquestionable oracle from above, which is heard and must simply be obeyed, but the voice that is welcomed and enters into dialogue and communion, that “installs” itself in existence itself. It is a verb that has a strong physical connotation. In the Greek translation of the Bible, it is a verb that appears mainly in the book of the prophet Isaiah to designate the inhabitants of a place such as Jerusalem (cf. Is 22:21). The believer is thus inhabited by the Word of Christ.

If the famous Johannine hymn contemplates the logos that became flesh and pitched his tent among the tents of men (cf. Jn 1:14) and expresses its temporary nature through the verb σκηνώω, the Deuteropauline text alludes to an indwelling and a presence of the word that we could define as *permanent*. The idea of pitching a tent implies that, at some point, it will have to be taken down again. The tent is transitory, as has been the historical existence of the logos made flesh. The sense of dwelling, on the other hand, relates to the idea of a permanent abode. All this takes shape not only in relation to teaching and instruction, but also to liturgical praise. The word is welcomed, learned and celebrated. The word dwells to the extent that praise becomes a form of existence.

The Paul of the letter, however, does not identify this situation with the eschaton, but contemplates the humanly overwhelming mission that lies ahead and, in this sense, in addition to the exhortation to be grateful, the apostle implores believers to pray that ‘a door for the word’ (Col 4:3) may be opened to them and that the mystery of Christ may continue to be proclaimed. Believers inhabited by the Word intercede so that the Word of Christ may also dwell in those who have not received the Gospel of Christ.

In this final invitation from the chained Paul in his letter, we can contemplate the missionary imperative of the whole Church. Being inhabited by the Word is not exhausted in the joy of encounter and presence, but involves a restless spirit until that Word also dwells in everyone. The Word is received *in order to* be transmitted.