



The Word of God and Social Action

Insights from Verbum Domini

In our Church, the year 2012-13 marked two important events: the Synod on the New Evangelization, and the Year of Faith. Yet these two events draw support and energy from a previous event: the Synod on the Word of God, held in October 2008, which gave us the exhortation *Verbum Domini* in 2010. If we are to enter fully into the dynamic of the New Evangelization and the Year of Faith, we need a profound reception of the message of this Synod and the exhortation that resulted from it. As the CCCB Commission for Justice and Peace, we would like to offer this short reflection on *Verbum Domini* and its social teaching. By doing so, we hope that we can all come to a deeper understanding of what it means to truly be evangelized and to truly be people of faith, so that our proclamation of Jesus Christ may not be in word only, but also in action.

This text was composed during the pontificate of Benedict XVI, and is designed to draw connections between *Verbum Domini* and Catholic social teaching. However, the message contained here is the same as that proclaimed by Francis, who states that “it is also our duty as Catholics to work harder and harder in a serious process of spiritual conversion, to come closer every day to the Gospel that spurs us to carry out an effective practical service to individuals and to society.”¹

The Message of Verbum Domini

Verbum Domini provides us with a deeper understanding of what, or better, “who” the Word of God is. We are invited to consider the word of God as a symphony, that is, as a unique word expressed in different ways, like a polyphonic hymn. These voices of the word include the eternal Word, or Logos, Christ the Word made flesh, creation itself (often called the “book of nature”), the whole history of salvation, the preaching of the Apostles, and finally the sacred Scriptures.²

The first part of the exhortation is particularly rich: it examines the reality of the word of God, but also the reception of that word and its interpretation.³ The second part looks more deeply into the role played by the word in the liturgy and in the whole of the Church’s life.⁴ Finally, the third and final part considers how the word of God has been given for the world.⁵

1 Francis, Address to the President of the Republic of Italy, 8 June 2013.

2 Cf. *Verbum Domini* 7.

3 Cf. *Verbum Domini* 6-49. This first part is titled “*Verbum Dei: The God Who Speaks.*”

4 Cf. *Verbum Domini* 50-89. This second part is titled “*Verbum in Ecclesia: The Word of God and the Church.*”

5 Cf. *Verbum Domini* 90-120. This third and final part is titled “*Verbum Mundo: The Church’s Mission: To Proclaim the Word of God to the World.*”

The Close Relationship between Engagement in the World and the Word of God

It is the third part of the Exhortation that makes the connection between the word of God and engagement in the world (cf. *Verbum Domini* 99-108). This section opens by affirming that “the word of God itself emphasizes the need for our engagement in the world and our responsibility before Christ, the Lord of history.”⁶ This declaration alludes to the parable of the sheep and the goats found in Matthew 25.31-46, when all will have to give an account of their deeds toward “the least of these.” Speaking of engagement in the world and responsibility before Christ is intended to spur us on to achieve the good, to act for justice, reconciliation, and peace, and to live a life marked by love.

■ **Three Clearly Identified Areas of Engagement**

Justice

As regards acting for justice, a phrase of Pope Paul VI comes to mind: we must “reach and as it were overturn with the force of the Gospel the standards of judgement, the interests, the thought-patterns, the sources of inspiration and life-styles of humanity that are in contrast with the Word of God and with his plan for salvation.”⁷ We therefore urge those involved in social and political life to establish a real contact with the Gospel so that they might treat every person with the greatest respect, promoting the dignity of all. The Church also desires that these persons, the majority of whom are laity, be formed in the school of the Gospel according to the principles of the Church’s social doctrine.

According to *Verbum Domini*, spreading the word of God can only strengthen the affirmation of, and respect for, the human rights of everyone, and therefore contribute to the universal recognition of human dignity. Why is this? Because the word unceasingly recalls that we have been taken up and redeemed by Jesus Christ, by his Incarnation, death, and resurrection.⁸

Reconciliation and Peace

Verbum Domini emphasizes that the word of God is the source of reconciliation and peace among peoples, for “in that word God is reconciling to himself all things.”⁹ The writings of St. Paul, such as 2 Corinthians 5.18-20 and Ephesians 1.10 and 2.14 illustrate this.¹⁰ *Verbum Domini* affirms boldly that “religion can never justify intolerance

6 Cf. *Verbum Domini* 99.

7 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 19; cited in *Verbum Domini* 100.

8 Cf. *Verbum Domini* 101.

9 *Verbum Domini* 102.

10 “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (2 Corinthians 5.18-20)

“... as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth.” (Ephesians 1.10)

“For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” (Ephesians 2.14)

or war. We cannot kill in God's name!"¹¹ Because Catholics hold that in the crucified and risen Christ, God has accomplished the work of reconciliation, we ought to give an example of this reconciliation. We have all, at some time or other, witnessed moving gestures of reconciliation. Consider the gesture of Pope John Paul II toward the man who attempted to kill him. Faced with violence and arms, the Word of God reminds us "that peace is possible."¹²

Love

According to the word of God, love is at the root of commitment to justice, reconciliation, and peace. *Verbum Domini* underlines the link between receptive listening to the word of God and selfless service to our brothers and sisters. What role does the word of God play here? It "awakens 'charity and justice towards all, especially towards the poor.'"¹³ It can be particularly fruitful to meditate often on the Pauline hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13. Benedict XVI recognizes this primacy of love when he proclaims "We should never forget that 'love – *caritas* – will always prove necessary, even in the most just society . . . whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such.'"¹⁴

■ **Four Target Groups for the Proclamation of the Word**

Paragraphs 104-107 of *Verbum Domini* present four groups in society to whom proclamation of the word is particularly important today: youth, migrants, the suffering, and the poor.

Youth (*Verbum Domini* 104)

Youth represent the future of the Church, and often have "a spontaneous openness to hearing the word of God and a sincere desire to know Jesus."¹⁵ Youth is also a time in life when many are confronted with important questions about the meaning of life and the direction one's life should take.

We must therefore help young people acquire an intimacy and familiarity with sacred Scripture, so that it will become a compass guiding their path. We must ensure that young people have witnesses and teachers who can walk with them and teach them to love the Gospel and to share it with other young people. In this way, they will be equipped to live their prophetic call to act for justice and solidarity in our world. Finally, when proclaiming the word of God, we must be aware that regular contact with this word is a fertile ground for the discernment of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life.

11 *Verbum Domini* 102.

12 *Verbum Domini* 102.

13 *Verbum Domini* 103.

14 *Verbum Domini* 103.

15 *Verbum Domini* 104.

Migrants (Verbum Domini 105)

Migratory movements now occur on an unprecedented scale. Often, people who do not know Christ are moving to traditionally Christian countries, or conversely, people from cultures deeply impacted by Christian faith are emigrating to countries where the proclamation of Christ and the new evangelization are necessary.

Migrants have the right to hear the *kerygma*, which should be proposed and not imposed. Further, Christian migrants often require pastoral assistance. For these reasons, all dioceses affected by migration should organize themselves appropriately and recognize that migratory movements are an opportunity to discover new forms of the presence and proclamation of the word of God. These dioceses must also provide, to the best of their abilities, adequate welcome and attention to these migrants, who are our brothers and sisters.

The Suffering (Verbum Domini 106)

When human beings experience physical, psychological, or spiritual suffering, the ultimate questions about one's life make themselves acutely felt. Even when words fail before the mystery of evil and suffering, the word of God helps us see that even these moments are mysteriously "embraced" by God's love and compassion.

We can therefore meditate on scriptural texts like Wisdom 2.23-24 and 2 Corinthians 4.8-11,¹⁶ as well as on the passion and death of our Lord. Jesus truly suffered and died *for us*: "by his passion and death he took our weakness upon himself and thoroughly transformed it."¹⁷ We ought to welcome the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church's mission, in the word, in the Sacraments, and in men and women of good will who lend their hands, eyes, and hearts to Christ. Indeed, the Church must "continue to care for the infirm and to bring them the life giving presence of the Lord Jesus in the word and in the Eucharist," to help them to read the Scriptures so that they might discover that "their condition itself enables them to share in a special way in Christ's redemptive suffering for the salvation of the world."¹⁸

The Poor (Verbum Domini 107)

"Sacred Scripture manifests God's special love for the poor and needy (cf. Matthew 25.31-46)."¹⁹ In this regard, the Church must exercise the service of *diakonia*, which must be bound to the proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacred mysteries, while keeping in mind that "the poor are themselves agents of evangelization" and not

16 "For God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it." (Wisdom 2.23-24)

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh." (2 Corinthians 4.8-11)

17 *Verbum Domini* 106.

18 *Verbum Domini* 106.

19 *Verbum Domini* 107. In Matthew 25.31-46, Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and the goats.

only its recipients.²⁰ "Pastors are called to listen to the poor, to learn from them, to guide them in their faith and to encourage them to take responsibility for their lives."²¹

A careful distinction must be made between poverty freely chosen as a virtue (as many saints have done), and poverty as indigence, which is often marked by hunger or need. This latter is often the result of injustice rooted in self-interest, and can be a source of conflict. We all need to rediscover moderation, which can be a form of that saintly poverty which is freely chosen, as well as solidarity, which seeks to combat poverty rooted in injustice. Finally we ought to develop a deeper understanding of Matthew 5.3 and Luke 6.20,²² being attentive to the fact that "in the Bible, the true poor are those who entrust themselves totally to God."²³

■ Creation

The Church recognizes that the word of God calls us to care for God's creation. It is interesting to note how the question of ecology has progressively made its way into the official documents of the Church. *Verbum Domini* 8, under the heading "The cosmic dimension of the word," invokes the prologue of the Gospel of John to affirm that all things were made through the Word. It then cites Colossians 1.15f and Hebrews 11.3 to show that the Word is the source of all creation.²⁴ In order to illustrate the close connection between the word of God and creation, it also cites Psalm 33.6,9; Psalm 19.1; Wisdom 13.5; and Romans 1.19f.²⁵ The paragraph closes by referring to Saint Bonaventure, "who in the great tradition of the Greek Fathers sees all the possibilities of creation present in the *Logos*, states that 'every creature is a word of God, since it proclaims God.'²⁶ *Verbum Domini* again refers to John 1.2 in order to make the point that "the entire created cosmos . . . contains traces of that Word through whom all things were made."²⁷

20 *Verbum Domini* 107.

21 *Verbum Domini* 107.

22 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5.3)

"Then he looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.'" (Luke 6.20)

23 *Verbum Domini* 107.

24 "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible . . ." (Colossians 1.15-16)

"By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible." (Hebrews 11.3)

25 "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth . . . For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm." (Psalm 33.6,9)

"The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." (Psalm 19.1)

"For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator." (Wisdom 13.5)

"For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things that he has made." (Romans 1.19-20)

26 The passage from Bonaventure is *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, II, 12: Opera Omnia V, Quaracchi 1891, pp. 302-303.

The idea here is similar to that expressed in Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* 3: "God, who through the Word creates all things (see John 1.3) and keeps them in existence, gives men an enduring witness to Himself in created realities (see Romans 1.19-20)."

27 *Verbum Domini* 108.

The word of God reminds us of the necessity to become engaged in our world, and of our responsibility towards Christ. (*Verbum Domini* 99)

The word of God enlightens the path of our engagement in the world where we are called to do good, to act for justice, reconciliation, and peace, and to love. (*Verbum Domini* 100-103)

The word of God speaks to all humanity. At this moment in history it must be proclaimed in a special way to young people, to migrants, to the suffering, and to the poor. (*Verbum Domini* 104-107)

The word of God expects us to safeguard all creation, for “in the beginning was the Word” through whom all things were made. (*Verbum Domini* 108)

How, then, can we fulfill our responsibility toward creation? *Verbum Domini* provides some helpful guidance. First of all, we can accept that “Revelation makes known God’s plan for the cosmos.”²⁸ Second, we must denounce “that mistaken attitude which refuses to view all created realities as a reflection of their Creator, but instead as mere raw material, to be exploited without scruple.”²⁹ Third, we should look “with new eyes at the entire created cosmos.”³⁰ Fourth, we must promote an “authentic ecology” rooted in the obedience of faith.³¹ Fifth, we need a renewed theological sensitivity to the goodness of all things created in Christ. And finally, we must reeducate ourselves in “wonder and in the ability to recognize the beauty made manifest in created realities.”³²

Pope Francis has pointed out that the word of God “inspires the whole of Christian life. . . . The texts inspired by God were entrusted to the Community of believers, to the Church of Christ, to nourish faith and to guide the life of charity.”³³ Let us pray that, through our reflections on the relationship between the word of God and social action, our lives might come to mirror the truth and justice found in that word and be truly lives of faith and charity.

28 *Verbum Domini* 108.

29 *Verbum Domini* 108.

30 *Verbum Domini* 108.

31 *Verbum Domini* 108.

32 *Verbum Domini* 108.

33 Francis, Address to the members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, 12 April 2013.

Discussion Questions on Integrating the Message of *Verbum Domini* 99-108

- ▶ Looking at my life up to now, what Scripture texts have spoken to me and pushed me to get more involved in the world?
- ▶ Have there been moments in my life when my openness to the person of Christ and his message helped upset one or more of my criteria for judgment, my determining values, points of interest, sources of inspiration, or models of life?
- ▶ As a person involved in social and political life, how has my relationship with Christ and my attentiveness to his message allowed me to live in a new and different way? Do I let the Gospel and the Church's social teaching bring me to a greater respect for human rights and for the dignity of every human person?
- ▶ The Gospel calls us to be involved in our world. How am I living my call to work for reconciliation, and for peace in our world? How is the community I belong to living out this call? What does my life testify in this regard? What have I seen that most inspires me in this regard? Are we sometimes overly timid in this area? If so, how?
- ▶ *Verbum Domini* is insistent that in Christianity there is only one source of justice, reconciliation, and peace: love. Benedict XVI stated forcefully that "whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such" (*Verbum Domini* 103). How does my life show that I share this conviction? How does our Church express its agreement with this conviction? What are the greatest obstacles to this constant growth in love?

While every human person needs to hear and accept the word, *Verbum Domini* targets four particular groups who need a greater access to the word: youth, migrants, the suffering, and the poor.

Youth

- ▶ In my environment, with all my responsibilities, what can I do to help young people acquire an intimacy and familiarity with the Sacred Scriptures, so that it might become a compass for their lives?

Migrants

- ▶ What has currently been done, and what initiatives could be tried in my diocese in order to find new ways of being present and of proclaiming, ways that are adapted to those who arrive from other countries, cultures, or religions?

The Suffering

- ▶ As a person or as part of a community engaged in the world, what am I doing, and what can I do, to show appreciation for the ministry of caring for the sick not only in health institutions, but also in home care? What can I do to contribute to the spiritual growth of the sick, whether that sickness be physical, mental, or spiritual?

The Poor

- ▶ When we feed the body, do we remember to care enough to also provide spiritual food?
- ▶ As persons active in the world in the name of the Gospel, are we sufficiently aware that the poor themselves are evangelizers?
- ▶ As pastors, what have we learned as we listen to the poor? Do we let ourselves be taught by them? Are we acting as their guides in faith? Do we do everything in our power so that they might become more aware of their call to be the authors of their own story?

Regarding the involvement of Christians in the world, are we sufficiently aware that the 21st century has brought the inescapable responsibility of safeguarding all of creation?

Ecological Concern

- ▶ What stage are we at in our recognition of creation as a gift from God which must be accepted and used according to his plan?
- ▶ Have we let the word of God change the way we look at the cosmos?
- ▶ How have we contributed, personally and as a community, to the promotion of an authentic ecology?
- ▶ How can we teach ourselves the attitude of wonder so that we recognize the authentic beauty of creation?
- ▶ How can we contribute, in our own spheres of influence, to the attitudes of marvel and sensitivity at the beauty of the cosmos?

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