

# The Humility Of God's Word<sup>1</sup>

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The mystery of Christ, the Word who is God, and the Bible, the Word of God are interpenetrating and mutually illuminating. Both are mysteries of God revealing himself in human form: Christ revealed incarnate in human nature and Scripture expressed in human language. In the inseparable connection of these two mysteries one discovers the vital parallel between the inerrancy of Scripture and the sinlessness of Jesus. The divine Son became fully human in every respect “except sin” (Heb 5:15). Similarly, the words of God are expressed in human language in every respect except error.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the Bible’s humble human language mirrors the humility of Jesus. In both mysteries God confronts our pride while challenging us to approach him with a humble heart and mind.

St. Augustine was initially put off by “the humble style of biblical language”<sup>3</sup> in contrast to the eloquence of classical authors like Cicero. St. Jerome also initially rebelled at “the uncouth style” of the sacred writings.<sup>4</sup> However, once their pride was put aside they encountered the humble Jesus in the Bible who transformed their lives and prompted them to embark on an adventure of study and discovery that inflamed their hearts and challenged their great intellects until the end of their lives. As a result, their biblical insights enrich us today.

When the divine Son “emptied himself” (Phil 2:7) to become a man, he accepted the limitations of human nature. He experienced fatigue (Jn 4:6), hunger (Mt 4:2), astonishment (Mk 6:6), grief (Jn 11:35), and extreme distress (Lk 22:44). He even “humbled himself” to the extent of accepting death, “even death on a cross” (Phil 2:7-8). Yet the apparent weakness of Jesus’ earthly existence did not diminish his unseen perfection. He never ceased to be “the truth” (Jn 14:6) and sinless – the divine Son of the Father (Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 22).

Drawing on this Christological analogy, the same thing can be said about the written Word of God. Despite its expression in plain and imperfect human language it never ceases to be God’s discourse. So just as the Word made flesh was intensely human, yet never sinned, so, too, the inspired Word is intensely human, yet it never errs. The marvel that God accommodates himself to human weakness by conveying his Word in our humble language finds confirmation in Mary’s maternal gift of the Word, in the apostles’ preaching of the Word, and in the liturgy’s actualization of the Word.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay draws substantially from Scott Hahn’s insightful scholarly article “For the Sake of Our Salvation: The Truth and Humility of God’s Word,” in *Letter & Spirit*, Vol. 6, 2010, pp. 21-45.

<sup>2</sup> See: Pope Pius XII’s 1941 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* [“Inspired by the Holy Spirit”], 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Confessions*, Book 12, Chap. 27, 37.

<sup>4</sup> *Epistulae* 22.30.

It is easy to see a parallel between inspiration and the conception and birth of Jesus. In both mysteries we find the action of two persons – one human and one divine. Just as the human authors of Scripture fully and freely operated under the influence of the Holy Spirit in giving birth to the Word of God, so Mary acted fully and in perfect union with the Holy Spirit in giving human nature to the eternal Word. The human authors of the Bible were not passive instruments of divine inspiration, but active participants. Similarly, Mary's *fiat* (Latin for "Let it be done") was no mere passive resignation to God's plan, but an active and enthusiastic embrace of her maternal vocation. In the Greek text her acceptance is *genoito* expressed in the optative mood, which captures her ardent desire to cooperate with the divine plan.

A second parallel is seen between biblical inspiration and the preaching of the apostles. Like the human authors of the Bible, the apostles communicated the life-transforming Word to the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result, their preaching of the gospel was not deducible to mere human words but was saturated with God's authority. Paul affirms this when he wrote to the Thessalonians: "When you receive the word of God which you *heard from us*, you accepted it not as the word of men but *as what it really is, the Word of God* (1 Thess 2:13). Biblical inspiration gives a permanent written expression of the Word of God. Similarly, the apostolic teaching verbally articulated the divine Word bringing about the permanent founding of the Church in history and provided a foundation for the composition of the books that comprise the New Testament.

Similarly, the humility of Christ is reflected in the apostles' witness, which Paul calls "the word of the cross," a message of foolishness to the "worldly wise or the age (1 Cor 1:18). The message of the rejected and humiliated savior confounds the expectations of reason and throws the merely human way of evaluating things into confusion. The humility of the Word they proclaimed was a reality in which the apostles participated in a very personal way. They were subjected to the same dishonor for they were treated "like men sentenced to death" and even as "the refuse of the world" (1 Cor 4:9, 13). A reflection on the list of Paul's afflictions (2 Cor 11:23-33) reveals how profoundly the mission of the apostles integrated them into the scandal of the cross and the foolishness of divine condescension embodied in the Word of God.

A third parallel with the Sacred Scripture is seen in the liturgy, the Church's worship. In biblical inspiration the Holy Spirit communicates the Word of God through fallible human instruments. In the liturgy the Holy Spirit continues to bring the Word into the world through human gestures and utterances. This is accomplished in two ways through proclamation and sacramental administration. When the biblical Word is proclaimed we are challenged to surrender to the divine message with the same "obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5; 16:26) as the original recipients of God's revelation. Also by the simultaneous action of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis* "calling down") and human words (of consecration), the Word is made present (confection) under the humble form of food

(communion). In this way every Mass is a new intervention of God in history, a new event of salvation.<sup>5</sup>

In the liturgy we encounter another amazing example of the power of God working through human weakness. In the priest God uses the frailest of natural means to accomplish his purpose. Empowered by grace, the priest acts *in the Person of Christ the head*, speaking his words and repeating his movements as he sets before us Christ's paschal sacrifice that redeemed the world. The humble substance of bread and wine stand helpless and yields to the transubstantiating Word. The lowly signs of bread and wine become the Lord's greatest gift. One can't help being awe struck by this self-abnegating form by which the divine Word signals his loving presence and union with us.

The humility of the Word, primarily in Christ and secondarily in Sacred Scripture, points to a recurrent pattern in God's efforts to reach the human family in love. This recognition of the Bible's humility challenges the supremacy of human reason to embrace the knowledge that can only come through faith. In addition, it confronts our pride and beckons us to intellectual humility. Only a humble intellect receptive to the Word in modest dress can tune in to the higher wisdom of God and receive the marvelous insights that are withheld from "the wise and understanding" (Mt 11:25). In this way the truth is validated that God's power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9).

This, of course, is in sharp contrast to modern man who foolishly makes his ideas the measure of things divine. Human reason functions properly only when it accepts its limitations and acknowledges that there are questions it cannot answer. It is only through supernatural faith that a person gains access to the transcendent order of knowledge in which the Bible is perceived as the living Word of God and not merely a cultural document or an historical artifact that needs to be unraveled according to the judgment of the interpreter. Benedict XVI proposes a very different alternative:

"Then there is the other way of using reason, of being wise – that of the man who recognizes who he is; he recognizes the proper measure and greatness of God, opening himself in humility to the newness of God's action. It is in this way, precisely by accepting his own smallness, making himself little as he really is, that he arrives at the truth."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See: Scott Hahn, *Letter and Spirit: From Written Text to Living Word in the Liturgy* (Doubleday, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Homily, Mass with the International Theological Commission (Dec. 1, 20098), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, Dec. 9, 10098, 6.