

In Defense of the Word

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I. Word and Sacrament

“The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord, in so far as she never ceases, particularly in the sacred liturgy, to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ” (*Dei Verbum*, 21).

The faith of the Church rests on the strength of our belief in these two essentials: the Word of God and the Sacraments. These two may be more specifically represented by the Bible and the Blessed Sacrament, which are so wonderfully reflected in the two parts of Catholic Mass – “the source and summit of the Christian life” (CCC, 1324). We must believe in the truth of Sacred Scripture, that it is unlike any other writing – that in it God speaks to us (that He is, if you will, really present in the Bible) – and that our God is really and fully present (body, blood, soul, and divinity) in the Sacrament of the altar. If these two pillars are shaken, how shall the house stand? These are the fundamentals of the faith, and, if taken in this sense (as defending the Church’s fundamental beliefs), one should gladly be called a “fundamentalist.”

And these two fundamentals are not separate entities; as the Mass is one and whole, so are these two beliefs – for indeed one informs the other and the other gives form to the one. As James has told us we need both faith and works, so we need both to hear and believe the Word of God and to eat and so realize in our very bodies His presence. It is the Word (“This is my body...”) that makes Jesus present in the Sacrament, and it is our partaking of the Sacrament that makes Jesus present in us. And He can be present to us in the Sacrament only insofar as we believe His Word: to the extent we fail to hear and heed His Word, to that extent our Communion is vain.

So it should be no wonder that lack of faith in the Lord’s presence in the Blessed Sacrament comes even as faith in His Word – both as it speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Church and, more specifically, as it speaks to us through Scripture’s verse – has significantly eroded. Lack of faith in the Real Presence may be more readily perceived; here I pray to indicate how that lack of faith has been informed by lack of true faith in Scripture.

II. The Prophet Speaks for God

“Know this first of all, that there is no prophecy of Scripture that is a matter of private interpretation, for no prophecy ever came through human will; but rather human beings moved by the Holy Spirit spoke under the influence of God” (2Pt.1:20-21).

“Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit” (*Dei Verbum*, 9).

The prophet intends what God intends – nothing more, nothing less. (“[T]hey consigned to writing whatever He wanted written, and no more” (*DV*, 11).) Like Mary, whose will was necessary to bring about salvation but whose will was given entirely to God; like Jesus Himself, who declared, “Not my will but yours be done” (Lk. 22:42); so are the prophets who have given us God’s Word. That it is not their willing it that brought about Scripture is evident in the words of Jeremiah re his call: “You duped me, O Lord, and I let myself be duped; you were too strong for me, and you triumphed” (Jer.20:7); and Amos: “I was no prophet, nor have I belonged to a company of prophets; ... The LORD took me from following the flock, and said to me, Go. Prophecy to my people Israel.” (Am.7:14-16). That they speak only what they hear from Him (that He quite literally puts words in their mouths) is eminently clear throughout God’s Word – in the “stone tablets inscribed by God’s own finger” (Ex.31:18) provided to Moses; in the scroll God gives Ezekial to eat (see Ez.3:1-4); in the LORD’s repeated command to all His prophets to declare, “Thus say the LORD...” and so to deliver His words even as He speaks them, neither more nor less, despite the ridicule and persecution they inevitably receive for their faithfulness. And, of course, John severely warns against adding to or taking away from the prophetic words of Holy Scripture (see Rev.22:18-19). Yet there is much adding and subtracting in our day.

“It was not air vibrating with the human voice that reached their ears, but rather it was God speaking within the soul of the prophets,” Jerome tells us (Office of Readings, Sept. 30); yet how many suffer the “ignorance of Scripture [that] is ignorance of Christ” the saint duly warns against. They profane the power of the Word to the point where even the Lord’s Resurrection is shrouded in doubt. Let all souls listen to Polycarp: “Whoever perverts the Lord’s words to suit his own desires and denies that there is a resurrection and a judgment is the firstborn of Satan. So let us abandon the folly of the masses and their false teaching, and return to the teaching that was handed down to us from the beginning” (Office, 26th Wk., Tues.).

From the mouth of God comes Truth alone, and the prophet is God’s mouthpiece.

III. The Word is Truth, not Myth

A. Symbol and Reality

Telling symbol from reality is perhaps the defining work of wisdom. There is no writing more symbolic than the Bible, none with greater resonance and ramification, none which stands for more, which means all, as it does. Yet there is none more real. As God is real. As man is real. As heaven is real... As the cross is real and Jesus' blood is real, and His salvation most real to sinful man. Yet nothing courses through time, in all things, as does the Savior's blood (which we drink, quite really, at His altar each day).

There is a seldom heard example, a less renowned text from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians (4:22-31), which may well illustrate the point. The Apostle speaks of Sarah and Hagar, the mothers of Isaac and Ishmael, respectively. He tells us in no uncertain terms that they are symbols: "This is an allegory. These two women represent two covenants." And they do. And their children do, these two sons of Abraham, both blessed through the patriarch (yet both at war with each other). That Sarah is mother of the free (representing the new, heavenly Jerusalem) and Hagar mother of the slave (representing the old city of Jerusalem) is true. That they have symbolic value is undeniable. But to say that these two women did not actually exist, that they were not flesh and blood – as were their sons, as was Abraham – would be heretical, and serve to destroy not only the reality of their existence but the strength of their symbol. This is what we do with the Bible when we call it (or parts of it) merely symbolic.

The symbol of Sarah and Hagar, of Isaac and Ishmael, extends even to this day, even still in the earthly city of Jerusalem, where rocks are thrown, bombs explode, tanks roll in – though now both sons physically descended from Abraham are symbols of slavery. (And where are his spiritual sons, we the freeborn of the covenant of Christ?) Does not this violence most greatly symbolize the violence of man, his continuing slavery to sin under the old law of an eye for an eye? Is it not this war which typifies man's raising his hand against his brother? (Is it not for this reason all eyes are drawn there?) Yet is the blood shed by any mother's son therefore less real? If these were not human limbs torn from the body, if the wholeness and hearts of real women and children, and men, were not really being rent asunder, would the symbol matter?

Life and death are not a game. The Bible is not a myth. And yet there is nothing of more mythical proportions.

B. Myth and Parable

To the point, is it justifiable to call Jonah a parable and the Flood a myth, as a reputable Catholic newspaper has done? Or to term Tobit and Judith and Esther imaginary tales, as has another popular Catholic publisher? Where is the line to be drawn? In the absence of authoritative word, the Bible seems fair game for virtually any interpretation, without regard for soundness of doctrine or consideration of the effect of such questionable scholarship on the faith of the people.

Is it not obvious that the word “myth” carries with it inescapable connotations stronger than any denotation the most orthodox of scholars might try to resurrect? In common parlance the word is synonymous with “untruth”, with lie, with falsehood... When someone says, “That’s just a myth,” or, “Let’s put an end to that myth,” it is clear: myth = untruth. How can a word so easily equated with untruth be so freely equated with Truth itself? And is it not obvious that the ordinary hearer will invariably associate the word “myth” with Greek and Roman and Norse and American-Indian myths, which are indeed fanciful concoctions that are pagan in nature and as far removed from Scripture as the living LORD is from their gods, who are no gods at all? Should the Church not prescribe caution in terming “myth” that which has ever been held as truth? Should she not perform her “task of giving authentic interpretation of the Word of God” (*DV*, 10) and preserve the sacredness of that Word “without the contamination of error” (*DV*, 6) by keeping it from being equated with these myths, as is done even in some grammar schools? Will she not speak?

And as for the free application of the terms “parable” and “poetry”, will “the living teaching office of the Church” (*DV*, 10) not serve to keep these designations in place, to maintain the substantial reality and visionary prophecy of Scripture for what it is? Again, we are not dealing here with works of the imagination, artistic renderings. Yes, Jesus spoke in parables. But it is eminently clear *that* He speaks in parables and *when* He speaks in parables. The same is not so for books such as Jonah, which the Lord Himself refers to (see 12:40-42), to compare Himself with the prophet and with Solomon. Is He mixing His palette with real and imaginary characters? (Or are they perhaps all imaginary, as some in the avant-garde of the deconstruction of Scripture would lead us to believe?) And will parabolic figures judge the faithless on the last day!?

There is a begging here for Scriptural interpretation to be revisited, to be addressed more carefully by the appropriate bodies in the Church to rein in the arbitrary, if not whimsical, characterizations that pass for scholarship today: there needs definition of the Church’s understanding of *specific* Scripture books and passages. *Dei Verbum* speaks of cultural influence and literary genres, but there is no particular document to control the application of these factors. (And how appropriate is it to speak of the “contemporary literary form” (12) of an ancient oral tradition?) And so trucks of dissent are freely driven through the space left. *Dei Verbum* does call for continued scholarly research led by the Spirit, “in accord with the mind of the Church” (23). But where is the “watchful eye of the sacred Magisterium” (23), for while other matters of faith addressed by the council have been treated and retreated in postconciliar documents, there is no further document to address the proper reading of the Word of God. Is the Word so secondary to our faith that it can be thus ignored? It would seem not if “the ‘study of the sacred page’ should be the very soul of sacred theology” (24)

C. The Heart of Jewish Culture Was God Himself (As it should be for Christians)

“He who established her is the Most High God” (Ps.87:5).

As for “circumstances of time and culture” (*DV*, 12), it seems “culture” has become a red herring in Scriptural interpretation as well – that somehow culture significantly determines what God has to say. Let me ask a simple question: what was the culture of the faithful Jew? Is it not so that culture and religion were one and the same for him? Was not God to be at the heart of all he did and said? Were not God’s words to be drilled into children (such instruction immediately follows the proclamation of the Shema in Dt.6:4-7), written on doorposts and lintels (see Dt.11:20), prayed “seven times a day” (Ps.119:164)...?

For that matter, is not the Christian called to be the same? Are we not called to leave all the trappings of this world and *its* culture behind, as did the apostles? Are we not called to have nothing before God and to have Him influence all we do? Is He not to be at the heart of our every thought, word, and action? Is *He* not to be *our* culture, even as He was for the devout Jew?

But do we even attempt to approach this blessed state? And so in our compromise with the world we readily adopt its culture and apply it to God’s Word – abortion and contraception are permissible; homosexual acts are natural; amassing wealth is commendable; God is like any god (though science is a god greater than He)... and what becomes foreign is the altar of sacrifice to which the Lord calls us. So, instead of the nations coming to the faithful who stand and pray in the Temple at the center of the universe as God’s chosen (“In those days ten men of every nationality, speaking different tongues, shall take hold, yes, take hold of every Jew by the edge of his garment and say, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’” (Zech.8:23)), God’s chosen profane His sacred Word, courting the abominations of the nations. And thus the Body of Christ raised at our altar becomes an empty sacrifice to our pagan eyes.

IV. Do Not Bow to the Sun

A. Blinded by Pride

Do we not bow to the sun when we believe our minds exalted above the Mind of God? Is it not eminent foolishness to put faith in the human eye, all the while calling the LORD blind? And yet is it not current fashion to do such as this, thus reveling in our ignorance? Are we any better than those of ancient days who worshipped wood and stone, proclaiming their life had come from them? Are not our idols just as empty?

What hope is there for this creature crawling between heaven and earth – digging in the ground on hands and knees and shooting vainly into the vacuum of space – unless he accepts his place, and turns to the One who created him? All his time until such repentance will be but waste, upon which the worms do feed. Without humility man will remain blind, will be forever dead... will never stand upright.

But there is a light, a light which blinds the sun by comparison – a light which brings even the pagans to their knees. The light is the Light of the Spirit, brought by Jesus the Christ to frail humanity. By His sacrifice it now shines: He has been resurrected in our stead. And so also we might live; and so now we might hear; and so now we might understand, by that Light of the Spirit, the Light that is our God. Let us employ this Light as we open the pages of His Book.

Father, forgive us our blindness, the pride which gouges out our eyes. Instill a longing in our hearts to see; let our souls be set upon your Truth, upon your Son.

B. The Miracle

There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy (as a famous poet has said). We do not put our fingers on the pulse of God. As scientists determine the length of time the universe has been in existence and propound that it could not have been created in six days but must have taken billions of years to develop, there are two questions which seem to remain unspoken by those in religious circles, who take such discovery at face value, and these omissions cut at the heart of faith – essentially, both disbelieve the miraculous.

The first is that if God could make the sun stand in the sky at Joshua's command that he might complete his battle (see Josh.10:12-14), could He not extend the length of a day at His creation of the universe? (Was there someone with a watch keeping Him to His hours?) The second question, and perhaps the more overlooked, regards the cosmic actions that are determined to have occurred, that seemingly must have taken billions of years to transpire: Could the LORD not have compacted the elapsing of these natural phenomena into a span of six days (or into a single day, a single hour... a single moment) – is His power short of such movement, of such force?

But, again, seeing with human eyes alone and lacking of faith in the Maker of heaven and earth, the vision of man falls short and attempts to proscribe God into his small realm of understanding.

We are living in a miracle; this we should first understand. The Infinite God is not delimited by the finite earth or the man who is made of its dust. Nor is His Word.

V. The Word *Is* Truth

In the final summation, the Word is the Word. The Word is Truth. Period. No more. It is that simple, that true, that clear.

Though certainly (as pointed out in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*) there are many senses to Scripture – rich as it is, speaking to all and of all as it does – “all other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal” (CCC, 116) and its exegetes are enjoined to follow “the rules of sacred interpretation.” Can they be said to “*be especially ‘attentive to the content and unity of the whole Scripture’*” (CCC, 112) if ignorant that the interpretation of Jonah as parable contradicts Jesus’ own words in Matthew? Do they “*read the Scripture within ‘the living Tradition of the whole Church’*” (CCC, 113) if they speak in opposition to what has been consistently held by the Church Fathers? Are they “*attentive to the analogy of faith,*” to the coherence of the truth of the faith” (CCC, 114)? Or is it not rather *lack* of faith that calls so many texts into question? Is it not so that those who promulgate such theories fail to give “the obedience of faith” and the “submission of their intellect and will to God” (DV, 5)? And are they not in the first place at a loss for “the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and ‘makes it easy for all to accept and believe the truth’” (DV, 5)?

Isaiah is declaring visions for God, not writing “poetry”; the Flood, the parting of the Red Sea, the stopping of the sun in the sky, the multiplication of loaves, the Resurrection, etc., etc., are not fanciful renderings of events but the truest accounts of the events themselves. Truth! Are not these and other texts clear in their humble detail and repetition, and corroborated by other references in the Bible itself (as well as the Church Fathers)? Why would the sacred author say, “Never before or since was there a day like this,” if the sun had not actually “halted in the middle of the sky...for a whole day” as Scripture says (Jos.10:13,14)? Or why would such a point be made of the waters piling up “like a wall” (“like a mound”, “congealed in the midst of the sea” – Ex.14:22 & 15:8) either side of the Israelites as they passed through the Red Sea if there had just been a dry spell? And, as said, though Jesus clearly spoke in parables, Jonah and Esther and Judith and others are not parables – they do not even possess the literary characteristics (e.g. universality of character and setting) of parables!

A final note, again about cultural presumptions: Jesus does not exaggerate. He speaks the truth – simply, clearly, fully, completely... definitively. If He says, “It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go into Gehenna” (see Mt.5:29-30), He means it. And is it not so? (Though I suppose to those who have cut Gehenna out of their theology and taken refuge in this glamorous world the loss of arm or eye would certainly seem more tragic, it is not so with those of faith.) And please note that the Lord says “if your right hand [or “eye”] causes you to sin,” then “cut it off” (or “tear it out”). But it is of course *not* a body part that causes us to sin but – as the Lord has repeatedly made evident – it is from our *hearts* sin comes. And He does not counsel cutting these out, but circumcising them with the Word of Truth.

Oh where is common sense? Where is spiritual wisdom and insight? Where are those who “immerse themselves in the Scriptures” (DV, 25)? Where is the Church when we need a Mother to guide us? Will She not continue to strive “to reach day by day a more profound understanding of the sacred Scriptures” (DV, 23)?

I pray my cry may fall upon receptive ears.