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CIRCULAR  
OF  
BROTHER BERNARD GAUDEUL  
SUPERIOR GENERAL

“THE GOOD MESSAGE OF GOD”  
*(Heb. 6:5)*



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## .. THE GOOD MESSAGE OF GOD” (Heb 6:5)

*“To know Jesus intimately, we have to probe and ponder the Scriptures as he himself reminded us”*

(Jean-Marie de la Mennais to Bruté: I, p. 50).

others,

ir RULE OF LIFE urges us to study the Word of God (C 68; D ), to receive it in the spirit of obedience (D 55), to make it the foundation of our religious life (D 57), to allow it to nourish our prayer (D 80, 86), our spiritual reading (C 45; D 78), and our devotion to the Blessed Virgin (D 93), to draw inspiration from it in our programmes of formation (C 56) and to share in its proclamation by our catechetical mission (D 114).

The General Conference of November 1985 made an earnest appeal that the Brothers listen to and celebrate the Word of God. There seemed no better way for each one of us “to deepen his personal experience of God” and so to live by a profound spirituality centered on the person of Christ, and the quest for the Will of God” (cf Circ. 274, p. 35).

The importance it gave to the Divine Word harmonizes with the consistent recommendation of today’s Church, beginning with the papal encyclical DIVINO AFFLANTE SPIRITU and further emphasized in the Dogmatic Constitution DEI VERBUM of Vatican II.

It then, polemics reaching back to the Reformation with the modern upheaval of the early XXth century induced Catholics to

word of God has regained its full dignity in the liturgy and daily life of the Church. Excellent commentaries abound in different languages, introductory courses to Biblical studies grow more and more popular, and the renewed interest continues to open fresh territories. We are witnessing, as Enzo Bianchi remarks, a re-epiphany of God's Word throughout the Christian community.

We religious read and hear that Word every day and several times a day . . . perhaps too frequently. For it can easily become commonplace, trite, no more than a soothing sound for the deep sub-conscious. It may receive no more recognition than today's editorial or the latest news bulletin, perhaps even less since it does not share the urgency of current events. The New Testament and even the Gospels belong to the past; they were fresh news two thousand years ago . . . And as for the Old Testament, what possible relevance can be found in the amorous exploits of Nabuchodonosor and Assourbanipal? We feel quite happy to leave Jeremiah with his jeremiads, Jonas with his whale and Job with his dunghill. Even Paul at grips with the Judaisiers or Jesus contending with the Pharisees and Sadducees have no compelling immediacy. What really arouses our interest is the world we know: the age of computer technology and nuclear science, not the distant past with its rural simplicities, restricted vision and the naive outlook which has so little in common with modern critical thinking and scientific progress.

Is the Word of God really to be discerned in that far distant context? Is his message really to be found in those endless chapters of the Pentateuch, for example, with their pot-pourri of out-date laws? In the raw hatred to be found in the Book of Judges? In th

lent fury of the chosen people in their hour of conquest, or their sing in defeat? In the spite and vitriol that spill over into the lms? Or in the bitter denunciations of the prophets? By the re token, do episodes like Juda's incest and David's adultery m likely candidates in any sacred text? And what about the ag of Songs with its exquisite celebration of sexual love without much as a mention of the Creator? Such materials, together h a rough and ready approach to history and the pseudo- nce arising sporadically in different contexts, have no suasive credentials as part of the inspired Word.

;, St. Paul is quite explicit: "All scripture is inspired by God" (2 n 3) while Peter is even more forthright in teaching that "no phecy ever came from man's initiative. When men spoke for d it was the Holy Spirit that moved them" (2P 1:21). Vatican II roborates that claim in asserting: "The Sacred Scriptures tain the word of God and, since they are inspired, really are the ssage of God" (*Dei Verbum* 24).

anwhile, that message has to be rightly understood. It makes pretence to teach us history, the exact sciences or any discipline enable to sheer human research and endeavour. "God provides direct information on historical or scientific matters despite despread and ingrained belief to the contrary; he does not cipher for us the puzzling clash of forces that shape our human stiny. His faithful were never intended as foretellers of what lay ead though a persistent tendency to believe otherwise lives on" uquocq: Dogmatic Theology I, p. 70). But, as Creator of the iverse and of man, he reveals as he alone can do so, far beyond :tentative explanations of all science, the fundamental and imate meaning of life and human history.

The Bible may be read from a merely historical perspective where it becomes a valuable resource for the understanding of humanity; it may be read, especially in certain translations, for its poetic quality, the music of its cadences, the aptness of its symbols and the beauty of its imagery; it may further be explored for its sociological import as it traces the evolution of internal and external relations between the twelve tribes of Israel over the course of centuries. But all such approaches shirk the essential meaning: the Bible as the message of God calling for our belief, offering us an experience of salvation, and inviting us to communion with the living God, to a covenant made in time but lasting for eternity. It is possible, then, to probe the Scriptures with the sharpest tools of learning and fail completely to grasp their import; in fact, the wrong approach could lead to the loss of faith. Yet, paradoxically, it is possible to have the deepest insight without all technical aid.

It is similarly possible to entertain such an awareness of God's transcendence as to deny all possibility of his communing with man. The gulf between the Creator and his creatures is so vast as to preclude any demeaning condescension on God's part or vain presumption on the part of man. Whatever else may be said about such extreme transcendentalism, there is one advantage for ourselves at the outset of this circular: it prompts us to a sense of our own modest abilities. We are able to think and talk of God and his Word only by analogy with the consequent need to continually refining our terms and imagery. "O Thou, who art beyond all that exists, what more can we say of Thee? No sound



name Thee, no mind understand Thee, for Thou surpasseth all knowledge. All names belong to Thee, yet how can I address Thee, Thou alone whose name is mystery?" (Poem attributed to St. Gregory of Nazianzen).

The following pages will prove meaningless without the prerequisite of sturdy faith. If faith is ailing or doubt assails us, we should heed the word of our Founder and "ask God, in season and out of season, to enlighten our hearts. Deprived of such enlightenment, we could never grasp a word of his teaching or enter into his mysteries. We must plead to be among the little ones whom he loves to teach his secrets" (Correspondence: 1:50).

In that case, the outcome will be for us what it has been for so many others: the Word of God will become "a light on our path" (Isaiah 118: 105). In response to our varying needs and circumstances, the Word will move us to joy, peace, praise, fear or wonder. The Bible will become a bedside book from which we daily cull some profit.

Four aspects of this Book merit special reflection:

- I. The mystery of God's Word.
- II. The response to God's Word.
- III. The proclamation of God's Word.
- IV. The fruit of God's Word.

These reflections will naturally suggest practical applications.

God's glory and the perfect copy of his nature" (Heb 1:3), c  
equal, consubstantial, co-existent.

"In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God and t  
Word was God" (Jn 1:1), the perfect expression of his divinit

This Word, reserved to the joy of God, gives voice to the myste  
in which Father and Son find infinite, reciprocal delight in t  
Spirit who envelops them; to the mystery in which the Wo  
exults to be the begotten of the Father and to acknowledge th  
relationship in the fullness of love.

This Word, beyond the hearing of man, will pass from eternity  
time in the stupendous mysteries of creation and in the Wo  
made flesh for our redemption.

The God who creates is the Holy Trinity. The uncreated Wo  
shares in this creation as "master craftsman" (Prov 8:20) so th  
creation itself speaks out and "the heavens declare the glory o  
God . . . day discourses of it to day, night to night hands on th  
knowledge. No utterance at all, no speech, no sound that anyon  
can hear; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and the  
message to the ends of the world" (Ps 19: 1-4). By that messag  
man discovers something about his creator: "For what can b  
known about God is perfectly plain to him since God himself ha  
made it plain. Ever since God created the world, his everlastin  
power and deity — however invisible — have been there to see i  
the things he made" (Rm 1: 19-20). In creation, the Word ca  
already be recognized for what it always will be: the instrument o  
God's revelation.

Continuing this mission of revelation, the Word was spoken directly to man. It spoke to Abram and promised to make him the father of a great nation, reiterating this promise both to Isaac and Jacob. It then chose Moses as prophet of the covenant with the Decalogue as its charter.

From that moment, the history of Israel became "sacred history", history no more faultless and edifying than any other but one whose meaning is inextricably linked to God for "it was from God that Israel took her origin; it was by God that she learned to interpret the events that led up to it" (Jacques Guillet, *The God Who Speaks*, p. 33).

In the midst of the free play of human liberty, historical circumstances and all secondary causes, the Almighty unerringly pursued his saving plan.

The prophets made that clear to the chosen people. Seized by the Spirit, they saw beyond appearances; peering behind the scenes, they recognized the hand of God in every facet of Israel's life, its economy and policy, its collective enterprises and individual ventures. Their word was truly the message of God; the same message delivered in different idioms. Hence, it is not difficult, for example, to perceive in the various narratives the distinctive characteristics of Isaiah or Jeremiah, the fervid disequilibrium of Ezekiel and the marital tribulations of Hosea. Yet it is God who speaks by their voice; they see themselves as his mouthpiece: "The Oracle of the Lord".

In this way, the Word of God sustained the hopes of Israel throughout her adversities and sketched the portrait of the

man, it assumes human language for itself translating divine mystery into mortal words; from being human it advances to being man. Jesus Christ is the unique and perfect Word, the living Word of the Father since "My word is not my own; it is the word of the one who sent me" (Jn 14:24).

Christ is the unique revelation, the sole exegete of God: "No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1:18). But, since Jesus is fully human, none of his sayings can adequately express the revelation. Each of his words, it is true, spoken with the power and assurance of the Spirit, speaks the truth of God . . . But the divine message cannot be confined to a word, a phrase or even a series of discourses, for all language is a finite instrument incapable of dealing completely with the infinite mystery of God. Hebrew like Aramaic, Greek like Latin, one modern language like any other lacks the resources of vocabulary and syntax to give more than an imperfect translation of divine reality.

To tell us all he had to say, Jesus needed the full expression of his being in his life, death and resurrection. The Word has not only to be heard but also to be seen. Every action, every attitude and even his silences have their import since they all convey the mystery of God in human terms. They speak to us of the Father's meekness, his incomparable love, his boundless mercy towards the sinner and his special concern for the poor and disadvantaged. In Jesus the Word becomes physician of body and soul, finally offering himself up to man and for man, in the sacramental reality of the Bread and Wine, and in the physical oblation on the cross of Calvary.

With startling clarity, the Word exposes God's glorious salvific plan for man and the universe: "to bring everything together under Christ, as head" (Ep 1:10). In this way, it brings the earlier prophecies to perfection, enlightening them from within as though with a retroactive power bringing unity to their apparent diversity. It reveals "the message which was a mystery hidden for generations and centuries" (Col. 1:26), fulfills God's loving signs for man and thereby reveals the personality of the living God and that of man, the child of God; as well as the countenance of God: "Philip, to have seen me is to have seen the Father" (Jn 14:9), and that of man: "Here is the man!" (Jn 19:6).

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The Word made flesh suffered and died on the cross but then rose from death and now lives forever. That Word inspired Peter at Pentecost, Paul in the synagogues of Asia Minor, on the Acropolis of Athens and in the praetoria of Caesarea and Rome; it inspired all the Apostles as they carried the Good News to every corner of the world. They are not the Word but servants of the Word, repeating, each in his own way, the message they had previously received.

In today's Church, the mystical body of Christ, apostles and prophets, under the same inspiration, continue to spread the same Word of God. In harmony with the whole history of revelation, God speaks in her and through her to make his message known. After the resurrection, it became the Church's mission to discern and interpret the treasure of God's Word and to determine the validity of all commentaries and commentators.

about (Jn 3: 37, 40). How much more forceful then is the witness of the New Testament, for whenever we listen to it, the voice we hear is his.

Throughout the scriptures, it is God who addresses us. With all its diversity of content from patriarchal traditions, proverbs, apocalyptic poems, hymns and psalms to the four gospels and apostolic letters, the scripture is proclaimed at each liturgy as the Word of the Lord. Vatican II emphasizes that "Christ is present in his word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the church" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7).

Meanwhile, two observations deserve attention:

--- In one sense, Scripture fails to do justice to the Word much as an outline does to the completed masterpiece. The Word of God though subjecting itself to written evidence, obviously surpasses this evidence. In this way, the representation of Christ deriving from the Scriptures, must never be considered exhaustive. Christ cannot be circumscribed by the scriptures: "If all were written down, the world itself, I suppose, would not hold all the book that would have to be written" (Jn 21:25). Christianity, unlike Islam for example, is not "the religion of the Book". From the Moslem perspective, the word of God became the Koran; for the Christian, the word was made flesh . . . Thus, Islam approaches God with a text while we go with a Person, Christ the Lord (c Jacques Jomier, O.P., *Cahiers Evangile*: 48).

--- Not all the books of the Bible share the same degree of excellence of revelation. The progressive unfolding, already

cernible in the Old Testament, is even more apparent in the transition, at the fullness of time, to the New. For this reason, the religious ideals of the Book of Judges are not identical with those of the Gospels; Leviticus is no equal to the first letter of John . . .

## WORD SPOKEN IN HUMILITY.

God's message has no striking literary distinction. Exteriorly, it does not differ from ordinary human usage. It employs the same vocabulary, grammar, syntax, imagery and literary forms as other ordered documents, and, in this respect, is uncompromisingly the word of man. How else could it ever be understood? Intended for human ears, it accommodates itself to human understanding. Like other human discourse, it laments in sorrow and distills much homespun wisdom into proverbs; its legal codes stifle the imagination and its historical narratives swing from sparkling construction to dull, leaden, statement; its prophetic oracles are so beautiful and limpid are elsewhere trite or obscure. The words of God expressed in human language share the kenosis of the Son who became like other men (cf *Dei Verbum*, 13).

God's message is not noisy, aggressive or self-imposing. Where it is wanted, it goes unheeded. Where it is sought, it discloses its meaning quietly, allusively, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It may spend years on an idle shelf, or fall on deaf ears without compelling the indifferent to heed what it has to say. Respectful of man's God-given freedom, it comes to man with the meekness and humility of man's creator. Like a mother stooping to help her child, God graciously descends to the level of his creature. What, in fact, is the Bible but the story of his loving concern free of

in spite of all this, the word as God's Word is endowed with creative power. "God said 'Let there be light' and there was light. God said 'Let there be a vault in the waters to divide the waters into two . . . Let the earth produce vegetation . . . Let there be lights in the vault of heaven . . . Let the waters teem with living creatures. Let the earth produce every kind of living creature', and so it was (Gen 1). God spoke, as Claudel reminds us, and the whole universe obeyed not only by springing into existence but by advancing to its proper end (cf. Journal: vol. II, p. 125).

More powerful than the chariots of Pharaoh, than the armies of Babylon or Assyria, the Word achieved victory and destroyed the foe, brought rain after parching drought, spread hoarfrost like ashes on the earth and stilled the tempest winds.

The same power was at work in the multiplication of oil, the multiplication of bread and fish, in the healing of the sick, the resurrection of the dead, the deliverance of the possessed, and above all in the cleansing from sin.

Unlike so much of our frail human testimony, the Word of God can never be spoken without powerful impact. It realises whatever it declares: "Yes, as the rain and snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making yield and giving growth to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eating, so the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do" (Is 55: 9-10). Such power leads to the consternation of many: "Astonishment seized them and they were all saying to one another 'What teaching! He gives orders to



clean spirits with authority and power and they come out'” (Lk 5:6). The believer has only to obey the divine command: “If you so, I will lay out the nets” (Lk 5:6), to see sterile human efforts converted to a bountiful harvest: “they netted such a number of fish that their nets began to tear” (Lk 5:6).

When the son of man appeared to John, “a sword came from his mouth” (Rv 1:16); his word was his only weapon “alive and active: cuts like any double-edged sword but more finely; it can slip through the place where the soul is divided from the spirit, or cuts from the marrow; it can judge the secret emotions and thoughts” (Heb 4:12). The comparison to a two-edged sword comes directly from the account of creation which separates and organizes. Here, the word is seen at work in the soul of the believer or infidel; like a double-edged sword it cannot be staved or blunted. It saves or it judges.

Father de la Mennais remarks: “The word of God is fraught with power of stupendous impact” (Sermons III, p. 928). “The force and power in the word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for herans, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life” (*Dei Verbum*: 21).

## WORD SPOKEN FOR TODAY

The message of God gives life today since he who offers it, the Word made flesh, is alive today, and he who inspires it is the living spirit. Together they are at work today in the world and in our own hearts.

... at Nazareth. Jesus read a passage from Isaiah

agent but the very act of salvation; not the slightest suggestion of death attends it. Unlike the testimony of men, even those like Plato, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Bossuet or Marx, scripture never becomes a dead letter. The works of the former, it is true, retain certain pleasing vitality, but a vitality without the interior animation of their authors; their light is the light of departed luminaries. The latter, on the other hand, throbs with life because it is the fruit of Life himself and is continuously inspired by the Spirit — today as it was yesterday and will be tomorrow. The incarnate Word gives me that assurance while the Spirit enlightens me and leads me to the complete truth (cf Jn 16:13). With their help, a particular text or passage till then obscure, insipid or even dull, suddenly comes to life and revivifies me. I will leave me stunned, bewildered, converted, and I shall recognize the creative, redeeming power of God's Word working anew within me.

To convey the vitality of this Word, Jesus makes several apt comparisons. "The seed is the word of God", a tiny grain having the power of life itself and yearning for fertile soil to sprout, burgeon and produce a vast harvest" (Mk 4:3-9). Who has not marvelled at the exuberant vitality of ivy and other plants that dilapidate the stoutest walls, or of roots that penetrate and lift the hardest concrete? How much more vigorous and irrepressible is the word of Life!

On other occasions, the Word of God becomes our daily bread, the manna which fed us during the long desert journey, "the bread of life" (Jn:34) sustaining the heart with blood and the mind with clear perception. Should we be afflicted, then, with spiritual

nemia, what better tonic than the daily reading of John or Paul or Amos?

I tell you most solemnly," says Jesus, "whoever listens to my words and believes in the one who sent me, has eternal life; without being brought to judgment, he has passed from death to life" (Jn 5:24). "Those who keep her live, those who desert her die" (Ba 4:1).

Church history has numerous examples of the living and perennial power of the Word.

- It was during the Gospel reading at the Eucharist that St. Antony was completely overcome by the invitation: "Go sell all that you have and come, follow me," and had a clear vision of his mission to found monasticism.

- Saint Augustine one day heard a child calling. "Take and read! Take and read it!". "As quickly as I could, I returned to the place where I had just left the book of Paul on rising from bed. I took it, opened it and quietly read the first chapter where these words assailed my eyes: 'No drunken orgies, no promiscuity or licentiousness, and no wrangling or jealousy. Let your armor be the Lord Jesus Christ; forget about satisfying your bodies with all their cravings' (Rm: 13:13 seq.). I had no wish to read further and there was no need. As soon as I finished the last words of this admonition, a comforting light flooded my heart and all shadow of doubt was banished" (*Confessions*, Bk 8, XII:29). Augustine has remained the outstanding example of the person thunderstruck by grace: "You have pierced our hearts with the arrows of love and we bore your words implanted in our vitals"

never again be silenced . . . From that moment, Francis was changed man. All the theology in the world could never describe such an interior conversion defying all normal psychological patterns. Francis made room for Christ. He was still a man, but man inhabited by Christ. The Francis of yesterday, yearning desperately for love, had finally come home (cf. Julien Green *BROTHER FRANCIS* pp. 110-112).

-- Charles de Foucauld gives his own experience in his own words "Nothing in my life had ever made such a deep impression or had stronger impact than the words: 'Whatever you do to one of these little ones you do to me.' Those words flow from the lips of Truth incarnate, the same lips which said " 'This is my body, this is my blood'. How could we possibly resist the urge to find and love him among 'the little ones' the sinners and the poor, using all his spiritual resources for the conversion of souls, all his material resources to alleviate affliction and sorrow?"

## WORD SPOKEN TO ME

Such examples prompt us to join with the psalmist in his supplication: "Be good to your servant and I shall live, I shall observe your word" (Ps 119: 17). For the words of scripture are words of life for me today. They come to me directly from God at the very moment I read or listen to them. Their story is not that of an irrelevant past but my own. Their objective is not a lesson from which I may derive an application for self-improvement but a direct involvement between myself and God. Thus, the paralyzed man brought to Jesus for help is me. The daughter of Jairus raised from the dead is me. I too am the poor leper trying to

atch the Master's eye, the adulteress falling at his feet, Nicodemus asking him by night, Zaccheus getting down from the tree. The shepherd he calls to follow him, the doctor of the law trying to insult him, Peter no sooner confessing than denying his faith — all these people are me, and the words that Jesus spoke to them he likewise speaks to me. Their reactions are my own reactions since in one aspect or another of their situation corresponds with an aspect of my own.

The whole Gospel, therefore, is really mine. The Father's words to Jesus; "You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you" (Lk 22), like Jesus' words to the Father: "Father, let your will be done, not mine" (Lk 22:42), "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit", I must appropriate to myself; not, of course, with the intensity and amplitude of their origin but nonetheless truly and without fear of self-delusion.

The same is true of all that precedes the Gospel: the long centuries of expectation, the pleas of the prophets to a people turning from Yahweh to pagan idols, the lyrical outbursts of the psalmist . . . I, indeed, am Jacob wrestling with his God throughout the night, David dancing in front of the ark or bitterly lamenting his sin, Jeremiah rejected because of his prophecies, Job bemoaning his lot and crying out for justice.

Similarly, mine are the letters of Paul, Peter and John, the Acts of the Apostles and the visions of St. John.

Every passage of scripture is a gift of the present moment from the Spirit who brings me the Word of the living Christ. Once again, it becomes "the word event", the living presence of the Speaker and

The Word of God is always spoken in love. Without it, man could have no direct access to his Creator for “nobody can see God and live”. That is why “in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them” (*Dei Verbum*: 21). In those books he discloses the mystery that floods his eternity with joy. Human wisdom concludes with the chilly abstractions of the philosophers who give us the Prime Mover, the First Cause or the Supreme Intelligence. But St. John rises above all that in asserting that “God is Love” (Jn 4:8).

What a mind-boggling assertion! The Infinite coming to terms with the finite! God talking with his creatures, confiding in them exposing his plans for man and his universe! The astonishing truth is that we so often remain unastonished. Wherever can we find stronger evidence of love than in the confiding of one’s deepest self to another? To whom do we open our heart, with whom do we share our dreams and affections if not with one we love and who loves us in return?

God does likewise. He opens himself to us, reveals the burning love of the Holy Trinity, his yearning to adopt us as his children and give us a share in his divinity. To ease our bewilderment at such a mystery, he adapts his revelation to our weakness and, step by step, leads us to “the fullness of time”. He speaks first of all through his prophets and only later and definitively through his Son, “the faithful witness” (Rev 1:5), the Word made flesh who came to live among us: “No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father’s heart, who has made him known”.

is gradual unveiling of God and his master design, proceeds in sensitive and discriminating love. He sometimes provokes fear and awe, at other times wins us with his advances, but never strikes on our freedom. Meanwhile, love betrayed or requited is always a terrible thing; hence, we also read of God in anger and outrage. His censures and anathemas, however, do not stem from fury but from genuine love, the love of a Father awaiting his prodigal son, the love of a husband disposed to give his unfaithful wife. In his *Journal*, Julien Green reflects that “the real subject of the Bible from beginning to end of both testaments is love. Love raised up the prophets and crucified the Lord-man. In the wrath of God we invariably discern that jealousy which incessantly strives to raise the chosen people to the fidelity of her lover”.

“May we love you and possess you, for you are love” says the recessional (Monday II, Lauds). Like Israel, can we ever get over the fact that God has given us this privilege? For the chosen people it was an unending source of wonder: “He reveals his word to Jacob, his statutes and rulings to them” (Ps 147: 19-20), and their wonder reverberated among the early Christians: “He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, the hidden plan he so kindly made in Christ from the beginning” (Eph 1: 9-10).

Do we not share their privileges? The word I hear each day at Mass, where the two readings systematically cover our whole salvation history, the word spoken at Lauds and Vespers, the message I ponder in my spiritual reading, the incidental word exchanged with a confrère — all these must be taken as the voice of the well-beloved. The message may sound exacting and severe, consoling and invigorating, but it always proceeds from loving

simplicity, he makes himself available without forcing us to go out of our way. To hear him, we have only to bend our ear. And how eagerly we should take in his words! Instead, we often find time for everything else: television, radio, newspapers, light conversation; but the Word of God, the Word of Truth and Life easily goes unnoticed.

What if God had never uttered a word? What could we then know beyond the fact of his existence and of the several attributes discovered gropingly and at great cost in his work of creation? We should await the finality of death in total ignorance of everlasting happiness. The silence of God! It weighs on us even now when he seems deaf or impervious to our prayers; we feel cut-off and abandoned, almost preferring that he took no notice of us.

In the Old Testament, the ancients were invariably overcome with fear when God entered their life unexpectedly. "Take off your shoes", said God to Moses, "for the place on which you stand is holy ground" (Ex 3:5). "Truly, Yahweh is in this place and I never knew it", said Jacob as he awoke from sleep (Gen 28:16). And the same was for Mary when the Angel Gabriel greeted her (Lk 1:29), for Peter and the other Apostles when they were overcome with awe at the epiphanies of the Father and the Son (cf. Mk 4:4-6:51, 9:6). Unfortunately, we have lost this sense of the sacred though the Church tries hard to restore it in the solemnity she brings to the liturgy of the Word. May we rediscover the religious awe which is proof at once of our great love and veneration!

The Word of God is an invitation and appeal; it is a name conferred on me as God's image. It is God calling me into



sistence. How wholeheartedly should I respond to that call and  
and my happiness in his love!

-- II --

## OUR RESPONSE TO THE WORD

Despite its power and pressing appeal to love, the Word of God  
offers grave setbacks from its intended beneficiary, man. Man  
has the freedom to reject it or to receive it languidly or even with  
regret. If he refuses to open the door of his heart, God has to stay  
on the threshold with an occasional gentle knock as a reminder of  
his presence, before withdrawing quietly.

Man can always play deaf to the voice of God; so can a  
community, a province or the Congregation as a whole since  
deafness can be a collective as well as a private deficiency. How  
often did Jesus yearn to give Jerusalem his message of peace, "but,  
alas, it is hidden from your eyes . . . you did not recognize your  
opportunity when God offered it" (Lk 19:43). So Jesus wept over  
the city whose destruction he foresaw.

In man, the Word of God does not work automatically; it requires  
certain interior dispositions. First of all, it has to be welcomed,  
warmly received; and this goes far beyond passive acceptance.  
'Welcome' suggest eagerness, a loving approach to our visitors.  
We offer our hand to greet them just as we reach out to accept a  
bouquet; we make them feel wanted and cherished; we give them  
our time and hospitality. And that is precisely the way we should  
receive the Word of God.

Israel!" We hear it first with Moses (Dt 4:1; 5:1; 6), then repeatedly taken up by the prophets. "O land, land, land, listen to the word of Yahweh" begs Jeremiah (Jf 22:29), and his words re-echo in the psalms: "Listen to this law, my people, pay attention to what I say" (Ps 78:1), "Listen, you are my people, let me warn you. Israel, if only you would listen to me! But my people refused to listen to me, Israel refused to obey me" (Ps 81:9 seq.).

The New Testament takes up the strain. The first word of Jesus as he taught in parables was: "Listen" (Mk 4:3). The Book of Revelation appeals to the churches to pay full attention to the word of the Lord and to the Spirit who inspires it, and each of the seven letters concludes with this appeal (Rv 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Even today, the same invitation begins morning and evening prayer for the Jewish people: "Shema, Israel" ("Listen, O Israel!") (Dt 6:4).

Listening goes beyond hearing; it implies effort to hear someone as well as something. It induces us to put aside our own preoccupations, prejudices and selfishness to catch every nuance of expression and feeling in the message of the other. It suggests the receptive attitude of a mother, counselor or doctor rather than the resistive attitude of a prosecutor or rival.

In our own times, where print so often replaces oral transmission, we tend more often to read than to listen to the word of God, and this involves some loss since the spoken word has a vitality all its own. Confronted with the written word, the reader has to recreate the living accent, tone and cadence for himself; he will then

perceive the world of difference between drama read in private and a play enacted on the stage.

The word of God was intended for hearing with all the vibrant energy it had on the lips of the prophets in their vehemence as in their gentler moods; the persuasive ring is caught repeatedly in scripture and, above all, in the message of our Blessed Lord.

Jesus left no written record; he spoke. As we read his Gospel, we do well to hear his voice as he subdues the multitude, wrestles with his adversaries, poses the searching question, pronounces judgment or forgives the sinner; like the voice of God in the Old Testament, his too is almighty and irresistible. In this way, we restore life to written symbols; and whenever we are privileged to read the scriptures aloud at mass or daily office, we are careful to do so worthily.

Our aim is not only to heed the message but, more importantly, him who gives it; for God's word does more than teach; it calls for close communion. In telling us about God's mystery, it keeps urging us to enter into that mystery. Its appeal is made not so much to the reasoning intellect as to the heart and will. It lays insistent claim to our love for a Person as well as adherence to a proposition, for with Jesus, the messenger is the greater part of the message.

In ordinary daily life, it is possible to listen to a person's remarks without involvement at any other level. When somebody speaks, we simply try to catch his meaning. We sometimes enjoy a kind of intellectual satisfaction in the skill of presentation, the acuity of perception or the depth of thought, and may be led to accept, modify or compare the content of his message.

mystery of love where it is question not so much of our embracing the Word as the Word embracing us, not of our possessing the Word as the Word's possession of us. We can never fully absorb the Word but the Word easily absorbs us.

That is why, whenever we read or listen to the scriptures, we should be mindful of "the joy of the Holy Spirit" (I Th 1:6) who is Love. Our hearts can receive God's word only in the Spirit by whom the Father sent it forth. Otherwise, we shall never understand it; we shall have no taste for it, missing the joy and new life it can bring. It may serve some ancillary intellectual purpose yet miss its essential goal. As disciples, we need God to open our ears (cf. Is 50:4); only God can give the Spirit "who reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God" (I Co 2:10).

All reading of the scriptures, then, presupposes prayer to the Holy Spirit. Like St. Jerome, we must learn "to open our sails to his influence" since the Spirit alone can help us discover the meaning of the message he inspires. Christ proclaims that message but "he always seems to commit his words and actions, with almost casual ease, to the Spirit who will make their meaning clear" (Urs von Balthazar, *New Points of Reference*, p. 139).

We cannot read or hear the word of God as we read a secular text. Even the sharpest intelligence will fall short. We need the grace of God, the indwelling of the Spirit. Then, like eager disciples, we shall sit with Mary close by the side of Jesus as he talks to us (Lk 10:39), or lean on his breast as John did (Jn 13:25). "We must open the ears of our heart", counsels Father de La Mennais, "to let the word of truth sink deep and feed our souls" (Sermons III, p. 927).

he gospels often refer to the eagerness, even the hunger, of those who came to hear the Master. At Nazareth, as he explained a passage from Isaiah, "all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him" (Lk 4:20-22). "On the piece of level ground" where he stopped to proclaim the Beatitudes, "there was a large gathering of his disciples with a great crowd of people from all parts of Judea and from Jerusalem and from the coastal regions of Tyre and Sidon who had come to see him" (Lk 6:17). At the twilight of his life, "from early morning" (Lk 21:38), "he taught in the Temple every day . . . ; and the people as a whole hung on his words" (Lk 19: 47-48). The great pity is that they attended to his words rather than to him. They grew critical and contentious; they would go along, on occasion, with what he had to say but they did not put their faith in him; they mistrusted him since he forced them to question their ways. He failed to abide by accepted canons, so they finally went their way deserting him.

Yet from the very outset, he had warned them in his parables: "Take care how you hear" (Lk 8:18). They had to listen with more than their ears; they had to open their hearts as well for the word needs a heart that is humble, free from the taint of prejudice, and receptive to what it hears; the Father hides his mystery from the great and mighty but reveals it to the little ones. The heart must also be a quiet, uncluttered sanctuary, not a forum for noisy commerce. It is impossible to listen attentively in the market place where distractions of every kind intrude. Careful listening demands a quiet atmosphere. "Our heavenly Father", writes John of the Cross, "has uttered a single word: his Son. It is the Word he speaks eternally and in eternal silence; only in the silence of the soul can that Word be heard". Hence, the importance of recollection and self-composure that we may be all ears for the word of love

This silence is far from voiceless! It speaks to God of my poverty in face of his manifest abundance, and it tells me how I must yield to his Word without hesitancy or reservation. Then, freed from all restraint, it can work feely and effectively; it has every chance of being clearly heard and understood.

Sadly, however, we often give free rein to worry and preoccupations, or foster sentimental attachments which put God's voice in the background. Like the Jews, we may even conclude that "this is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?" (Jn 6:60). Every morning at Lauds we hear the insistent appeal of the Lord: "If today you would only hear my voice" (Ps 95:7), and so often we remain indifferent . . . How different from Solomon caught up in the affairs of state and the intrigues of his court, and begging at the start of his reign: "Give your servant a heart to understand" (I K 3:10). How unlike Lydia who "listened to us; and the Lord opened her heart to accept what Paul was saying" (Ac 16: 13-14).

## KEEPING THE WORD

Listening, of course, is not enough; we have to keep the word, to treasure it in our hearts, as Scripture points out emphatically.

The Angel Gabriel, sent by God to Daniel, "to teach him how to understand", tells him: "You are a man especially chosen. Grasp the meaning of the word, understand the vision" which applies directly to you (Dn 9:22-25).

zechiel did not hesitate to open his mouth to eat the scroll that tasted sweet as honey (Ez 2), and Jesus citing Deuteronomy takes up the same image, comparing the word to daily bread: "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). In the same vein, many others speak about "eating and digesting" the word. In the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus gradually shifted from the Word, as bread of life, to his sacred body as bread offered up for us. To share the Word and partake of Christ's body, consume the teaching and consume the teacher, are two sides of the same coin. And the urgency allows us full communion with God.

The letter to the Hebrews urges us to "appreciate the good message from God" (Heb 6:5). This implies reflecting on it at leisure, repeating it tirelessly, ruminating over it and allowing it to become part of us. That is how we extend the listening process, assimilating what we have received and learning to live in the presence of the Word which strikes deeper and deeper roots in our soul.

The word must make its abode in us; or rather, as Jesus told us, we must abide in it, live within it so that it becomes our real milieu. In all the varied imagery of guarding, inhabiting, penetrating, eating and ruminating, we are reminded of the same exigency: our relationship with the word must be sustained if we hope to reach the promised goal.

Scripture sometimes has an immediate effect; a word or phrase at morning or evening devotions, in our personal readings or simple conversation may so catch our eye or ear as to vitalize at once our faith, increase our generosity, give us unexpected insight. Like a

above the moment and the superficial. In *Lynchique* (21, pp. 54-55), Jacques Lemaitre points out that the message of God comes in various guises. It may refresh like a passing breeze or strike with the force of thunder. But that is of little importance. What we know is that God is there. All we need to do is open our heart to his word, let it sink in deeply, and quietly set about its task without obtrusive questioning and anxiety. A gracious welcome does away with officiousness and noise; let that be our model. We should first take time to let God's word be at home with us; afterwards, we may begin to reflect on it, dwelling on whatever phrase or versicle brings us closer to God. There is no need to hurry; a good banquet allows plenty of time for digestion. So does the food God gives us in his word.

Often the word of God is not understood immediately. It remains clouded in mystery, beyond all comprehension. It is too rich a food for speedy consumption and digestion. We must resolve to take it slowly. It will unveil its mystery only to the humble who accept their limitations; it will reveal its riches only to the patient of heart who, like a woman with child, do all they can to nurse and feed the treasure within.

On more than one occasion in the Gospel, people mistook the nature of what Christ had to say to them: we have only to think of Nicodemus, a doctor of the law, the woman of Samaria, and time and time again his own apostles. Sometimes, they completely misunderstood, especially when he spoke of his passion, death and resurrection: "They could make nothing of this; what he said was quite obscure to them; they had no idea what it meant" (Lk 18:34).



At the cleansing of the Temple, St. John records that “the disciples remembered the words of scripture: “Zeal for your house will devour me” (Jn 2:17). The full implications of the psalm (Ps. 69:9) suddenly dawned on them. On the other hand, an important illusion escaped them: “Destroy this sanctuary and in three days I will raise it up”. Only after he rose from the dead did the disciples recall “that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the words he had said” (Jn 2:22).

The disciples of Emmaus also knew the scriptures but their interpretation was faulty. Jesus said to them: “You foolish men! So slow to believe the full message of the prophets!” (Lk 24:25). He explained to them the passages that were about himself so that “their eyes were opened and they recognized him”. Scriptural or Dogmatic scholarship can never independently grasp the meaning of the message; an understanding heart, the heart of a loyal disciple, is always the primary requisite.

The Holy Spirit, “the Spirit of Truth” (Jn 16:16), after “reminding you of all I have said to you” (Jn 14:26) is our only reliable guide when we strive to understand the full import and new shades of meaning in any part of scripture: “The Spirit of Truth . . . will lead you to the complete truth” (Jn 16:13).

So, when the hour of temptation strikes and we, in our turn, have to undergo our own petty trials and afflictions in the wilderness or the garden of Gethsemane, the words we have long pondered in our hearts will put the enemy to flight: “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God”. “Be off, Satan!” Scripture says, “you must not put the Lord your God to the test” (Mt 4:7). “Father, let your will be done, not mine” (Lk 22:43)

at the crib, and by her Son in the Temple, at Cana and on Calvary. It took time and pain to understand clearly all that had been said. "As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Lk 2:19), eventually grasping in this way all that lay beyond her human reason. It was this witness Jesus had in mind in acclaiming her not so much for his physical birth and upbringing as for hearing the word of God and keeping it (cf Lk 11:28).

The history of the Church offers numerous copies of this prototype. Francis Xavier reached into the heart of the matter only after the repeated question of Ignatius: "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world if he suffers the loss of his own soul?" Theresa of Lisieux suddenly dazzled by a text she had known for years made it the lodestar of her spiritual life: "Unless you become like little children you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity time and time again meditated in her cell on the wisdom of St. Paul till she found, especially in Ephesians I, the secret and core of his spirituality.

"Let these words I urge on you today be written in your heart . . . You shall repeat them to your children . . . whether at rest in your house or walking abroad, at your lying down or at your rising." This, comments Jacques Lemaître, is not an invitation to systematic reflection but to the practice of continual return to a simple word of scripture that touched our heart, a practice which makes it easier to express our love.

Prayerful reflection is a kind of rumination on the words and actions of God, like an effort to break through the outer shell and reach the kernel where flavour and nutrition reside. Thanks to this

kind of spiritual food, our memories grow peopled with the thoughts and incidents of scripture and less tolerant of vain distractions. The word of God progressively asserts its dominion, dismissing futile memories, chastising timid reticence, taming all resistance and removing every doubt. If we are truly immersed in the scripture, it becomes our native element like air to our bodies or water to fish. We turn to it longingly and grow to love it better. One experience reinforces another, one text throws light on another and both shine clearer; following the tradition of the Fathers of the Church, scripture itself becomes its own best commentary.

Naturally, everyone has his own favourite passages to fall back on in times of trials, to use in prayer or free time, to spur his faith, build up his spirits, inflame his zeal, or relive in gratitude a moment when God gave him clear insight into his message: "I am El Shaddai, Bear yourself blameless in my presence" (Gn 17: 1-2); "Do not be afraid, for I am with you"; "I have come to bring fire upon earth", "Come to me all who labour and are heavy burdened and I will give you rest"; "You are my well-beloved Son in whom I take delight"; "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our abode with him" . . .

It is highly commendable, then, to live out our days in the rhythm of the Gospel, imbibing its spirit as a sponge imbibes water. What better way to lead a recollected life? Many of us have heavy schedules with one task treading on the heels of another with the hazard of disorientation; but the message we heard at Lauds, at the Eucharist or during mental prayer stands out like a beacon to warn of dangers and point the way home. And it is more than a beacon: it is an interior light "growing to a greatness" till it floods

listen to the word and not obey is like looking at your own feature in a mirror and then, after a quick look going off and immediately forgetting what you looked like. But the man who looks steadily at the perfect law of freedom and makes that his habit — no listening, then forgetting but actively putting it into practice — will be happy in all that he does” (Jn 1: 18-25). Conviction, born in the heart, is put to work with the hands giving a distinct characteristic to whatever we think or do. We have only to listen and obey.

‘Listening’ and ‘obeying’ — two words often related in etymology and always related in meaning. The second is impossible without the first of which it is the extension. The follower of the word is he who listens and puts it into practice, who discerns the will of another and determines, at whatever cost, to follow it as long as he trusts that other: “Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on rock” (Mt 7:24). For every Christian, this implies renewal of his baptismal promises, and for every religious unfaltering loyalty to the insistent call: “Come, follow me”.

Obedience is no easy matter; it makes demands on all we have and are. It is not a mechanical response or a simple moral obligation for God, writes Péguy, “takes no pleasure in the homage of slaves”. He seeks obedience born of free will, understanding and love; love first reflected in eager reception, then reaching fulfillment in total commitment to God’s will. That is the “obedience of faith” which Paul speaks about (Rm 1:5). It is the virtue which proves how genuine we are in our profession. To hear and meditate the word is futile unless it results in a life of faith.

onformable with that word.

Sometimes we act spontaneously and are inspired to specific acts of charity, patience or forgiveness. While perceiving quite clearly what is amiss in our life, we remain fully aware that "God is greater than our conscience and knows everything" (I Jn 3:20). It is he who helps us achieve whatever looked difficult or impossible beforehand. His word keeps prompting those short invocations which unite us with the sick and crippled who appealed in firm faith to Christ.

More frequently, however, we find the work of conversion a slow, almost imperceptible process. The word needs time to transform the way we judge, to change our spiritual outlook. Still, we see pride gradually yielding to humility, obduracy to docility, sloth to energy, impatience to tolerance, prejudice to wary circumspection. Our whole life, in fact, draws closer and closer to the ideals of the Gospel. It is not only our conduct but the motive behind it that stands converted.

In showing us what we are now, the word of God also reveals what we are destined to become. The gate it points to is the narrow gate of the kingdom. The road is that of the Beatitudes, and those who take it are assured of their objective. For the word of God brings its own enabling graces. It is invested with the power of its origin in whom thought and action are inseparable (cf Dom Oury, p. 20).

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Receiving God's message involves the three powers of my soul as well as the three theological virtues. 'Listening' calls into play my understanding and the virtue of faith; 'keeping' my memory and

on revealing new aspects and we will marvel how we missed them. The ancient treasure will provide endless new riches, for God's message rather than restricting our vision will sharpen it beyond all measure. God is inseparable from his word; but since he transcends all language, we need his Spirit to shatter verbal limitations and lead us to the whole truth that scripture expresses.

Each one will be judged on the way he receives the Word (cf Mk 8:38), on the faith, love, trust and docility which characterize his attitude. Everyone hears it, but only those who live by it will bear its fruits. If we receive it, we receive Jesus, the Word incarnate; if we reject it, we cut ourselves off from the life of God. "He who rejects me and refuses my words has his judge already: the word itself that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day" (Jn 12: 47-48).

The Word inevitably entails risk: it insists on a hearing, forces us to reflect and demands commitments. This risk, moreover, extends to every level, even the national. Totalitarian regimes, for example, look upon the Bible as a subversive instrument. To own a copy is almost treasonous and may guarantee years behind bars. But, above all, the risk is personal since the Good News insists on my renunciation, my conversion of heart, my unselfish dedication; so, many would rather not hear it and go their way without it.

"The Word was the true light . . . He was in the world and the world did not know him. He came to his own domain and his own people did not accept him" (Jn 1: 9-11). Israel had earlier killed her prophets, and the Word kept silent. Then, "the Word was made

flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14), and the world thought the silence would go on. Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem believed they had heard the last of him; but the Spirit of God intervened and the Good News travelled to every corner of the earth.

Brothers, let us be fully receptive to the Spirit of the Word. He is at work in our hearts, so noiseless and unobtrusive that we may not even be aware. But since he knows us better than we know ourselves, there is no need for alarm! His aim is not to destroy but to heal and make anew. Like grateful servants, we should stand in confident expectation of the Master's bounty; like Mary, we should be happy to do whatever he asks. Our "fiat" like hers will see the word take seed, mature and bear its fruit. When we listen to it, we listen to Christ; when we ignore it, we turn our back on Christ: "Whoever takes the message to heart proves his love of the Saviour". Should love require it, let us be ready, like our Saviour, to persevere in the face of all rejection.

In this way, God's word becomes so much part of us as to be a second nature. It will have fulfilled its mission: we are no longer two but one. I dwell within the word and the word dwells in me. It has become flesh of my flesh so that I become the living word of Christ transcribing his message for the age I live in.

Only then is its work completed: active, from all eternity, in God, it has now become active in us. The joy of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit will be that the word we have heard, kept and obeyed, be shared with our Brothers, students and the world at large.

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the prophet learned of his vocation: "Son of man, open your mouth and eat what I am about to give you. I looked. A hand was there stretching out to me and a scroll. He unrolled it in front of me . . . He said 'Son of man, eat what is given to you; eat this scroll, then go and speak to the House of Israel'. I ate it and it tasted sweet as honey. Then he said: 'Son of man, go to the House of Israel and tell them what I have said' " (Ez 2:8 seq.).

Ezekiel's vocation is typical of every Christian's. Realizing its fulfillment in the recipient, the word wants him to become the instrument for the same purpose in the lives of others. The grace of baptism and religious consecration gives us the prophetic mission of proclaiming the word of God. We have been born of the word, raised by and in the word; we are asked, in turn, to become its bearers.

Which word are we asked to deliver? In what way? Where and when?

#### A. WHICH WORD?

In the Bible, the prophet is the spokesman of God. He sets out to proclaim not his own message, the result of his own experience and reflection, but a message he knows as coming directly from God. That explains why one of the seraphs touched the lips of Isaiah to purge away all iniquity (cf Is 6:6-7), and why Yahweh put out his hand and touched the mouth of Jeremiah saying: "There! I am putting my words into your mouth" (Is 1:9).

The Hebrew verb for "prophetize" is "naba" to flow from a source,



o that the prophet becomes the well head of the divine but hidden source. The Greek equivalent, from which we derive our own word means “to speak on behalf of . . .” So the prophet speaks on behalf of God and in God’s name. Docile to God’s message, he appropriates it to himself, cloaks it in his own word, delivers it in his own personal style yet never distorts the content. His mission is to give to others precisely what the Lord has given him.

In the Old Testament, the prophet received the word to pass it on to others. He could not keep it to himself since it was “a fire in his mouth” (Jer 5:14). Indeed, “Elijah arose like a fire, his word flaring like a torch” (Si 48:1), while Jeremiah lamented: “There seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones. The effort to restrain it wearied me. I could not bear it” (Jer 20:9).

In the same way, Jesus came to give us not his own message but the message he received from the Father. He is “the only Son, nearest to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (Jn 1:18). Word made flesh, he expressed the Ineffable in terms we can understand, using the things we know to introduce us to him who surpasses all understanding. Jesus did this in public as in private, whether he went out to teach or simply pursued the common life of his contemporaries; his witness, in either case, being perfectly manifest: “Philip, to have seen me is to have seen the Father” (Jn 14:9).

The New Testament depicts the apostle as “eye witness and minister of the word” (Lk 1:2), “a steward entrusted with the mysteries of God” (I Co 4:1), “a servant of the revelation” (cf Rev 1:1-2) and, perhaps primarily as a man who must “continue to devote himself to prayer and to the service of the word” (Ac 6:1-4).

... to have is about Jesus, and only about him as the crucified  
" (I Co 2:2).

Before everything else, that implies attentive listening on our part: "To what avail can anyone preach the word of God to others unless he has listened to that word within his own soul? (St. Augustine). Before we bear it, we must be borne by it; before we sow it, we must be receptive to it. "Open your mouth and eat . . . then go and speak to the House of Israel" (Ez 2:8 seq.); the sequence is inevitable since the second is impossible without the first.

This also implies serious Biblical study which keeps abreast of modern critical thinking and tries to integrate whatever is helpful in current research.

And it finally implies acceptance of the whole of sacred scripture, not of any truncated version. To choose one part to the exclusion of another is to violate its unity, for scripture is a seamless robe. Those in the early church who "accepted this passage but not that" were seen by Origen as "the executioners of Christ, tearing his limbs apart" What refers to the Revelation of John is equally applicable to the Bible as a whole: "This is my solemn warning to all who hear the prophecies in this book: if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him every plague mentioned in the book; if anyone cuts anything out of the prophecies in this book, God will cut off his share of the tree of life and of the holy city which are described in this book" (Rev 22:18-19).

The prophet is steadfast, clinging to the message he has received

without manipulating it to his own ends. He never seeks to replace Christ but to assure that Christ has all the space he needs. After all, it is Christ's message not his own that he wants to spread abroad. That is why Vatican II reminds the clergy that "the task of priests is not to teach their own wisdom but God's Word" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*: 4), and why John Paul II puts us on our guard against allowing the scriptures to be subservient to any brand of ideology.

With that in mind, we might ask ourselves what image of Christ do we convey to our students: Jesus Christ super-star? Jesus the revolutionary? Jesus fashioned to the whims of the time? Or rather him whom Peter confessed: "The Christ, Son of the living God", and Thomas: "My Lord and my God", and the centurion: "Truly, the Son of God"? Him extolled in the christological hymns of Paul (Phil 2:6-11); (Ep 1:13-14) (Col 1:15-20) which the Church incorporates into her Divine Office?

## B. IN WHAT MANNER?

### IN THE SPIRIT AND WITH THE CHURCH

The Holy Father asks us to recall the earliest days of the Church if we are intent on the work of effective evangelization. There in the Upper Room we find the apostles persevering in prayer with Mary for the coming of the Paraclete. They need his inspiration to go out and preach the Good News. It is no different for us for "that is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8). He gives us signs of his presence today as he did in the past; but to pinpoint them, to exploit and develop them, we may be asked to abandon whatever is obsolete and to rivet our attention on what he is doing now wherever human life is lived "in the Spirit" (cf Rm 8). His

aiding power and speaks under his inspiration so that the message he carries is more than human; it is the word of God. Jesus himself, though conceived of the Holy Spirit, did not begin his public teaching till he received a new outpouring of the Spirit in the baptism of John. His apostles went boldly about their mission after the descent of the Paraclete at Pentecost.

So it is in the life of every Christian. After his baptism, he receives the sacrament of confirmation to strengthen him in his witness to the faith. In our own lives, our final profession endows us with renewed grace for our ministry of evangelization.

The living bond between prophet and Spirit explains the spiritual efficacy of our teaching. If the bond is sundered, that teaching is reduced to human stature; it may sound impressive and scholarly but it is void of supernatural content. In the physical world, a voice is inaudible without sound waves to carry it to the listener; a vacuum is always soundless. In the spiritual world, God's message is similarly inaudible without the intervention of the Spirit. The word of Truth spoken by the Father in the breath of the Holy Spirit will lead man to the Father by the same intermediary. He is the spiritual reality suggested by the sound wave.

It is imperative, then, for us Brothers to maintain vital contacts with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit and the Word are indissolubly united. Without the former, the latter can bear no fruit. Without the latter, the former can bear no message: "The Spirit", said Jesus, "will not be speaking as from himself. All he tells you will be taken from what is mine" (Jn 16: 13-14). "He will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said"(Jn 14:26). As at

entecost, he will enable us to proclaim the Good News in words our students can understand. At Pentecost, men from every nation under heaven were assembled in Jerusalem and they were amazed and astonished to hear the Galileans speaking to each of them in his own native language (Ac 2: 7-8). We must be confident that the Spirit, who is at work in us and in our students, will assure similar grace so that the same message given to a class of thirty will meet the special needs of each individually. The Spirit who inspires us adapts the word to personal circumstances.

St. John goes so far as to tell his followers: "You do not need anyone to teach you; the anointing he gave teaches you everything" (I Jn 2:27); it is an assertion which Augustine develops: "John, my beloved, is speaking of an unfathomable mystery. My words may strike your ears but the real Teacher is within you. We can all draw your attention to words, but without that interior light to guide you, our words are sounding brass and tinkling cymbals . . . You all hear what I am saying, but those who have not received the unction of the Holy Spirit, and are deaf to the interior promptings, will leave this place no wiser."

Without God, we can never make God known. Whenever we speak of him, it is he who precedes, accompanies and empowers us, the more convincingly as we pray for his grace and remain docile to his Spirit. Otherwise, we should simply be speaking in the wilderness. The disproportion between all that could ever be said and the conversion of a single soul is evident. Only the Spirit converts "hearts of stone into natural hearts" and only the word spoken in the Spirit has the power to move and convert. That is a basic truth we can never afford to ignore.

like the Word and the Spirit, so the Spirit and the Church are

Conference in Paris, Jan. 16, 1983). "We must be most careful to remember that the interpretation of scriptural prophecy is never a matter for the individual" writes Peter (2 Pi:20), for the scriptures can be most profitably seen only in the tradition and under the authority of their divinely appointed custodian, the Church.

## IN FAITH

The proclamation of God's word is impossible without faith. Only by entering the mystery himself can the prophet open the door for others. Ailing belief, whether in theory or practice, is likely to keep it shut.

The ever recurring temptation is to look upon God's message as though it were our own, and to believe that all success depended on our teaching skills and the use of a good programme. In which case, of course, it resembles any other "subject". It loses its real identity and becomes "a gong booming or a cymbal clashing" (I Co 13:1). St. Paul discovered this at Athens and learned from his mistake: "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to spread the Good News, and not to preach that in terms of philosophy in which the crucifixion of Christ cannot be expressed" (I Co 1:17).

Modern technology offers many useful tools for promoting the Good News, but unless that News is kept intact and vital, the tools serve no real purpose. Much religious teaching is sterile and much spiritual writing insipid because they have been cut off from their source. The word has been reduced to a dead letter. How, then, can it give life? The corpse has to be reanimated and the Spirit alone has the power.

Most of us have seen this exemplified in our own lives when some misunderstanding or conflict has led us back to what really matters: the word of God, in its stark simplicity and clarity, spoken and received in the shadow of the Holy Spirit.

No matter how conscientious and fervent we are in our work of evangelization, we have to expect some shadow of the trials which Jesus and his apostles experienced in seeing the disbelief of those they tried to help. It is hard to measure the patience of God and the supreme respect he shows for human freedom. Our instinct is to put our finger on quick returns, just as Thomas needed to touch the Master's wounds . . . That is why the Holy Father tells us that the natural desire for speedy results makes us forget that the Word works slowly and silently in the hearts of the faithful. The sudden irruption of grace in the life of a man or woman may lead indeed to radical conversion. But the irruption may be the climax to a long series of preparatory graces which the Spirit usually extends and which it is our duty to accept and honour. Faith needs time. (cf *La Documentation catholique*, Jan. 16, 1983; pp. 72-73).

★ ★ ★ ★

The triple conviction that the Word of God must be proclaimed in the Spirit, with the Church, and in faith goes hand in hand with the awareness that two interior dispositions, ostensibly contradictory but in fact complementary, are de rigueur.

## WITH HUMILITY

The first disposition is humility. To be chosen as teachers of the word of God is to be filled with wonder and surprise, a mystery of God's love leaving us chastened but full of praise and self-forgetfulness. The messenger is not the message, but the mere

finds himself not so much depersonalized as super-personalized. He appropriates a message which becomes enfleshed in him and takes possession of his mind, heart and lips. In this way, emptied of himself, he is at once the bearer of the word and the bearer of Christ.

Many of the prophets were keenly aware of their own insignificance in face of the mission expected of them. "Who am I" asked Moses "to go to Pharaoh? I am a slow speaker and not able to speak well" (Ex 3:11). "What a wretched state I am in!" lamented Isaiah, "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips" (Is 6:4), while Jeremiah argued: "Lord Yahweh, look, I do not know how to speak: I am a child!" (Jf 1:7). Every prophet, in fact, takes stock of his resources and knows he is not up to his mission. Like John the Baptist he would gladly fade from the picture; like Paul he is "in great fear and trembling" but conscious "of the power of the Spirit" (1 Co 2:4). What always counts is not the prophet but the message he carries.

History shows that God chooses his messengers from the poor and simple. The Curé of Ars and St. Bernadette are striking illustrations; but, above all, we have the Blessed Virgin, a young girl of fifteen or sixteen, chosen to grace a fallen world with the Word of Life himself!

In every case, the prophet's reaction is complete self-effacement vis-a-vis the message he is asked to deliver. As steward of the word, he gives it his homage and dedicates himself, heart and soul, to its service. He receives and transmits exactly what is offered



without twisting it to his own taste or adjusting it to fit his personal outlook. True to the long tradition of the Church, he voids any selective process or compromise injurious to its unity. When he meets with success, he claims no credit; when he seems to fail, he seeks no refuge in self-pity.

## WITH BOLDNESS

The second disposition is boldness. Though aware of his inadequacy, the Brother recognizes God's call and relies on God's help: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (Ac 1:8). Disposing of all hesitation and objections, God gives his assurance: "Do not be afraid, I shall be with you". Not merely on this or that occasion but, as Jesus told his apostles, everywhere and always "even to the end of time".

Left to myself, I should have every reason to doubt. But God has promised his Spirit, and it is he who enables and inspires me to preach the Word of Truth. Were it only my word, I should have every reason to hesitate. What arrogance to think of mine as the word of life! But it is not my word: it is the promise of eternal life through man's Redeemer. My own inadequacy, weaknesses and failings cannot reduce the persuasive power of that reality.

Why, then, should I ever be afraid to proclaim the Good News? Why dwell on my deficiencies? Why take refuge in such hollow pretexts as: "I'm not capable; I've had no preparation; I don't know what to say; the Bible has no appeal for modern students; they're not up to it . . ." Why should I refrain because I seem to have no success, because my students seem indifferent or even faintly bored? With a secular discipline, I should soon find ways to

ought of himself "as one born out of time". But they all received the same answer as the apostle: "Do not be afraid to speak out, nor allow yourself to be silenced. I am with you. I have many people on my side" (Ac 18:9).

It belongs to each one of us to go up to the Cenacle and pray for the promised strength! It is no mere coincidence that the word "bold" or "fearless" never appears in the gospels yet recurs twelve times in Acts after the feast of Pentecost. By the power of the Spirit, "the tongue of stammerers will speak clearly" (Is 32:4), and by the same power the craven apostles, hiding behind the walls of the Cenacle, will fling open its doors and boldly preach the message which will take them to every corner of the world. "One of the things for which we are absolutely indebted to Our Blessed Lord is utter fearlessness. Our very frailty is a source of strength since Jesus is the Master of the impossible" (Charles de Foucauld).

If I am faithful to the example of Jesus, I am bound to encounter resistance and suffering since the word is not always designed for pleasure. Jeremiah found that "the word of Yahweh has meant for me insult, derision all day long" (Jr 20:8). And in his own mission, Jesus met with much more than consolation. From the end of the third chapter in Mark, there is an obvious loss of prestige, with growing opposition to whatever he had to say. Even in this chapter, Mark speaks of conspiracy; it begins with the Pharisees, spreads to the people and finally involves everybody. In the parable of the vineyard, Jesus referred to himself as "the stone rejected by the builders" (Mk 2:10). He knew that he was heading for a downfall. His enemies grew bolder in their denunciation till

late asked what evil he had done and the reply was "Crucify him, crucify him!" (cf Cardinal Martini, *Etre avec Jésus*, pp. 58-59).

The Apostles shared this experience with Jesus, and after his death met the same kind of fate. But Peter and John, under edict of silence by the Sanhedrin, protested: "We cannot promise to stop proclaiming what we have seen and heard" (Ac 4:20). Paul did the same thing: "Woe to me if I cease to preach the gospel!" From prison, he wrote to the Ephesians: "Pray for me to be given an opportunity to open my mouth and speak without fear and give out the mystery of the gospel of which I am an ambassador in chains; pray that in proclaiming it I may speak out boldly as I ought to" (Eph 6: 19-20). From his first letter we learn what trials he had to undergo on his missionary journeys: "We had, as you know, been given rough treatment and been grossly insulted at Philippi, and it was our God who gave us the courage to proclaim his Good News to you in the face of great opposition" (I Th 2:2). "It was God who decided we were fit to be entrusted with the Good News and when we are speaking, we are not trying to please men but God . . . never at any time have our speeches been simply flattery or a cover for trying to get money, nor have we ever looked for any special honour from men" (I Th 2:4-7). "Taught by the word and example of Christ, the apostles followed the same way . . . to convert men to faith in Christ as Lord — not, however, by the use of coercion or by devices unworthy of the gospel, but by the power, above all, of the Word of God" (*Dignitatis Humanae*: 11).

ought to follow their example. If my teaching is inspired by the Holy Spirit, it will find in the hearts of others the same Spirit pressuring them to listen and obey. The meaning may be stifled for a while, but it will flame out when, perhaps, we least expect it. In

we must be nighly competent as well as bold. How regrettable if we could not meet their questions, doubts and aspirations! What guidance would they have in the spiritual life to which God calls them? But what a privilege if it could be said of us as of Jesus: "Zeal for your house will devour me!" (Jn 2:17). Though the help we offer can never be fool-proof, please God, it will never be so flimsy as to wilt under the first doubts or onslaught.

Especially with the young, we have to be bold and daring. So many of them are puzzled, looking for a meaning to their life. They are thirsting for something they cannot find; their situation is similar to the one described by Amos: "See what days are coming — it is the Lord Yahweh who speaks — days when I will bring famine on the country, a famine not of bread, a drought not of water, but of hearing the word of Yahweh" (Am 8: 11-12). It is our privilege to appease that hunger and quench that thirst.

## WITH JOY

The prophet needs many gifts but the master gift is joy: the joy of being selected to proclaim the happiness of the beatitudes. These beatitudes cannot be dispensed in gloom or detachment; they call for life and enthusiasm, the zeal of a soul possessed by God. When Jesus heard of the marvels wrought by his disciples, "he was filled with joy by the Holy Spirit and said 'I bless you, Father' " (Lk 10:21). With him and all his followers, we too should exult: "How beautiful are the feet of one who brings good news!" (Is 52:7), the Good News of salvation, the news that spreads joy so that "the people were carried away by his teaching" (Mk 11:18).

The ardent exhortation of Paul VI is especially suited to this context: "Let us maintain, therefore, our fervour of spirit. Let us reserve the sweet and heartfelt joy of evangelizing, even when we have to sow in tears. We must be possessed by the same eagerness of spirit that inspired John the Baptist, Peter and Paul, the other apostles and all the multitude of admirable evangelizers down through the ages — a spirit which neither men nor circumstances can ever extinguish. May it be a great source of joy to us who have dedicated our lives to the task. And may the world of our time which is searching, now in anguish and now in hope, receive the gospel not from evangelizers who are dejected or dispirited, not from those who are impatient or anxious; let them hear it from ministers of the gospel whose lives are aglow with fervour, from those who having received the joy of Christ into their own hearts, are ready to risk their lives so that the kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established throughout the world". (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 80).

## IN ACCORD WITH ESTABLISHED PRACTICE.

The proclamation of the Word in the Spirit, with the Church, in faith, and with hope and boldness takes three different forms: kerygma, catechesis and witness.

Kerygma is the heralding of God's mystery reduced to its essentials in the Easter mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, and it aims at the conversion of the listeners to Christ.

Catechesis, seen here under a single aspect, is the systematic development of the mystery of our faith. It analyses and amplifies the content of the kerygma and aims at a thorough understanding

exhorts and all witness has a voice. Valid proclamation, in fact, comprises the three modes as the following pages indicate.

### C. WHERE AND WHEN?

The reply to the question seems obvious: everywhere and always. Nothing can stop a blazing fire! "Proclaim the word in season and out of season" writes Paul, not only because it is our vocation but also because it is the most pressing need of our time; the world and especially man in the world lose all meaning once they are seen independently of God.

While all this is true, there are still what we may call "special occasions".

### DAILY LIFE AND CASUAL MEETINGS.

The first, most frequent and perhaps most neglected of these occasions are the casual contacts of everyday life: a word or so exchanged with someone in a corridor, free wheeling discussion at table or in the common room, a chat on the way to school, a conversation we happen to strike up on an outing or holiday.

For many Christians, these are the only opportunities they have; for ourselves, they offer outlets for simple, unobtrusive apostolate with our colleagues and students, whether in the classroom or on the playing fields, whenever we sense the need.

A simple remark, bearing the imprint of the gospel, can do untold good. It may touch someone's heart without our knowing it,

encing a hidden ulcer or opening up new vistas. A timely word is like a cleansing sword, a soothing balm, a pillar of light, a refreshing breeze, the hidden seed destined for later growth.

How often did Jesus make use of such opportunities! He spoke with Nicodemus by night, chatted with the woman he happened to meet at the well, with Martha and Mary in their home. He surprised the guests in the Pharisee's house with "Simon, I have something to say to you . . ." (Lk 7:40), yet took people aside to exchange a private word: "Woman, what has all this to do with you and me?" (Jn 2:4), "Do not be afraid; only have faith" (Mk 5:36). Little courtesies, kindly rebukes, all capable of a fruitful harvest . . .

The first Christians spread the Good News by going out and preaching at one town or another as providence so disposed (cf Ac 13:26-40; 18:24-28). Perhaps our own lives owe much to later Christians responding to a similar impulse? A thoughtful word has often helped people to change their ways, to adjust their point of view, to look at life in a new way, to shoulder their crosses bravely. Weighed down with despair, they may have been cheered by a ray of hope; downhearted and depressed, they may have discovered the encouragement they needed.

They were the beneficiaries. Who was the benefactor? Some simple, uneducated bystander perhaps, a person seemingly incapable of giving advice. So the prayer of Christ is brought home to them once more: "I bless you, Father, for hiding these things from the learned and clever and revealing them to mere children" (Mt 11:25).

...many the same readiness opportunities for this kind of free exchange where Brothers can share the word of God according "as the Spirit gives them the gift of speech" (Ac 2:4) There is no question here of scholarship, rivalry or emulation but of humility, frankness and simplicity of heart. Wherever it is practised, the symptoms speak for themselves!

## THE DAILY EXHORTATION

The daily Christian exhortation, which used to begin the teaching day, has in many places fallen out of favour. Conditions, of course, have changed and most teachers spend their days passing from one class to another. But students have changed as well. They seem more receptive to this brief kind of religious reflection than to any other. We should be well-advised, then, to revitalize one of our oldest traditions.

This tradition enjoys distinct advantages. Being brief, it is unlikely to tire our students, and for the flighty, undisciplined and unresponsive, it may prove the best of all possible instruments.

Secondly, it can easily relate to specific events and contemporary situations. While formal catechesis is sequential, each lesson following a plan over a pre-determined stretch of time, the exhortation allows for greater flexibility and can easily respond to the patterns of current life with its births and deaths, triumphs and disasters, local or universal feasts, television programmes and the latest news. The gospels shed light on all these facets of human concern.



hardly, the daily exhortation can be tailored to fit students of all dimensions! The generous can find the stimulus they need, the timid something they can digest without adverse effects, the lukewarm a spur to action, and everyone a chance for self-examination.

There is a kerygmatic flavour to the exhortation. It gets to the heart of the matter without pre-ambles; it proposes energetic reaction to dangerous habits of thought and behaviour, and stimulates unwavering loyalty to Christ. The key note may be stern and challenging, or light and encouraging, but it is sure to strike the hearts of our students as long as we remain close to the Holy Spirit. It is he who achieves his ends when the time is ripe.

‘He spoke the word to them so far as they were capable of understanding it’ (Mk 4:33). As we give the daily exhortation, we can once again recall the example of Christ; like his parables, a clear simple message arouses interest, opens new vistas and points in a direction many will be eager to follow.

In view of this, the daily exhortation should be reinstated. It is ironical that it fell out of use precisely at the time it could be most advantageous and reap the best rewards. Used with conviction and competence, it inevitably shapes the minds and attitudes of our students; it is a daily reminder of their gifts and responsibilities.

The “bedtime talk” used in our boarding schools shares the same purpose. For Dom Bosco, this was the most effective way to help the young. If it is well prepared and given in a congenial atmosphere, it brings peace and calm and “protects us as we

Jesus, and only about him as the crucified Christ" (I Co 2:2). Hence, all valid catechesis is Christo-centric.

What distinguishes catechesis from the foregoing is its systematic and progressive character, its critical content and didactic method. The syllabus is the whole of sacred scripture and the demands, sustained and disciplined study. Faith is no longer a plea but intellectual inquiry seeking to understand and master the truths that nourish the human mind and appease its yearnings.

Catechesis is the extension of the kerygma. It is a process of sound but slow formation. With a weekly allotment of at least two hours, the same theme may extend over several months. Only in this way can the student derive lasting formative and intellectual value with repercussions on his life and outlook. Sadly, however, religious education claims only two sessions a week in nearly all our schools with the corresponding danger of superficiality. The heaviest showers have a hard time penetrating soil which is left to harden; the water runs off and evaporates quickly . . .

In a secularized society, catechesis becomes more difficult and its outcome hard to measure. At the same time, the Good News gains a kind of shock value. It delivers a message guaranteed to surprise people accustomed to a different idiom: "Never has man spoken like this man", declared the soldiers sent to arrest the Messiah, and many of our contemporaries would share their sentiment.

Jesus was not only a prophet but also a teacher (Mt 23:10; Jn 3:2). Thus, he had frequent recourse to catechesis. In addition to revealing his experience, he also taught a message. Thus,

teaching the crowd or multitudes" becomes almost a gospel refrain. How often he turned to the people and taught them vividly about God's plan of salvation. "From every town," writes Mark, "they all hurried on foot . . . and as he stepped ashore he saw a large crowd; and he took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd and he set himself to teach them at some length" (Mk 6:33-34). He never hesitated to return to the same truth to reinforce what had not been clearly understood. We have only to recall his eucharistic teaching after the miracle of the loaves (Jn 6), his explanation of Light during the feast of tabernacles (Jn 7:9), and more strikingly, his Sermon on the Mount and his lengthy discourse in the Upper Room. Before this, he had often taken his apostles aside to teach them the meaning of his parables; later on, he spent several hours with the disciples of Emmaus: "Starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself" (Lk 24:27), and "he then opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Lk 24:45).

We can have no better model. What Jesus did for the multitudes, the disciples of Emmaus and his apostles, we must strive to do for those in our care. Helping our students to read and understand the Bible is far less daunting than many believe; the subject is inexhaustible; once the appetite is whetted, scripture holds food for a life-time.

That food should be offered to everyone, since the word of God makes no exceptions. It is addressed to the child as well as the grown-up, to the layman as well as the scholar, and each according to his capacity will find the sustenance he needs. That is

are endowed with their own elixir. A passage charged with revulsion in my own eyes may be full of balm for another burdened with sorrow and needing serenity; the Word of God comes to meet his needs. "The gift of teaching" (I Co 12:28) has a similar prerogative so that the words of the catechist are attuned by grace to the personal needs of each of his listeners.

Scripture and catechesis go hand in hand; the latter finds its whole justification in the word of God which is both its starting point and finishing line.

## GROUP STUDY AND GOSPEL MISSION

From time to time, Jesus took his disciples aside to rest and pray. He gave them, as we might say, a couple of days off. He invited them to celebrate a special liturgical feast together or to sit down for a meal. These were the times when he could show more than usual love and concern; he could speak to them intimately of the Blessed Trinity so they might contemplate it on their own and take part in the life of God. He asked them to commit themselves to a sturdier faith and to follow him more closely: "And you, will you also go away?" "And who do you say that I am?" . . . Jesus, the spiritual leader in action!

The Book of Acts tells of Paul's reaction at Ephesus: "As soon as they (the incredulous) began attacking the Way in front of the others, he broke with them and took his disciples apart to hold daily discussions in the lecture room of Tyrannus. This went on for two years" (Ac 19: 9-10).

eachers of this calibre are sorely needed today. We hear almost everywhere of people searching for a guru, a reliable spiritual leader, but how often they return disappointed and disillusioned! Are we able to meet their needs? Our own confrères sometimes need guidance, parents disoriented by changes in Catholic practice are looking for explanations, students thirsting for deeper spiritual lives are yearning for personal direction. A whole realm of possibilities lies open to us. Genuine concern for others would prompt us to explore those possibilities enthusiastically and also with tact and discretion; we shall be the more effective as we learn to live in close communion with the Holy Spirit. And that, surely, is the primary objective of all religious.

Our mission of religious education and spiritual counselling is facilitated by various Catholic Action groups (Catholic Family Movement, Legion of Mary), prayer groups (Search and Cursillo programmes), scouting, charismatic renewal, Focolari, etc. . . . In addition, there are organized outings and camping holidays which make heavy but worthwhile demands on a Brother's time. In these settings, young people are generally more open and feel free to be themselves, easily responsive to a noble inspiration. Sometimes, a single remark from a Brother who really lives the gospel can affect the whole life of those in his charge.

The best opportunities undoubtedly arise during voluntary recollections, organized retreats or workshops which culminate in precise resolutions and a clear plan of action. These, in turn, can prompt inquiry into a life of total commitment to the Church in the priesthood or religious life, especially if the prevalent atmosphere is one of joy. Young people gladly take part in song, dance and other activities designed to celebrate the faith. Faith is expressed and grows stronger by the practice. Whenever



The instruments of evangelization are many and varied, to be used according to need. Students, too, are many and varied, but each is susceptible to the word of God. If that word influences the heart of the teacher, it has every chance of enkindling the generosity of his students, for zeal like love, always finds a way.

-- IV --

## FRUIT OF THE WORD

The Word of God is the life of faith. It led us to the faith, fostered and developed our belief, and at the hour of death will lift us from its complete realization in God to the glory of eternal life. To trace the action of the Word in our own life and that of others, we need to look carefully at what we mean by growth in faith.

### A. NEW LIFE.

This action started at baptism where God “made us his children by the message of the truth so that we should be a sort of first-fruits of all that he had created” (Jm 1:18). In baptism “our new birth was not from any mortal seed but from the everlasting word of the living and eternal God” (1 Pt:23). This vital seed transmits, so to speak, the noblest genes entitling us “to share the divine nature” (2 Pt:4). By revelation we were re-born for “to all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God” (Jn 1:12). At our baptism, the Father told us, as he told Jesus in the Jordan: “You are my son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you” (Lk 3:22). That is

he creative word ennobling the rest of our life.

Though most of us were baptised within a few days of our birth, we took upon ourselves, and continue to take upon ourselves the privilege of theological faith. We cling gratefully to this sacramental gift, “the word of truth”, which made us children of God. We take our place among “those in whom the Word has elicited faith and who are grafted onto the glorified humanity” (D: 5).

The one outstanding result of our spiritual affiliation is the revelation of God’s mystery as a loving Father — no less than Love itself — and of our own mystery as beloved children. Christianity, unlike so many primitive religions, excites no craven fear but rather boundless trust in the loving Creator. God did not abandon man to the sad consequences of his abused freedom but hastened to man’s rescue, sending “his Son born of a woman, born a subject of the Law to enable us to be adopted as sons” (Ga 14:4-5).

St. John insists on the literal meaning of ‘sons’, for “that is what we are” (1 Jn 3:1). “The proof that you are sons is that God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts: the Spirit that cries ‘Abba, Father’ and it is this that makes you a son; you are not a slave any more, and if God has made you a son, then he has made you heir” (Ga 4:6-7).

The mystery of salvation becomes, by the Word, a reality for all who believe. In confronting us with our sinfulness and our fall from grace, it reveals at one and the same time the power of a New Covenant to restore us. The Word saves us from despair, self-

the road we must follow but even takes us by the hand, gives us the food and support we need and brings us home. It is our viaticum. Peter tells us: "You are new born, and like babies, you should be hungry for nothing but milk, the spiritual honesty which will help you to grow up to salvation" (1 P 2:2). Like a child at the breast, the disciple thirsts for the nourishment of the Word, the means of spiritual growth and spiritual fulfillment.

The Word of God, then, holds central importance in Christian life: as "the seed", it engenders new life; as milk, it ensures healthy development. "You are my son, the beloved!" That declaration was not reserved for a solitary occasion; as long as we are faithful to our baptismal promises, it is repeated incessantly and it re-enacts the mystery of our infant baptism. Our whole life comes under its sacramental power.

For us religious, that declaration of love held special significance on the day of our profession when we took Our Lord's invitation to heart: "Come, follow me!" becoming his companions and accepting his mission to preach (cf Mk 3:14). Everyday and throughout the day, he keeps repeating the same invitation in the same words: "Come, follow me!"

That invitation re-echoes throughout the scriptures where we can read our own sacred history in a language that is never dated. Chapter by chapter, we listen to them at the daily Eucharist, in the Divine Office and at the sacrament of reconciliation. We hear them again in the silence of mental prayer, at spiritual reading from the lips of others whose words are clearly inspired by the Holy Spirit, and even in the daily events, — "those masters giver



by God” (Pascal, *Pensées*) — which call us, in all their joys and sorrows, to give ourselves without reserve to the service of the Kingdom.

Each form of the word leads us to sanctification. We all stand in need of reproof, repentance, sorrow for the love rejected, and the Word is at hand to help us. But we are also called to absolute resignation to the will and love of God: “May it be done to me according to your word”. Sometimes, we catch the word of warning, at others we hear nothing but the voice of ardent love.

The word keeps pace with every step we make, just as it did for Jesus who read it as his Father’s Will and acted “in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Co 15:3-4). His prayer during the Passion shows how he accepted his death within the context of the word he had lived throughout his life, the word which also lived in him and which, in him, was made manifest (cf Ratzinger, *The Risen Christ*, pp. 117-118). For this reason, Christ would say: “Father, I have glorified you on earth and finished the work that you gave me to do” (Jn 17:4). “It is accomplished” (Jn 19:30). “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Lk 23:46).

## FULFILLMENT

The Word inevitably brings us closer to Jesus. Little by little, his gentleness and authority, his patience and zeal, his love for God and man, his boundless humility and trust become our own. In short, like St. Paul, “we put on Jesus Christ”. The word makes us Christlike, indulgent with children, compassionate with the sinful, helpful to the sorrowful, mindful of the deaf and mute, the paralysed and leprous, all who are burdened with affliction. We want to serve as the Master served: “If I, then, the Lord and

keep my word, and my Father will love him and we shall come to him and make our home with him" (Jn 14:23). Keeping his word is the real proof of our love for Christ. When we do that, the Father loves us, and Father and Son come to dwell in our heart. Later, Jesus went on to say: "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you" (Jn 14:16). It is not the Spirit who speaks, but it is he who vivifies the word of Jesus and helps it convert our hearts.

Dom André Louf looks at the Word within our heart as the new abode of God with man. Wherever the Word resides, awaiting the stirring of the Spirit, there is God in his fullness. The unspeakable love which draws the Father and Son into our souls prompts the Holy Spirit to unfold the mystery of their love.

Such realities surpass our clouded understanding yet remain far truer than all the eye can see or the senses grasp. They are the basic and fundamental truths for which all men yearn, often subconsciously, often in spite of themselves. We who hear the voice of Truth himself have far stronger grounds for certitude and consolation: "Still happier those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Lk 11:28). The promised happiness is the reward for our fidelity, another name for faith: "Anybody who receives my commandments and keeps them will be the one who loves me; and anybody who loves me will be loved by my Father and I shall love him and show myself to him" (Jn 14:21).

That is the summary of life lived in the Spirit. It starts with baptism, matures over the years and reaches fulfillment at the

of death when we enter into full communion with God. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am" (Jn 17:24). "They have kept your word" (Jn 17:6). "Now at last they know that all you have given me comes indeed from you; for I have given them the teaching you gave to me" (Jn 17:7-8). "I have made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them and so that I may be in them (Jn 17:26).

God makes no empty promises; he always keeps his word. God, "rich in mercy", loves the world so much that he continues to give us his only Son (Jn 3:16) whose saving grace never tires, never grows old. Those who receive it have the guarantee of the kingdom. Like the Apostles on Mount Tabor, we know the stipulation: "Listen to him!" When we learn and follow the teaching of Jesus, his likeness transforms us to his likeness. Then, fallen creatures though we are, the Father will recognize his Son in us and will greet us with the words we know: "You are my son, the well-loved; enter into the joy of heaven".

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## PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

To avoid the risk of repeating suggestions already made or resolutions already in practice, it may prove helpful to consider a few practical applications intended for the community or congregation as a whole as well as for each Brother individually. We propose the five more obvious ones:

### 1. READING THE WORD

of the liturgy where the sacred texts are covered over a cycle of two or three years. In either case, we may decide on a quick perusal of the whole book to grasp its central theme, or on the reflective reading of a few excerpts for deeper understanding. Both methods are commendable; the former gives a sharper sense of context, the latter adds depth to our spiritual life.

The most important thing is the spirit in which we read. Even when cursive, our reading must not be haphazard for then it will never penetrate. Nor should it become a cerebral exercise for its objective is contemplation not analysis. Other times are reserved for study.

Speaking of the Gospels, our Founder reminded us not to let a day go by without reading a few passages of the sacred text; that is the legacy he left us, the résumé of all his counsel and the history of his own life. Though we can never give it too much time and attention, most Christians pay no heed to its treasures. “It is my hope, then, that everyone has his own copy of the New Testament and that every morning he puts himself out to read, if not a whole chapter, at least a few verses” (*Sermons III*, p. 928). His advice given to pious Institutes, is equally applicable to the whole of scripture. The more so since our Rule, following the expressed wish of Vatican II (*Perfectae Caritatis*: 6) enjoins daily reading of the Bible (D: 78). “The Brother strives by assiduous reading of the scriptures, to gain the supreme advantage of knowing Jesus Christ” (D:87). Every time we open them, we know that God has something to tell us. With what reverence, then, we should prepare to heed his word!

understand the word more fully, the commentaries of the others give invaluable help. These commentaries are not so much exegetical as homiletic in form, the outpourings of saintly and brilliant men which rise from prayerful contemplation rather than scholarly analysis. And this, perhaps, explains the spirit of peace and joy which permeates them, and the urgent attraction to the mystery of the God redeemer which the Word expresses. The readings from the office of the Hours are excellent samples of their quality; nothing prevents us from praying that office privately.

Today, other excellent books are available, some giving a bird's eye view of the whole Bible and others limiting themselves to a particular text with detailed commentary and suggestions profitable to our spiritual life. They enrich our background to whatever spiritual and theological writings we use for our sustenance or to topics of current concern. Meanwhile, remembering that the Bible is the only book where God is fully accessible, we must always give it preference and use the others as He allows.

The main obstacle confronting most Brothers, with regard to spiritual reading is lack of time, though their case can be easily overstated. We can always find time for what really interests us. We have only to compare the time spent on newspapers, magazines and television programmes with that spent on spiritual reading to reach a fair conclusion. Once we are aware of any irregularity in this respect, we can take the necessary means to mend it. School days, it is true, leave little time for adjustment, but week-ends allow more freedom and the Lord's Day provides golden opportunities. To nurture our life of union with Christ, the opportunities must be seized.

rigorous academic demands as the students are given a historical-critical method to consider the Bible as it is understood in scholarship. This, too, is a vital stage in their training. It is designed to give a general survey of Scripture and to adumbrate some of the major problems the texts give rise to. Detailed textual study of selected books determined by the judgment and competence of the relevant teachers, will be the next priority. Solid, historical-critical examination, with the most up-to-date references, of at least one text — e.g. a synoptic gospel, the psalm or a letter of Paul — is imperative. This, no doubt, calls for hard effort and diligent application; but there is no profitable alternative. In this discipline, more than any other, half-knowledge and fantasy are intolerable. A Brother needs thorough awareness of the faith he is asked to champion and to propagate (D:87). In view of rising academic standards almost everywhere, the scholastics need the best available preparation to meet their future challenge. This demands assiduity on their part and unstinted devotedness on the part of their teachers.

Biblical study in fact, should be a lifelong pursuit. It is not limited to strict exegesis but takes account of the geography of the Holy Lands, of the civilizations they witnessed, of the way the Biblical canons were formed . . . Invaluable background for the proper reception of the Word! and background we assimilate to become more worthy prophets of the Word. God, after all, never intervenes in support of sloth. He gave us an intellect and the tools required for a better understanding of his message. To use them means to honour his Revelation (cf. Oury, p. 139).

evotional reading and Biblical study are complementary. The first, to preserve its character, must not become a study session on the one hand, or light recreational reading on the other. Void of all doctrinal and theological content, or obsessed with peripheral and often irrelevant issues, it has minimal value. Nor must it adopt a fundamentalist approach after the manner of various non-informists . . . *Lectio divina et studia*: they have to be differentiated but not to the point of divorce between theology and spirituality. Serious study is conducive to a profoundly spiritual life; it can be moulded to serve and improve our prayer. Devotional reading is less conceptual; the two are complementary but not exclusive (cf Oury, pp. 146-7).

## PRAYING THE WORD

Brother's prayer is above all else "loving attention to the Word" (D:80). In this way, he imitates Our Lord who prayed in the words of scripture (cf Ps 21:31; 6:68; Jn 19:28-30), and our Blessed Lady whose Magnificat is a tissue of biblical phrases. He continues the traditions of Zachariah, Simeon and all the saintly Jews who prayed the psalms and canticles in the revealed word of God. At Lauds and Vespers, "the Brothers unite their prayer to that of God's people for the joys, hopes and distress of mankind" (D:78). The psalter, more than any other book, recapitulates for him every variety of human experience; in praying its psalms we draw close to God and become one with God's people so that our voice, however feeble, mingles in a universal chorus of praise and in joint supplication for a suffering world.

Depression and aridity are part of our common lot. We need not be surprised, then, when it comes to mental prayer at the start or end

prophecy, a sentence or two from the Gospel or the letters or from any of which can incite us to adoration, praise, thanksgiving and petition, all those sentiments expressed in the Paternoster, the model of all prayer. Those words, fervently taken to heart, will reverberate throughout the day, enabling us “to pray continually and never lose heart” (Lk 18:1).

If, for example, we ponder the statement of Jesus: “I love the Father and I am doing exactly what the Father told me” (Jn 14:31), Jesus will gradually let us realize the depth of the Father’s love, will make us the object of that love and give us the joyful assurance of a beloved child. With time, we shall perceive that it is not we who say the word, but Jesus saying it in us and offering it through us, to the Father; so that all we do becomes an act of love in the Holy Spirit. It is then, and only then, that we know the Word has indeed been re-embodied in our own lives. God’s covenant, seeded in our hearts, has struck roots, burgeoned into life and borne fruit in prayer — our song of love —, and in our whole existence — unending prayer . . .

Later comes a moment when the Spirit subsumes all prayer in a single word: the name above all names, the name of him who is the living Word of the Father: Jesus. The Spirit will implant the name in our hearts, as Jesus will implant what was the heart and soul of his own life, the name “Abba!” — “Father!” — (cf. Lemaitre, *Tychique*: 21). We will come to see it as the gift of all gifts brought by the Word made flesh, and pray we may use it wisely as he did.



e daily rosary affords another means of dwelling on God's message, and in several different ways:

The first part of the "Ave", for example, comes directly from the scriptures. It comprises the angel's annunciation (Lk 1:28) and Elizabeth's words of welcome and blessing (Lk 1:42); words we repeat over and over again, while fixing our mind and heart on a moment which has special appeal: "Full of grace", "the happiest of women", "the mother of the Messiah" . . . One day, it will be the title that attracts us, another day another.

With Mary, we contemplate the whole mystery of salvation as it unfolds in the earthly life of her Son and Saviour, and like her, we inevitably draw closer to the living Word. Sometimes it is profitable to use a short scriptural introduction to the mystery we contemplate, at other times we should feel free to depart from the traditional sequence and relive the flight into Egypt or share the wedding feast at Cana, or any episode where Mary plays a striking role.

The christological character of the rosary escapes nobody, and is especially evident in Elizabeth's words of praise: "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus" and in the "Gloria" which concludes each mystery.

## SHARING THE WORD

The *Rule of Life* proposes that "Together, the Brothers read the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel" (D. . Their communal pursuit ensures the light of truth for "My word is truth", said Jesus, "and the truth shall set you free". Brothers of the same community follow the way of God's presence

## **1. Listening**

- After public reading of a psalm or gospel extract, each Brother in turn repeats or paraphrases one verse or another without an commentary.
- The reading demands close and reverent attention since it is community rendez-vous with the Word.
- The contribution of each Brother helps the whole group to delve deeper into the riches of the text under consideration.
- The commitment of each participant makes it easier for the community to keep the Word in their hearts.

## **2. Sharing**

- A short liturgical text or an episode from the gospels, chosen for its wealth of implication, is read aloud in public.
- A period of silent contemplation follows when each Brother finds a particular verse in which he recognizes a clear call from God.
- Each Brother then tells the others what he derives spontaneously from the spoken word whether by way of interpretation, enlightenment, self-amendment or special application.

This stage may either complete the meeting or lead to a second reading of the original passage with further reflection and exchange of reactions.

Alternatively, it may give occasion for each participant to acknowledge the new insights or sources of help he found in the observations of others.

The session may conclude with a prayer and a communal resolution based on God's will as manifested in the convergence of different view points.

Fraternal exchange of this kind makes it easier to recognize Christ in our neighbour and to be more aware of his love and what he calls for.

### **Vitalizing**

The community agrees on a scriptural passage (e.g. one suggested by the previous exercise or by the liturgy of the week).

The members resolve to live in the spirit of that passage for a fixed length of time (e.g. one week, a fortnight, a month).

They reassemble at the end of that time to share the outcome of their resolve: occasions or events where they were able to put it to practice, circumstances where it brought the grace of clarification, fortitude, change of heart, generous service, whether for themselves or for others.

They perceive how the enactment of God's word promotes solidarity and fosters harmony and zeal in their community

passages which the Brothers read and share; it is he who makes their meaning clear for those assembled in his name; and it is he who brings the words to life for the well-being and improvement of the community.

(Institute of the Brothers of St. Gabriel, *Letter from the General Council*, Rome, June 2, 1977, pp. 25-26).

## E. WITNESSING TO THE WORD

True witness comprises two elements; proclaiming the word and living it. The importance of the first is immediately obvious since our schools “have been founded specifically to make Jesus Christ better known and loved”.

We exercise this part of our ministry in the work of spiritual and apostolic formation where we often meet young people with outstanding potential. We should not hesitate to feed them on the word of God; we will be often surprised to see how earnestly they want it, and what meaning it has for their daily lives. In their case as in our own, the results may exceed all expectations.

It is especially as catechists, however, that we realize our mission; it is in reading, reflecting, studying and praying that we find the best preparation: “The Brother finds time to study the teaching of the faith . . . which enables him to improve his presentation of the Christian message” (D:87). In addition to academic preparation however, there is the all important matter of enlightened pedagogy which “to be fruitful should correspond to the deep

sonal convictions of the teacher and be reflected in his lifestyle” (115). Without vibrant faith and the help of the Holy Spirit, ecchesis will never amount to much. Before every lesson we ould seek his guidance, in prayer, both for ourselves and our dents. Better still, if circumstances allow us to prepare by a visit he Blessed Sacrament, to ask Our Lord “to put his word upon lips” and to send his Spirit into the hearts of those we help. As as possible, our lessons will keep close to the message of the ptures, encouraging the students to familiarize themselves h the Bible, at least with the New Testament and especially the pels. Promoting enthusiasm for the Word of God is the best of possible mementos.

e need to pray insistently for the charism of teaching whose ient features, according to St. Paul, are the interpretation of the ptures and the gift of convincing exhortation (cf. Rm 12:7; I 14:26). Most Brothers enjoy teaching and do it well; their rses often become a treat rather than an imposition for their sses. In religious education, however, natural flair is ufficient. The transforming grace of the spirit is imperative. We ve all had experience of this in passing from a secular discipline e geography or mathematics to teaching the inspired word of od. Our aim now goes beyond the purely academic; it is to reach d influence the hearts of the young. The primary objective is t to argue a good case or present a clear demonstration but to roduce a living Person. For our students, it is no longer a estion of grasping a notion but of committing themselves to at Person. Our teaching prowess, then, needs conversion to a al charism, and such conversion is reserved to the Holy Spirit. e will empower us not only to enlighten the minds but also to ove the hearts and wills of the young so that their outlook and all

is resident in this Word itself a divine power able to destroy all the forces arrayed against God and to bring men to faith in Christ and to his service" (*Dignitatis Humanae*: 11).

To live by the Word, not nominally but in fact, means that our example in community, the classroom and the various avocations that stud our days will be an inspiration for those who believe and a helpful challenge for those who do not. How many, without even saying it, will be indebted to our witness especially in matters which admit of no compromise! St. John Chrysostom reminds the faithful that a practising christian gave such witness, wielded such influence whether he was conscious of it or not. He could do more to extinguish the light of his example than the sun could suppress its heat or quench its rays . . . what might he have told a religious educator?

## CONCLUSION

"That day . . . Jesus got into a boat and sat there. The people stood on the beach and he told them many things" (Mt 13:1-9). That day is today; the barque is the Church; and Jesus speaks to us through her:

"Brothers, for the past several days, I have been scattering the seed which 'is the word of God' (Lk 8:11). Just as in the daily Eucharist and your morning and evening prayer, so in the pages of this circular, the seed has been rich and abundant. It will never be otherwise, whether my word reaches you through the mouths of my servants or through the patterns of your daily life.

ere are some who listen half-heartedly to what I have to say. No sooner do they hear the word than Satan snatches it from their heart. That has been the story from the very beginning: 'No, you will not die! God knows in fact . . .' He even put me to the test: 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones . . . throw yourself down . . . for scripture says . . .' (Mt 4:6). He never runs short of a plausible argument.

Others find interest and joy in my teaching. Like some of their own students in class, they agree with what I tell them and nod their heads in approval. But, in fact, they are superficial. Their minds are elsewhere so my message has little chance of sinking in deeply. It does not come 'to dwell' in their hearts; it is no sooner heard than forgotten; no sooner exposed to a distracting breeze than off in flight. It has no time to sink deep roots. My word carries no more weight than their own.

Some others listen to my word as they listen to anything that comes their way. Their heart, like an exposed thicket, is a home for every variety of seed, good or bad. Their ears, alert to every whisper, make little distinction between the Good News and the daily news on the media. Often, in fact, they spend more time on the sports columns than on the scriptures; what they retain from the latter is probably lost in the noise and welter of work. With all their itching for 'the latest', for worthless bagatelles and distracting activities, I want to tell them what I told Martha: "Brother, you worry and fret about so many things and yet few are needed, indeed only one" (Lk 10:41-42).

Many, perhaps the majority, take careful heed of my teaching. They are eager for the seed and have prepared the ground to

As for the seed you sow among your students and confrères, be calmly assured of its vitality and potential. Set about your task dutifully and competently, and leave the rest to God. 'This is what the kingdom of God is like: A man throws seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how he does not know. Of its own accord the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear' (Mk 4:36).

Brothers, all I ask you is to sow the seed; the germination and growth are outside your domain. Sow to the best of your ability, then go in peace.

Become men of God's Word whose hearts burn within them as they explain the scriptures (cf Lk 24:32); men who not only listen, but also live by my word and strive to pass it on to people everywhere (cf John Paul II, *Conference for Religious*, Chicago, Oct. 1979).

Turn to my mother who 'treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart' (Lk 2:19). Listen to the secret she discovered over her long years of close intimacy with me, her son, the Word incarnate. It was the secret she passed on to the servants at Cana of Galilee; she now gives it to you so you may respond as they did: 'do whatever he tells you' (Jn 2:5). The stone water jars will then see their contents turned to the best wine, to the advantage of all you are called to serve".

Brother Bernard Gaudeul, FIC  
Superior General.

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