



God's Word: Living Hope and Lasting Peace

Inaugural Address for the Fourth Asia-Oceania Biblical Congress

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During the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation, held in Lebanon in September 2002, Asian delegates expressed a desire to have another Asian-Oceanian gathering, more than ten years after the Third Asian Workshop for the Biblical Apostolate in Pattaya, Thailand. The fourth regional workshop was held in February 2005 in Tagaytay City, Philippines. This Asia-Oceania Biblical congress was organized on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Dei Verbum and was held under the auspices of the Catholic Biblical Federation, together with the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences' (FABC) Office of Peace and Harmony. More than 180 biblical pastoral ministers from all over Asia-Oceania – laywomen and men, bishops, priests and sisters – participated in this meeting.

The manifold Word: The call to life

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," St. John announced (John 1:1). 'Word' means communication. John tells us that communication is at the heart of the divine reality. God not only creates but also communicates from the beginning. Or rather, creation itself is the beginning of a continuous communication. Later Christian meditation fathomed the depth of John's Gospel and discovered that this Divine Word is not only the Word that creates and speaks to the universe, but is what makes the Father be eternally Father as he expresses himself in the Word and begets the Son – since a Divine Word always realizes what It says. God would not exist except in Self-communication. This is the very heart of the Christian experience of God. Hence we conclude that being itself is communication. *Omne ens est verum, omne ens est bonum*, said our ancestors.

God's Word is not merely a carrier of information. God's communication is a self-communication. Its content is necessarily God's self, even when the Word speaks

about the world and the humans in it. The unexpressed mystery of love, the Father, communicates the divine self to the Son and through Him, by the power of the Spirit, to the whole world. The world is the Word of God, as St. Bonaventure, and many other mystics have perceived. It is not only in the messages of the prophets and the apostles that the voice of God resounds (recall *Dei Verbum* 21), but also in the universe that has issued from the heart of God, and in all its history. *Liber naturae, liber scripturae, liber vitae ...*

The Word is not only the divine self-communication, but also a divine call. It is a summons, first to existence and then to growth. By his Word all things were created: "All things came into being through Him, and without Him nothing came into being." (John 1:3) *Asato ma sad gamaya*, we pray in India, a very ancient prayer dating from the times of the early prophets of Israel. "Lead me from non-being to being." This has been the effect of the Divine Word in our lives. We owe our existence to It; not only we, but the whole universe.

From darkness to light

Existence is a call to growth. "In Him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (John 1:4). This juxtaposition of life and light may surprise us. We may tend to think that the two belong to different realms: Life is reality that grows, light belongs to the world of knowledge, not of reality. St. John correlates them. The life was light. We can equally say that the light was life. The Word grows into life. This is the second invocation in Upanishadic prayer quoted above: "Lead me from darkness to the light" – *tamaso ma jyotir gamaya*. Light accompanies us on our pilgrimage; it shines in our darkness.

There are innumerable lights lit by the Word throughout history, as many as the stars sprinkled in the immensity of space. Theologically we may call them divine revelation. The *liber scripturae* of St. Bonaventure – perhaps we could correctly say, *libri scripturarum*. The Word is communicated to simple people, to cultures, to individuals, to religions: has not St. Thomas said somewhere that "whatever is good (and therefore whatever is true, too) has come from the Holy Spirit"? The Divine Word puts on a human garb and speaks Chinese and Vietnamese, Tagalu and Telugu, Arabic, Urdu and Tullu,



Tamil and Pali, Magadhi and Ardhamagadhi ... Seeking wholeness of life, our ancestors collected these lights and encoded some of them in scriptures and in traditional stories, made bright by that Light which enlightens every person coming into the world. It is our task to store up these words and listen to the Word they encode, to treasure these lights, colourful refractions of the divine Light, and to discern in human voices the Voice of the Maker calling us to growth, to a new existence, to hope and to peace.

We Christians carry in our collective memory the lights that shone in the deserts and the oases of West Asia and are preserved in the books of the First Testament. We have a special love for those words spoken in Israel about the same time as wise men like Confucius and Lao Tse, Siddhartha the Buddha and Mahavira the Jaina, and the Prophet Zarathushtra spoke their words in other Asian civilizations. Just as theirs, the expressions of the Divine Word in the east of the Mediterranean were devotionally collected and are now part of the Holy Bible. We treasure these authenticated expressions with special love because Jesus himself, his mother, the apostles and the earliest Christian communities, our ancestors in the faith, were fed by these words of life. We have experienced personally how much these lights have enlightened our paths through the deserts of life, how they have helped us to grow.



The table of the Word ...

But this does not prevent us from recognizing in other cultures, as Vatican II encourages us to do, not only wise human answers to fundamental problems of life (*Nostra Aetate* 2) but also the fruits of God's own grace which echoes within human freedom (*Gaudium et Spes* 16-17). They are lights that contain seeds of the Word that the Second Vatican Council wants us to discover with joy and reverence (*laete et reverenter*) (*Ad Gentes* 11). For "these ascetic and contemplative traditions ... of [our] ancient cultures" grow out of seeds planted by God in them, even prior to the preaching of the Gospel (see *Ad Gentes* 18). The Council is "without doubt that the Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified" (*Ad Gentes* 4). That is why it wants us to be at home (*familiares*) with our national and religious traditions.

We must ask ourselves: Are our reception sets capable of capturing the many waves of this omnipresent Word? How can they do that? How do they read the cultural expressions of humanity and discover them as expressions of the Divine Word? What or who enables us to discern in them God's Word of hope, peace and truth?

One question bothers us: Are the many and various ways in which God has spoken to our ancestors throughout history alternative communications of the Father to his dispersed children, or do they together form just one Word of love and salvation addressed to the heart of humanity?

From death to immortal life

The Upanishadic prayer quoted above has a third petition: "Lead me from death to immortality". Incidentally, when His Holiness Pope Paul VI was visiting Bombay in 1964, he made his own this whole prayer I am commenting on, precisely on the Feast of St. Francis Xavier, and declared it a universal prayer:

Rarely has this longing for God been expressed with words so full of the spirit of Advent as in the words written in your sacred books many centuries before Christ: 'From the unreal lead me to the real; from the darkness lead me to light; from death lead me to immortality.' This is a prayer that belongs also to our time. Today more than ever it should rise from every human heart. (AAS 57 [1965] 132)

Its last petition leads us beyond the mystery of creation and even beyond the revelation of God discernible in the lights lit throughout the history of humanity. It asks to be led into the mystery of divine life, immortality itself, eternal life, the *amrita*, the nectar of immortality, one of the great religious symbols found not only in Vedic literature but in many cultures. This prayer expresses the desire to enter into the profoundest Mystery, into the eschatological destiny prepared for us from the foundation of the world. As Christians, we have been blessed by the revelation of this ultimate destiny made present already now, in history, in the Word incarnate, immolated and risen. Such a blessing is also a frightening responsibility. For this Word, the foundation of our faith, the object of our hope, the power that enables us to love, is destined to all humanity: the light that enlightens all nations (Luke 2:32), the great light shining in the 'Galilee of the peoples', for all who live in the darkness of death (Mathew 4:15, 28:19).

Many words, one Word

We may perhaps ask ourselves how do we relate and coordinate the Word manifested in creation, and the Word spoken through history to enlighten every person coming into the world, and the Word revealed in the



risen Christ, the Word that became flesh and lived among us? Are these different words of God revealing different faces of the divine mystery, like the many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle offer partial views of the picture we want to compose? This is one way pluralism tries at times to come to terms with the plurality of religions. But there may be place for a different and more integrated understanding, wherein the various moments and aspects of the Divine Word are interrelated in a way that each is echoed from a different context but all form a single harmony wherein the whole history of humanity is contained. They all are one single Word by which God “reveals himself and the eternal laws of his will” (to use the terminology of Vatican I, *Dei Filius* 2). Vatican II explains it more articulately:

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Exod 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. (DV 2)

Later the same chapter tells us what is the specific role of Jesus Christ in this life-long history of the Word in the history of the world. It says:

To see Jesus is to see His Father (John 14:9). For this reason Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making Himself present and manifesting Himself: through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, but especially through His death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth. Moreover He confirmed with divine testimony what revelation proclaimed, that God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal. (DV 4)

There is a mysterious relation, one that we need to clarify, between the many stages and aspects of the Divine Word and the Word spoken in Son Jesus Christ, ‘completion’ of revelation, the Word incarnate. In him we can perceive how God is present in all creatures, how God acts in all history and illumines every human being coming into this world (John 1:9), and how God has spoken in various ways through our fathers (Heb 1:1), east and west, and what the total Word of God tells us: peace and hope, God with us as saviour, fullness of life.

The Council is echoing here the teaching of the letter to the Hebrews that says that the same God who spoke in many and various ways to the ancestors in the prophets has now, in the ultimate times, spoken to us in a Son. This Son is heir of all the words spoken through nature and history, because God has

created all history through him, who is “the splendour of God’s glory and the imprint of his existence” (Heb 1:3) in our visible world. He is therefore able to carry all things to God’s word of promise. Thus the Word spoken through the Son is not a foreigner in our midst: for the world was created through that Word, and through it is guided to completion. Being the fulfillment, the Son enables us to discover the full message in God’s creating and revealing Word. Indian grammarians have taught us that the meaning of a sentence can be fully known only when the last word has been pronounced. The final reading of the Word in creation and in all history is given to us when we hear the Word revealed in the risen Lord.

The Word in history

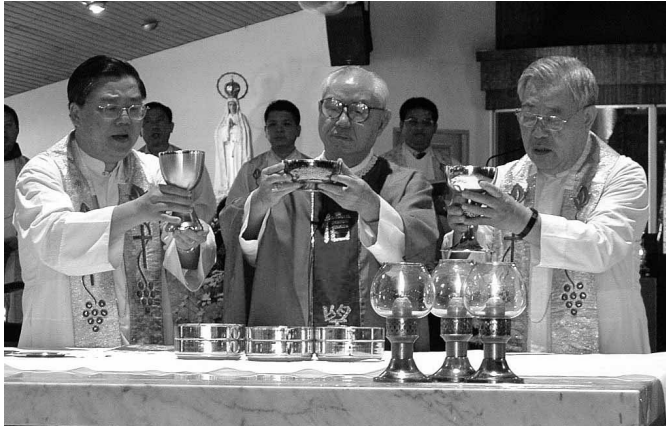
Can the Word from on high respond to the needs, desires, ideals that emerge from human hearts? Is there a dialogue between the world and God? Are we allowed to expect from God’s Word answers to our human questions, to our problems of violence, injustice, globalization, natural disasters, impotency before nature? Was the tsunami a word of God? To discover the connection between human history and needs and the revelation of God has been a concern of theologians from the middle of the nineteenth century, and has been articulated in various ways.

The traditional preachers of the Church even before the modern age, had always tried to apply the Word of God to the situations of their audiences and their times, and find in the Word they were preaching resources of hope, joy, faith, love to heal the evils of the time. Actually, the Bible itself is a reading of the Word of God in the light of the presuppositions and questions of the various contemporary communities that composed it, so that there is an implicit contextual theology operative in it. There are, besides, the specific “paraenetic” sections in the Bible: in the New Testament, for instance, the message of Jesus is the starting point for exhorting the readers to reflect on their own lives. All preachers have always helped in this task.

But the Christian reflection on the Word of God can go further than the idea of “applying” the revealed teaching to concrete situations. It can perceive the Word of God operative *within* the nature and the history of humanity. Justin and Origen spoke of the *logoi spermatikoi*, at times identified with Universal Reason, or with the Word that is found in every person coming into this world. St. Augustine is inspired by this tradition when he speaks of *rationes seminales*, a Latin translation of the *logoi spermatikoi*. In our times, Karl Rahner has referred to the “supernatural existential,” the situation of grace in which historically the whole of creation, and specifically



human beings, find themselves. The Word of God does not come to us extrinsically, but is inside history. Not strangely, the Indian tradition encourages us to seek the absolute reality, the *brahman*, in the Self, the *Atman*.



... and the table of the Eucharist

Signs of the times

Around the time of the Second Vatican Council, forty years ago, the theme of reading the signs of the time came up as a theological concern. John XXIII and Paul VI made frequent use of this expression, which St. Matthew records on the lips of Jesus (16:3). The Council itself used it at least five times and often alluded indirectly to it. "Impelled by its faith that it is being led by the Spirit of the Lord who fills the whole earth," it said, "God's people endeavours to discern the true signs of God's presence and purpose in the events, needs and desires which it shares with the rest of modern humanity" (*Gaudium et Spes* 11). Three elements are included in the prophetic function of reading the signs of the times: (1) "events, needs and desires" of the people; (2) God's presence and work in the world, and (3) a Spirit-filled discerning community. The events are not 'signs' except in the measure in which they are read by the believing community. Even God's personal presence in the world through his Word is made real and visible in the faith and obedience of Jesus of Nazareth. Revelation and faith make one whole. The interpreter is part of the interpretation.

The discernment of God's presence and action in history is part of the Christian tradition. The classical work is St. Augustine's *The City of God*. Leo the Great tries to interpret in the light of faith the crisis of the Roman Empire. We find a similar effort in Dante's interpretation of history. John XXIII read God's Word in the emergence of the working classes in the political area, the feminist movement, the de-colonization of the world. *Gaudium et Spes* added to that list. Note that the interpretation of the signs of the time is not just a theology of

history. It is not meant just to interpret the past, but to change the world. It is the root of the prophetic function, a discernment of the Word of God operative in our history and calling us to act today in view of a better future. That is how the prophets delivered their messages.

The Council mentions "events, desires and needs" of the people. I think these must be seen together. Less than three months ago we experienced around the Indian Ocean a tragic event: the tsunami disaster. A prophetic reading of the event will include not merely the cosmic phenomenon seldom experienced in those regions, but also the way in which the local population reacted to it and the ways the world responded to this event, thanks to the instant communication systems of our times. Is there a Word of God in this total event? How do we discern it? Is it a Word pronounced for us today? We make it real when we receive it through human discernment.

Reading the Word in history

A new understanding of the process of knowledge and of hermeneutics has given new support to the reflections on the immanence of the Divine Word in history. For us today reading the Word is not so much catching a ready-made meaning obvious or hidden in the text, as producing a meaning. The pre-understanding, activity and context of the reader are intrinsic elements of the act of reading or listening to the Word. 'Word' need not mean only the written or spoken word: it may well be the events of history, the signs of the times, messages that comes to us in thousands of ways. We are not tape recorders that pick up divine meanings floating in nature or in articulated works and print them on tapes. Every reading of the Bible is a production of God's Truth, for true knowledge is a personal activity.

We know from our faith that the Divine Word comes in the human words. Not seldom it echoes human words. When Moses heard the call of God what he heard was really the cry of the oppressed people, for God relayed it to him: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt, I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings and I have come to deliver them" (Exod 3:7-8). And so the events and situations of history are not only helps to discover the Divine Word, but are intrinsic to the Word communicated to us.

This, I submit, will be our main task: to recognize the Word of God speaking to us in the various voices of our days. Some of the challenges we are confronted with: Globalization of the economy and the globalization of culture that goes with it. How shall we discern it with insight and sensitivity? Where is the sin in globalization? Is it in its universality or in its exclusions? Then we may



consider the growing anger of the people of the globe and its manifestations in deadly violence: is the Lord speaking to us through them? What is the Word? Is it a judgment on our modern civilization, too strong in its achievements, so weak in human concern for the other? We have also a growing celebration of the pluralism of cultures and religions: does it bring a Word of God to the Christian community and to the world at large? How do we hear the Divine Word in the limitations and exhaustion of our natural resources, especially in the growing scarcity of drinking water?

Heralds of the Gospel, we cannot be messengers of doom. We carry with us the last Word of God, which is a Word of hope and peace: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). We must seek this Word of hope and peace also in the events of history and in the scriptures of the world. How can we convey it to the people? How to articulate it today in our situation? For our word of peace and hope cannot be a facile word, as it was with the false prophets of Israel so often condemned by the Lord. Hope and peace must find roots and be incarnate in our concrete history. The Word must also give us an active commitment to justice, a will not to be exclusive, and the power of forgiveness made real in the concrete histories of our peoples. What does justice imply, what does true forgiveness demand from all of us? These are no easy questions.



May the Word, who was with God from the beginning, remain central to our reflections. Permit me to transmit a promise of the divine presence from a Vedic hymn composed three or four thousand years old, where the Word (Vák, a feminine noun) speaks about her function in the world:

*I am Queen, the Gatherer-up of treasures,
The Knower, the First among the Holy Ones.
The gods have established me in many places,
Me who lives on many planes, in many a form.*

*The One who sees, who breathes, who hears what's spoken,
Through me alone obtains sustenance.
There are those who dwell by my side but know not,
Hear thou who hast hearing: I tell thee the sacred truth ...*

*And it is I who, like the wind, breathe forth,
And set all existing worlds in motion.
Beyond heavens and beyond the earth am I,
And all this I have become in my splendour. (RV X 125.3,4,8)*

One final word. There is a charming story in the Bible to which, according to St. Luke, the Lord alluded. It is the story of Naaman the leper (2 Kings 5). There are many theological ideas conveyed through that popular tale, but in this context I would like to mention that the word of sanity, the word that proved a word of hope and peace for Naaman, came first from a simple slave girl, a foreigner, who suggested that Naaman undertake his trip to Israel. When Naaman was discouraged in his expectations, again the word of sanity came from his servants, not his theologians. I want to suggest that if we want to interpret properly what the Lord is telling us in Asia today, perhaps we have to listen more carefully to what the little ones, the poor, the villagers, the girls, the simple people have to tell us. After all, they may well be the privileged media of the Divine Word. *Ex ore infantium ... Out of the mouth of children ...* ■