



I Hear a Symphony: The Many Meanings of “the Word of God”

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What’s the Word?

You and I might answer that question in many different ways, depending on the context in which it’s asked. “The word” could mean the latest news (“The word on the street is . . .”). Or it could mean a decisive command (“The word from the corner office is . . .”). Or it could simply mean a word—a basic unit of language, like the little clusters of the alphabet that make up this sentence.

There are many definitions of “the word,” and we don’t reduce them by much if we clarify the phrase by speaking of “the Word of God.” In religious language, and even in the Bible, “the Word” can mean many things. It can involve, for example, a simple sacred upgrade of the definitions I already mentioned—as when “the Word of the Lord” means *news* that comes to a prophet (see Ez 15:1), or when something happens by the command of “the word of God” (see Ps 33:6-9, Is 55:11).

In popular preaching in the United States, the phrase usually means one or both of the following: the *written* Word of God—that is, the Bible—or the *incarnate* Word of God—Jesus Christ.

Or it could mean both at the same time.

Our words about the Word can seem complicated or contradictory. Yet they’re no small matter for us, since we are talking here about the love, the commands, the message, and the very person of the God who made us and saved us.

What does the Church mean when it speaks of the Word of God? What does God mean when he speaks of his Word?

All Together Now

These questions are especially important for us now, as the Church prepares for a historic gathering in Rome. In October 2008 the bishops will meet in a synod to discuss the very matter at hand: “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church.”

For the last two years, theologians have been preparing for the discussion, and in their preliminary document (called a *Lineamenta*¹) they took up the problem of the multiple meanings of “the Word of God.”

And not only did they take it up—they showed us why it’s not really a problem at all. It was a master stroke, really. In their title for Section 9 of the document, they employed a beautiful phrase. They spoke of “the Word of God as a Symphony.”

A *symphony*: When we think of God’s Word in this way, we come to understand the diversity of meanings in a different and better way.

What is a symphony? It’s a piece of music scored for many different instruments, all “sounding together”—that’s the meaning of the Greek root *symphonia*. In a symphony, various elements combine in unison and harmony. Winds, percussion, brass, and strings are not contradictory, but rather complementary. They blend together to make music that inspires us to great love, contemplation, and action.

This comparison of “the Word” to a symphony became popular a generation ago, around the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In the years following Vatican II, a German theologian named Joseph Ratzinger also took up the metaphor, explaining that the symphony of faith is a “melody composed of the many apparently quite discordant strains in the contrapuntal interplay of law, prophets, Gospels and apostles.”² That German theologian, of course, would one day become the man who has summoned the 2008 synod: Pope Benedict XVI.

1 The full text of this resource can be found on the Vatican Web site at www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20070427_lineamenta-xii-assembly_en.html.

2 Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Essays to Orient Theology in Today’s Debates*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 84.

Fully Divine, Fully Human

The Word of God resounds like a symphony. There is nothing monotonous about it. God has spoken to us “in partial and various ways” (Heb 1:1). He speaks to us in the wonders of creation, for he made the universe through his eternal Word (Jn 1:3). He speaks to us in the written story of creation and salvation that we find in the Bible—in the law, prophets, Gospel, and Apostles.

Yet all these various strains harmonize perfectly in the person of the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC)³ echoes St. Augustine as it explains: “Through all the words of Sacred Scripture, God speaks only one single Word, his one Utterance in whom he expresses himself completely” (CCC, no. 102). Jesus himself is the revealed Word of God, and he in turn has revealed himself to be the subject of “all the Scriptures” (see Lk 24:27). All of the Bible is about him, even the parts that were written many centuries before he was born. It is Jesus who makes the Bible one book, and even “one Word.”

For Jesus truly, completely, and perfectly embodies the Word of God. That’s what we mean when we speak of the truth at the heart of our faith: the Incarnation. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn 1:14).

In that event, God communicated himself completely. Yet even then he spoke to us in words. Jesus spoke. He preached. He counseled. He taught. He prayed aloud. He asked questions. He told stories. He even traced words in the sand. He did all of this for our sake, because words are a normal human thing. Nevertheless, his words are extraordinary, because they are revelatory. They are human words that reveal the eternal Word of God. They are the Word of God in the words of men and women and children.

Beginning with this premise, the document for the synod encourages us to think of “the Word” in this “analogous sense.” We may look for relations of resemblance between the Word inspired (Scripture) and the Word incarnate (Jesus).

Both are fully divine and fully human. Jesus is true God and true man. He is coeternal with the Father; yet he was born of the Virgin Mary. St. Thomas Aquinas said that “Christ’s humanity is the instrument of his divinity.” In a similar way, the words of the Bible are instruments of the Word of God. Tradition speaks of the Scriptures as “the Word of God in the words of men.” Yet in both the Incarnation and the Inspiration, the divine agent and the human instrument are inseparably united.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed.) (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000).

• In Jesus, God’s Word became “a man like us in all things
• but sin” (Eucharistic Prayer IV). In Scripture, God’s Word
• is expressed in human words, but without the fallible quali-
• ties we usually associate with human literature. It is inspired
• by God, authored by God, and so it is given a certain
• authority by God. In the words of the *Lineamenta*, “Through
• the charism of divine inspiration, the Books of Sacred
• Scripture have a direct, concrete power of appeal not
• possessed by other texts or holy writings.”

• Both the Incarnation and the Inspiration of the Word are
• divinely revealed mysteries, known only by faith. We could
• never demonstrate them simply by logic or science. We
• could not have known them apart from God’s Revelation
• and the gift of faith.

The Word in Full

• So important are our Scriptures that they are sometimes
• misrepresented as the centerpiece of our religion. Journalists
• and even scholars will sometimes characterize Christianity
• as a “religion of the book.”

• But that’s a misunderstanding. In fact, the *Catechism* explic-
• itly rejects that idea, stating clearly that “the Christian faith
• is *not* a ‘religion of the book.’” Then it goes on to make the
• necessary distinction: “Christianity is the religion of the
• ‘Word’ of God, a word which is ‘not a written and mute
• word, but the Word which is incarnate and living’” (CCC,
• no. 108).

• We encounter not a dead letter, but a person: the “Word
• of God . . . living and effective” (Heb 4:12). This is not
• a word we can manipulate or spin to suit our whims. It is
• Jesus Christ, who comes with a fearsome power over all the
• elements, over life and death. “His eyes were [like] a fiery
• flame, and on his head were many diadems. . . . He wore
• a cloak that had been dipped in blood, and his name was
• called the Word of God” (Rev 19:12-13).

• The Church, in preparation for the synod in 2008, wants to
• make sure that we make no mistake about it. Our religion is
• not reducible to the printed pages of our sacred book. The
• *Lineamenta* warns us to avoid “erroneous or over-simplistic
• approaches and any ambiguity.”

• Instead, we are invited to listen to the Word of God in
• all its symphonic richness. The Word comes to us in the
• Scriptures, yes, but also in the life and sacred Tradition
• of our community of faith. This is how the first Christians
• received the Word of God. Their faith was certainly not

reducible to a book, because there was not yet a book for them to read. They had no New Testament; it had yet to be written. It would take centuries, in fact, before the New Testament was published as a single book. What's more, very few of those early Christians could read well enough to study even the Old Testament, and still fewer could afford to own books in those long-ago years before the printing press.

But they all—regardless of income or abilities—received the living Word of God in the heart of the Church. They received the Word in his body, alive on earth, the Church. St. Paul makes clear that the written text was just one way the Word lived in the Church. He told the Thessalonians, “Hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours” (2 Thes 2:15). So, for Paul and his hearers, tradition and “word of mouth” were as authoritative as Holy Writ. The life of the Church was much more than a book study. It was the life Christ gave to the Apostles, the living faith of the Catholic Church.

Again, we see in the New Testament that the Apostles gave the Christian Church so much more than texts. They passed on rituals (see 1 Cor 11:23); they pronounced blessings (Acts 6:6); they conveyed authority (Acts 13:3); they healed the sick (Acts 28:8). The Second Vatican Council, in its *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*⁴ speaks of the fullness of Christian living—the fullness of the tradition—the fullness of the *symphony*: “What was handed on by the Apostles comprises everything that serves to make the People of God live their lives in holiness and increase their faith. In this way the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes” (no. 8).

Mass Media

But it's fair for us to ask: How did it all happen? Where did it all happen for those first Christians?

We ask because we know that the answer to those questions should have some bearing on the way we receive the Word of God today.

The New Testament makes clear that there was indeed a place where the Church ordinarily encountered the Word. There was a place where the Scriptures were regularly proclaimed and the rites were enacted in the customary ways.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996).

• There was a place where the Apostles normally preached
• and where the congregation read the apostolic letters aloud.

• That place was the liturgy. Twice in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles we read about “the breaking of the bread” as the distinctive Christian activity: “And they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The motif recurs often afterward, and it continues throughout the surviving documents of those early centuries. The early Church was a Eucharistic Church.

• In the ritual public worship of the Church, Christians encountered the Word of God. It was not simplistic; it was symphonic. The people received the Word of God present in the inspired Scriptures, proclaimed in the readings from the Old Testament and the New. They received the Word of God in the inspired preaching of Christ's priests. The people received the Word of God in his true flesh as they received the sacramental elements. They received the Word of God in his body, the assembled Church.

• Indeed, it is by the Word of God that bread can be transformed into the very flesh of Christ, and that mere mortals can be transformed into Christ's immortal body.

• How can that be? How can a Word possess such power? Let's return to our analogy. God's Word is like our words in many ways. It is expressive and informative. But God's Word is unlike ours, too, because it is divine. Our words merely stand for things. When I speak of roses, I may evoke a bouquet in your imagination, but my words lack the power to drop even a single petal into your hand.

• God's Word, on the other hand, has the power to accomplish the very things that it signifies. You and I write words on paper. But God writes the world the way we write words. He does so simply by the power of his Word: “the Lord commanded and they were created” (Ps 148:5).

• The Word in its fullness is a powerful thing, a fearsome thing. But that, too, is a quality of great symphonies. Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth will shake us to our souls if we let them. A great composer can stoke the fires of love and courage. A great composer can rouse a nation with a song. A great composer can drive us to mighty deeds.

• But all that is nothing compared to what God wants to accomplish through his Word. God wants us to be, in Christ, a new creation. We do not merely *hear* the eternal

Word. We are baptized into the very life of the eternal Word. We come to “share in the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4). We participate in the symphony, not as spectators or listeners, but as performers. We speak it. We pray it. We ponder it. We make the Word our own through our full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy. And then we take that Word out into the world. The Word makes us his own; he gives us his flesh and blood to be our own.

So that great and fearsome life is not just something “out there” in heaven. It is the very life we live today as children of God. For the Word of God is the Son of God by nature; and it is that very nature he came to share with us through the Church. It’s his life that we receive from the Church, and it’s his life that we live in the Church, in all its symphonic richness.

• Let it shake you like no symphony ever has. Let the tim-
• pani rattle your soul and bring you to your feet in glory and
• praise. Like Paul, I want to tell you a mystery (1 Cor 15:51)
• and, indeed, many mysteries all at once, for there is mystery
• enough for everyone to possess and to enjoy. As St. Thomas
• Aquinas said, the Scriptures contain “many senses under
• one letter,” the better to suit the full range of intellectual
• gifts in the human race—“so that everyone,” he explained,
• “may marvel that he is able to find in Sacred Scripture the
• truth that he has mentally conceived.”

• It’s a mystery that human words can be inspired as they
• are in the Sacred Scriptures. It’s a mystery that the Divine
• Word could become incarnate and dwell among us. It’s a
• mystery that we can share in a Word that is infinite and
• eternal, though we are finite and mortal.

• But that’s the mystery God has given us. It’s the Word from
• above, but it’s also the Word on the street. And that, in a
• Word, is the Good News.