

P. RANIERO CANTALAMESSA

The Preaching Ministry

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The First Letter of Peter calls the apostles “those who preached the gospel through the Holy Spirit” (1 Peter 1: 12). In this definition we see the two constitutive factors of Christian preaching: its content and its method. The Gospel is the object to be proclaimed, the Holy Spirit is the method, that is, “the medium” or “the way” in which to do it. In my exposition I shall follow this scheme, speaking first of the content and then of the method of Christian preaching.

I. The content of Christian preaching

1 We preach a Crucified Christ

The First Letter of Peter sums up the entire content of Christian proclamation with the word “Gospel.” This word has taken different meanings. It can mean the four canonical Gospels, that is, the good news proclaimed by Jesus, but it can also mean the Good News about Jesus. In the first case Jesus is the *subject* of the Gospel, in the second he is the *object*. The same distinction is expressed today by distinguishing the *preaching* Jesus from the *preached* Christ.

In this second connotation the term Gospel indicates the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection for our salvation. The Gospel is Christ! Saint Paul encloses in this name the whole content of Christian proclamation: “We preach a crucified Christ” (1 Cor 1: 23), “It is not ourselves that we are proclaiming, but Christ Jesus as the Lord” (2 Cor 4:5).

With this in mind we try now to understand the challenges Christian preaching is facing in our time. What place does Jesus have in our society and our culture? I believe we can speak about it as a presence / absence of Christ. On a certain level—that of entertainment and mass media in general—Jesus Christ is very present and is even a “Superstar,” according to the title of a famous musical about him. In an interminable series of stories, films, and books, writers have falsified the figure of Christ, sometimes under the pretext of mysterious new historical documents about him. *The Da Vinci Code* is the latest and most aggressive instance in this long series. It has now become a fashionable trend, a new literary genre. People take advantage of the vast resonance associated with the name of Jesus and what he represents for a large part of humanity in order to ensure a lot of publicity at minimal cost. This is literary parasitism.

St. Augustine asked what pagans did when they did not succeed at resisting

vices (or even try to). Very simply, they attributed them to God! And so they made a god for lust, Venus, a god for violence, Mars; and so on, feeling themselves justified in practicing these vices. The same thing is happening today with regard to Christ, and it is one of the most disturbing signs of regression into paganism. There is no weakness or obsession in modern culture that is not somehow attributed to Jesus in a way that makes people feel justified in cultivating it.

From a certain point of view, then, we can say that Jesus Christ is very present in our culture. However, if we look at the arena of faith, where Jesus belongs more than anywhere else, we note, on the contrary, a disturbing absence if not an outright rejection of his person.

What do those who call themselves “believers” in Europe and elsewhere really believe in? Most often, they believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, a Creator, and in an “afterlife.” However, this is deist faith but not yet Christian faith. If we take into account Karl Barth’s famous distinction, this is *religion* but not yet *faith*.¹ Various sociological surveys highlight this fact even in countries and regions with ancient Christian traditions, like the region in which I was born, the Marches (in central Italy). In practice, Jesus Christ is absent in this kind of religiosity.

The dialogue between science and faith, which has recently aroused so much interest, tends, without meaning to, to put Christ between parentheses. Its focus is God the Creator; the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth has no place there. The same thing occurs in the dialogue with philosophy which prefers to deal with metaphysical concepts rather than with historical realities.

On the whole, what happened at the Areopagus in Athens when Paul preached there is being repeated on a global scale. As long as the apostle spoke of “the God who made the world and everything in it” and said that “we indeed are his offspring,” the learned Athenians listened to him with interest. But when he began to speak of Jesus Christ “being raised from the dead,” they responded politely, “we will hear you about this at another time” (see Acts of the Apostles 17:22-32).

We only need to take a quick look at the New Testament to understand how far we are now from the original meaning of the word “faith.” For Paul, the faith that justifies sinners and confers the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3:2), that is, the faith that saves, is faith in Jesus Christ, in the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection. For John as well, the faith “that overcomes the world” is faith in Jesus Christ: “Who overcomes the world if not the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (I John 5:4-5).

Given our current situation, our first task is to make a great act of faith. “Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33), Jesus told us. He not only overcame the world of his time but the world forever in terms of what is impervious and resistant to the gospel in people. Therefore, we

should not be afraid or resign ourselves in any way to the current situation. The recurring prophecies about the inevitable end of the church and of Christianity in a future technological society make us smile. We have a much more authoritative prophecy to hold on to: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matthew 24:35).

We cannot, however, remain passive; we need to do something to respond in an adequate way to the challenges that faith in Christ is facing in our time. To *re-evangelize* the *post-Christian* world, I believe it is essential that we know what the apostles did to *evangelize* the *pre-Christian* world! The two situations have much in common. And this is what I would now like to try to highlight: What was the first evangelization like? How did faith in Christ overcome the world?

2. *Kerygma and Didaché*

All the New Testament authors clearly presuppose their readers’ knowledge of a common tradition (*paradosis*) that goes back to the earthly Jesus. This tradition has two aspects or components: a component called “preaching” or proclamation (*kerygma*) about what God did through Jesus of Nazareth and a component called “teaching” (*didaché*) that presents ethical norms for right conduct on the part of believers.² Various Pauline letters incorporate this twofold structure, with kerygma in the first part and exhortation and practical advice flowing from it in the second part.

Preaching, or *kerygma*, is called “the gospel.”³ On the other hand, teaching, or *didaché*, is called the “law,” or the commandment, of Christ that is summed up as charity.⁴ Of these two, it is the first—*kerygma* or gospel—that gives the church its origin. The second—the law or charity—flows from the first and outlines an ideal of moral life for the church; it “forms” the faith of the church. It is his preaching that the apostle refers to when he distinguishes his work as a “father” in the faith in his meetings with the Corinthians from the work of the “teachers” who came after him. He says, “I became your father in Christ Jesus *through the gospel*” (1 Corinthians 4:15).

Faith like that, then, arises only in the presence of kerygma or proclamation. Referring to faith in Christ, the apostle asks, “How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:14)—literally “without someone who proclaims the *kerygma* (*chôris keryssontos*).” Paul concludes, “faith comes from what is heard” (Romans 10:17), and “what is heard” refers precisely to the “gospel” or kerygma.

Faith, then, comes by hearing the preaching of the word. But what exactly is the object of “preaching”? On the lips of Jesus the good news that is the basis for his parables and from which all his teaching arises is this: “The kingdom of God has come upon you!” But what is the content of the preaching by the apostles? The work of God in Jesus of Nazareth! That is

true, but there is something even more specific that is the vital nucleus of everything and that, with respect to all else, is like the blade that goes before the plough to break up the soil so that it can turn over the ground and make a furrow in it.

That more specific nucleus is the exclamation “Jesus is Lord!” proclaimed and received in the wonder of a faith *statu nascenti*, that is, in the act of being birthed. The mystery of this word is such that it cannot be said “except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). By itself, it leads whoever believes in his resurrection into salvation: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

“Just as the wake of a beautiful ship,” Charles Péguy said, “grows wider and wider until it disappears and loses itself, / But begins with a point, which is the point of the ship itself,”⁵⁵ so too, I would add that the preaching of the church expands until it constructs an immense doctrinal edifice, but it begins with a point, and this point is the kerygma: “Jesus is Lord!”

What Jesus preached—“The kingdom of God is at hand!”—becomes, as the apostles preach it, the exclamation “Jesus is Lord!” However, there is no opposition but rather perfect continuity between the Jesus *who preaches* and the Christ *preached* because to say “Jesus is Lord!” is the same as saying that the kingdom and sovereignty of God over the world has come to pass in the crucified and risen Jesus.

We need to understand this thoroughly to avoid an unrealistic reconstruction of apostolic preaching. After Pentecost, the apostles did not travel around the world just repeating, “Jesus is Lord!” Instead, what they did whenever they were about to preach the faith in a certain place for the first time was to go straight to the heart of the gospel, proclaiming two facts—Jesus died, Jesus is risen—and proclaiming the reason for each of these facts: He died “for our sins”; he was raised “for our justification” (see 1 Corinthians 15:3; Romans 4:25).

Paul records what he had proclaimed to the Corinthians when he first came to them this way: “Now I would remind, you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). This is what he calls “the gospel.” This is also the core of Peter’s sermons in the Acts of the Apostles: “You killed Jesus of Nazareth; God has raised him and made him Lord and Christ” (see Acts of the Apostles 2:22-36; 3:14-19; 10:39-42).

The proclamation that “Jesus is Lord!” is clearly nothing but the conclusion, sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit, of this brief story told in an

always-lively new way (even if it is substantially the same), and, at the same time, it summarizes the story and becomes operative in the one who hears it. “Christ Jesus emptied himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him [so] that every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:5-11).

The proclamation “Jesus is Lord!” does not, by itself alone, constitute the entirety of preaching, but it is nevertheless its soul, so to speak, the sun that illuminates it. It establishes a kind of communion with the story of Christ through the “host” of this proclamation, and it makes one think by analogy of the communion that is achieved with Christ’s body through the host of the Eucharist.

To come to faith is the unexpected and wondrous opening of a person’s eyes to this light. Recalling the moment of his conversion, Tertullian describes it as a startling exit from the dark “womb of common ignorance to the one light of Truth!”⁶ It was like the discovery of a new world. The First Letter of Peter describes it as being called “out of the darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9; see Colossians 1:12ff).

3. *Rediscovering the Kerygma*

Let us look at some essential characteristics of kerygma. As the exegete Heinrich Schlier has explained so well, it has an assertive and authoritative character—not a conversational or dialectical one. Thus, it does not need to justify itself with philosophical or apologetic arguments; one accepts it or not—that is all there is to it. It is not something that we may dispose of because it is kerygma that judges everything. It cannot be established by anyone because it originates in God himself, thus becoming the foundation of existence.⁷ It is prophetic speech in the strongest sense of the term.

Celsus, a pagan writer of the second century, says indignantly that Christians act like people who believe without reason. He is affronted that some of them do not wish to discuss the reasons for and against what they believe but keep repeating, “‘Do not examine, but believe!’ and ‘Your faith will save you!’ [and] ‘the wisdom of this life is bad, but foolishness is a good thing.’”⁸

Celsus (who on this point seems extraordinarily close to post-modern proponents of radical relativism) would like Christians to present their faith in a dialectical manner, thereby submitting it entirely to investigation and debate. Thus, Christian faith could re-enter the general framework—acceptable to philosophy as well—of humanity’s effort to understand itself and the world, an effort that always remains provisional and open-ended.

Of course, the refusal by Christians to give proofs and to have discussions did not pertain to the whole path of faith but only to its initial beginning. During this apostolic age they did not shy away from debate and from “giving reason for the hope that is within them” even to the Greeks (see 1 Peter 3:15).

The apologists in the second and third centuries are also proof of that. Rather, they believed faith was not able to spring from that debate but should precede it as a work of the Spirit and not of reason. Rational arguments could, at the best, serve as a preparation for faith and, once faith was accepted, demonstrate its “reasonableness.”

Another characteristic of kerygma: It has an explosive or germinative character, so to speak. It is more like the seed that becomes a tree than the ripe fruit at the top of the tree, whose fruit in Christianity is constituted by charity. One does not obtain it by distilling or summarizing tradition, as if it were its marrow. Rather, kerygma stands apart, or better, at the beginning of everything. Everything else develops from it, including the four gospels that were written afterwards precisely to illustrate it.

There has been a change concerning this point due to the current situation of the church. To the extent that Christianity is dominant in any given place and everything is Christian or is regarded as Christian, people are less aware of the importance of the initial choice by which they become Christian. What is stressed the most is not so much the initial moment of faith, the miracle of coming to faith, but rather the completeness and orthodoxy of the faith itself.

This situation has a strong bearing on evangelization today. Churches with a strong dogmatic and theological tradition (like the Catholic and other traditional Christian Churches) risk finding themselves disadvantaged if, beneath the immense heritage of doctrine, laws, and institutions, they do not rediscover that original nucleus that is able to generate faith by itself.

Presenting people today, who often lack any personal knowledge of Christ, with the entire range of doctrine is like putting one of those heavy brocaded mantles worn at one time by the clergy on the shoulders of a baby. We are more prepared by our past to be “shepherds” than to be “fishers” of men, that is, we are better prepared to nourish people who come to church than to bring new people into the church or to bring back those who have drifted away and live on its margins.

There is a need, therefore, for the basic proclamation to be presented to people clearly and succinctly at least once in life. The grace that some renewal movements incorporate for the Church today consists precisely in this. Within these movements adults finally have the opportunity to hear the kerygma, renew their baptism, consciously choose Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour, and commit themselves actively to the life of the church.

The proclamation of Jesus as Lord should retain its place of honor in all the critical moments of Christian life. The most propitious occasions are perhaps funerals because in the face of death people ask themselves questions, their hearts are open, and they are less distracted than at other times. Nothing speaks to people more pointedly about death than the Christian *kerygma*.

There is a story by Franz Kafka that is a powerful religious symbol. It tells of a dying emperor who calls one of his subjects near him. He whispers a message in his ear: "All the obstructing walls have been broken down"⁹ to make place for the crowd gathered around him. It is such an important message that he orders the messenger to repeat it back to him. Then he confirms the message with a nod and the messenger quickly sets out. But let us hear the rest of the story from the author:

Now pushing with his right arm, now with his left, he cleaves a way for himself through the throng; if he encounters resistance he points to his breast, where the symbol of the sun glitters; the way is made easier for him than it would be for any other man. But the multitudes are so vast; their numbers have no end. If he could reach the open fields how fast he would fly, and soon doubtless you would hear the welcome hammering of his fists on your door. But instead how vainly does he wear out his strength; still he is only making his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he get to the end of them; and if he succeeded in that nothing would be gained; he must next fight his way down the stair; and if he succeeded in that nothing would be gained; the courts would still have to be crossed; and after the courts the second outer palace; and so on for thousands of years; and if at last he should burst through the outermost gate—but never, never can that happen—the imperial capital would lie before him, the center of the world, crammed to bursting with its own sediment. Nobody could fight his way through here even with a message from a dead man. But you sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself.¹⁰

On his deathbed—on the cross—Christ also confided a message to his church. There are still so many people at their window who dream of a message like this. The church must never become like that complicated and suffocating palace from which the messenger is unable to exit.

The main obstacle to "racing off" with the Word is the division among Christians, "the dividing wall" that Jesus tore down at the moment of his death (see Ephesians 2:14) but that Christians have rebuilt. Other obstacles include the abundance of and confidence in human resources—too many tunics and too many purses that weigh the messenger down (see Luke 10:4). There is also an excess of bureaucracy, a clericalism that dulls the incisiveness of the Word and makes it seem remote from real life, language that is abstruse and incomprehensible, all constituting an insurmountable obstacle.

The apostle Paul exhorted the Christians of Thessalonica to pray, so that the Word of the Lord might be able "to run its course to the end" (cf. 2 Thess 3:1). The image suggests a sort of race of the Word, from Jerusalem to ends of the earth Rome. To be able to complete such a race, the Word should not

find too many obstacles in its path; it should be free and naked, like an athlete.

II. The method of Christian preaching

In this second lesson we want to deal with the problem of the method of Christian preaching, meaning by this word, as I said at the beginning, the way or the medium through which a certain goal is pursued and achieved. I do not intend to speak in this moment on the techniques, the different forms and the practical problems of Christian preaching. These too are part of the method, but I prefer to leave them for questions and answers. Here I want to speak of the method in its more general and spiritual meaning.

4. *"The medium is the message"*

If I wish to spread a piece of news, my first concern is how to transmit it: by means of the press? by radio? by television? The medium is so important that the modern science of social communications has coined the slogan, "The medium is the message." If I say a few words away from this microphone, you will hear nothing; there will be no communication between us.

Now, what is the primordial and natural means by which the word is transmitted? It is with breath, the sound of my voice. This is what takes the word formed in the secrecy of my mind and carries it to you. All other means only strengthen and amplify this first means, the breath of my voice. Written words come afterward, since letters of the alphabet are only symbols for sounds.

Even the word of God observes this law. It is transmitted by means of a breath, by a sound. What is, or who is, the breath of God, the *Ruah Yahweh*, according to the Bible? We know the answer: it is the Holy Spirit. Can my breath transmit your word, or your breath transmit my word? No, my word can only be pronounced with my breath and your word with your breath. Thus, in an analogous way the word of God can only be transmitted by the breath of God which is the Holy Spirit.

This is a very simple and almost obvious truth but of the utmost importance. It is the fundamental law of every message and of all evangelization. Our human news is transmitted in various ways: through radio, cable, satellite, etc., while sacred news is transmitted via the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the real, essential means of communication, without whom only the human content of the message is perceived. The words of God are "spirit and life" (Jn. 6:63), and, therefore, one can only transmit and receive them "in the Spirit."

This fundamental law is manifested throughout the history of salvation. Jesus began to preach "in the power of the Spirit" (Lk. 4:14). He himself

declared: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. Therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor” (Lk. 4:18). After the Passover, Jesus warned the Apostles not to leave Jerusalem until they had received power from above: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes down on you; then you are to be my witnesses” (Ac. 1:8). The whole account of Pentecost serves to highlight this truth. The Holy Spirit comes; then Peter, with the other Apostles, begins to speak in a loud voice about the crucified and risen Christ. His words have such power that 3,000 people feel their hearts pierced. The Holy Spirit, having descended upon the Apostles, energizes them with an irresistible impulse to evangelize.

St. Paul affirms that without the Holy Spirit it is impossible even to proclaim that Jesus is our Lord (cf. 1 Cor 12:3), which is at the very root of every Christian message. No one will ever be able to express the close bond between evangelization and the Holy Spirit better than Jesus himself. Appearing to the Apostles in the Cenacle, he said: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Then he breathed on them and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn. 20:21-22). After conferring on the Apostles the mandate to go out into the world, Jesus also granted them the means by which to fulfill it—the Holy Spirit—and he conferred it, significantly, with the sign of breath.

I have explained, quickly and briefly, these theological considerations on the role of the Holy Spirit in evangelization because I am more interested in developing a second point: what we ourselves can do to procure the Holy Spirit in our evangelizing, what we ourselves can do to receive power from above, as in a “new Pentecost.”

5. Prayer

I will highlight two means essential to this end: prayer and the right intention. It is easy to show that the Holy Spirit is received through prayer. This is how Jesus received the Holy Spirit and how the church itself did on the day of Pentecost. Luke describes the baptism of Jesus in this way: When “Jesus was at prayer after likewise being baptized, the skies opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him” (Lk. 3:21-22).

According to St. Luke, it was the prayer of Jesus that tore the heavens asunder and made the Holy Spirit come down. A little farther on in the same Gospel, we read: “Great crowds gathered to hear him and to be cured of their maladies. He often retired to deserted places and prayed” (5:15-16). The contrast is very eloquent between the pressing crowds and the decision of Jesus not to put aside his dialogue with his Father.

If we now move on to the church, we notice the same thing. The Holy Spirit at Pentecost came down on the Apostles while they were together and persevering in prayer (Ac. 1:14). Likewise, our only influence on the Holy Spirit, the only power that we have over him, is to call upon him and pray to

him. There are no other means. Yet this “weak” tool of prayerful invocation is, in reality, infallible: “In such a way your heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (Lk. 11:13). God is bound to give the Holy Spirit to the one who prays.

Personal prayer, though, is not sufficient; that of the entire community is also needed. Many times I have discovered how the word of God delights in coming down on a preacher in prayer with other believers. Once I was searching for the best message to give as the sermon I deliver each year at the Good Friday services of St. Peter’s Basilica in the presence of the Pope. About this same time in a prayer group, a brother read a passage from Philippians 2. On hearing the words “every knee must bend,” I suddenly had my answer. It was as if somebody had said: This is the word that you must proclaim. I did just that, and the outcome revealed it to be truly a word from God.

There isn’t a single gift more precious for a messenger than to have around him a group of people with whom he can pray in all simplicity, like a brother among brothers without any show of rank. This was how the Apostles prayed with the women and the disciples in the Cenacle before going out into the streets of Jerusalem. Only after they were among the people did they resume their roles of authority. In chapter four of the Acts of the Apostles, one sees what a community in prayer is like: how the gifts of the Holy Spirit restore courage to the Apostles Peter and John, threatened by the Sanhedrin and uncertain what to do, thus enabling them again to carry the message of Christ with *parrhesia*, that is with freedom and boldness.

Jesus said something which has always made Christians tremble: “A person will be held accountable for every idle word on the Day of Judgment” (Mt. 12:36). What does “idle word” mean? Perhaps a trifling word, a critical word or a calumny? Parallel texts (cf. Mt. 7:15-20) make it clear that Jesus was referring to false prophets who speak in his name. The Greek word that is usually translated “idle” or “trifling” literally means “ineffective, sterile, that which doesn’t create or produce anything.” Therefore, it is an empty, sterile word, in contrast to the word of God so often described by the Bible as “*eneiges*,” vigorous, effective and creative (cf. 1 Th. 2:13; Heb. 4:12). The “idle word” which everyone will have to account for on the Day of Judgment isn’t any and every idle word; it is the worthless, empty word spoken by the one who should instead be proclaiming the life-giving words of God. It is the word of the false prophet, who fails to speak God’s word while seducing others into believing he is doing so. We must account for every idle word spoken about God. This is the meaning of this solemn warning by Jesus.

6. *A prophetic speech*

Evangelization requires an authentically prophetic spirit and this depends on prayer. There are two ways of preparing a sermon. I can sit down at a table and choose, on my own, the words and the theme, relying on my own

knowledge and preferences. Then, once the speech is prepared, I can kneel down to ask God to give power to my words, to add his Spirit to my message. This is a good method, but it isn't prophetic. To be prophetic, I must do the reverse. First, I kneel and ask God for the word he wants to say; afterward, I sit down at the table and place my learning and my skills at the service of God. This changes everything: it is no longer a question of my word, but the word of God; it is no longer God who makes my word his own, but I who make the word of God my own.

The fact is that God has his word ready for every occasion. He never fails to reveal that word to the minister who asks him humbly and insistently. At first there is no more than an almost imperceptible change of heart: a little light that glows in one's mind, a word from the Bible that begins to catch one's attention and illuminate a situation. Though it seems to be only a tiny seed, it contains everything we need, even thunderbolts to tear asunder the cedars of Lebanon. The power of the Holy Spirit is at work. Afterward, you sit at the table, open your books, consult your notes, gather your thoughts together, consult the Fathers of the church, the teachers, the poets, but now it is no longer the word of God at the service of your learning, but your learning at the service of the word of God. Only then does the word of God release all its power.

Let me explain what is it that actually happens in this way. While the preacher is speaking, at a certain point, quite apart from any decision of his, he becomes aware of an intervention, as though a signal on another wavelength were coming through his voice. He becomes aware of this because he begins to feel deeply stirred, invested with a strength and an extraordinary power of conviction that he recognises clearly is not his own. His words come out incisive with greater assurance.

He experiences a touch of that "authority" that all recognised when they listened to Jesus speaking. If he is speaking of sin, for instance, he feels such zeal for God, such indignation, that it is as though God himself had appointed him his advocate to the sinful world. It seems to him that in that strength he would be able to stand up to the entire world and truly "make mad the guilty and appal the free."¹¹ If he is speaking of God's love, or about the sufferings of Christ, his voice resounds with something of the very *pathos* of God himself. Paul gives a very clear description of this experience:

In my speeches and the sermons that I gave, there were none of the arguments that belong to philosophy, only a *demonstration of the power of the Spirit*. And I did this so that your faith should not depend on human philosophy but on the power of God (2 Corinthians 2, 4 – 5).

When we brought the Good News to you, it came to you not only as words, but as power and as the Holy Spirit and as utter conviction (1 Thessalonians 1: 5).

The Apostle is speaking not only of his own experience, but of one shared by the whole community. In fact, when it is the Spirit who puts the words on the preacher's lips, the effects, even though wholly spiritual in their nature, are quite evident and easily seen. The listener is brought to a point of total concentration into which no other voice can reach: he too feels "touched", and a shiver goes often through his body. We are reminded of what the Letter to the Hebrews says, "The word of God is something alive and active: it cuts more incisively than any two-edged sword: it can seek out the place where soul is divided from spirit, or joints from marrow; it can pass judgment on secret emotions and thoughts (Heb. 4:12).

In a moment like this, the human speaker and the human voice fade out of the picture to make place for another voice entirely. "The true prophet, when he speaks, remains silent."¹² The prophet is silent because, at that moment, it is not he who speaks but another. A mysterious silence comes about within him, as when somebody stands respectfully aside to allow the king to pass. The prophet himself is fascinated by the word he is speaking, and if for human considerations he tries to keep a certain thought from being spoken out loud, he seems to feel "a fire burning in his heart ... imprisoned in his bones" (Jeremiah 20: 9); he simply cannot restrain it, and he says those words with even greater emphasis.

God says to his messenger, "You shall be as my own mouth" (Jer 15: 19), and the thought of it makes his messenger tremble. Of course, this is not sustained at the same level of intensity through the whole time that the prophet is speaking or preaching. There are special moments. God needs only one phrase, one word. The speaker and the listeners have the feeling that drops of fire mingle at a certain point with the preacher's words as they are spoken, and the words become white-hot and shining. Of all images, fire is the one that is least handicapped in expressing what the Spirit does in this kind of situation. So it was that at Pentecost, he showed himself as "tongues of fire" (Acts 2: 3). We read of Elijah that "he arose like a fire, his word flaring like a torch" (Ecclesiasticus 48:1), and in the book of the prophet Jeremiah, God himself declares, "Does not my word burn like fire? It is the Lord who speaks? Is it not like a hammer shattering rock?" (Jeremiah 23: 29).

7 Seeking God's glory

In addition to prayer, the other essential attitude for allowing the Holy Spirit to work through us is to have the right intention. For God, the intention is what counts. Man looks at the exterior, but God searches out the intentions of the heart (cf. 1 Sm. 16:7). The Holy Spirit cannot act in our ministry if our

motives are twisted. So it is necessary to ask ourselves: Why do we desire to preach? I will mention two means for purifying our intentions: humility and love.

St. Paul highlights the fact that one can proclaim Christ for reasons that are not equally good or just. Some people, he says, “preach Christ from motives of envy and rivalry” (Ph. 1:15-16). There are two motives for preaching the word of Christ: for oneself or for Christ. Knowing this, the Apostle solemnly declares: “It is not ourselves we preach, but Christ Jesus as Lord” (2 Cor. 4:5).

We know that Luke in the Acts of the Apostles wanted to contrast Pentecost and Babel so he could present the church as the antithesis of Babel. How does this contrast work? Why at Babel do the tongues become confused so that nobody understands anyone else, although all are speaking the same language? Why at Pentecost does everyone understand one another, though different tongues are being spoken?

The explanation is given in the passage itself. The builders of the tower of Babel prepared themselves for the enterprise by saying: “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth” (Gn 11. 4). Did you hear what they said? “Let us make a name for ourselves,” not “Let us make a name for God!”

By contrast, at Pentecost everyone understands the Apostles because they proclaim “the marvels of God” (Ac. 2:11). They don’t proclaim themselves but God. They are radically changed. They no longer argue about who is the greatest; they are concerned only about the greatness and majesty of God. They are elated by his glory. This is the secret of that mass conversion of 3,000 people. This is why the listeners felt their hearts pierced at the words of Peter. The Holy Spirit filtered through his words without any obstruction because his intention was upright, that is, pure and selfless.

In ancient times, it was thought that the builders of Babel were heathens whose intention was to challenge God. If so, then today we would read this passage as a contrast between atheists and the church. But this was not the case. Today we know that the builders of Babel were pious and religious men. The tower that they wanted to construct was in reality a temple to the divinity. It was one of those temples with terraces one above the other, a ziggurat, the remains of which can still be seen in Mesopotamia. The fault of the men of Babel is that they built a temple “to” God but not “for” God. They built it to make a name for themselves, for their own glorification. They exploited God.

Every spiritual work, every pastoral initiative and activity can be pursued in the spirit of Babel or of Pentecost. We are in danger of making use even of the service of God for our own personal affirmation. How confused and surprised I was the day I tried to discover the identity of the builders of

Babel. All of a sudden I saw quite clearly that I myself was among them! It was no longer necessary to dig among the ruins of Mesopotamia; it was enough to delve within myself, into my own heart.

Here is the secret to an authentic ecumenical understanding of evangelization. As long as we strive to make a name for ourselves, for our particular religious order or Christian denomination, we will continue to experience ongoing divisions among ourselves as Christians. This is what always happens when we allow ourselves to be consumed by a spirit of competition and rivalry, as history clearly shows. However, when we are converted to serving only the glory of God, we find ourselves free to announce his great works in fraternal concord with other believers.

We must ask God to give us the same searing experience of his glory that he gave to certain prophets. Isaiah, on seeing the holiness and the glory of God, cried out, "I am doomed!" (Is. 6:5). Ezechiel fell to the ground as if he were dead (Ez. 1:28). After this, God was able to speak his mind: "Go now, and prophesy to my people!" These prophets were men truly born again, dead to their own glorification and therefore free. The word cowers before such men. It cannot assert its powers of seduction and flattery over them.

Jesus once said, "I do not seek my own glory" (Jn. 8:50). We need to make these words our own and to repeat them over and over again to ourselves. They have an almost sacramental power to bring into reality the very thing they signify. Let's make these words our secret strategy. Let us proclaim these words of Jesus, as a kind of battle cry: "I seek no glory for myself!" This cry can rattle the gates of hell.

One strong reason for remaining humble while proclaiming the great deeds of God is to consider the distance between what we say and what we do. St. Seraphim of Sarov, a much-loved saint of the Russian people, said that preaching is easy: It's like throwing stones from the top of a belltower. Putting into practice what one preaches, that's difficult. It's like carrying those same stones from the ground to the top of the belltower.

8. Love for God's people

Once self-glorification, the main obstacle to a pure intention, has been removed, we still have to face the task of perfecting our intentions. Our intention to preach Christ can be tainted by certain character defects. Chief among these would be a lack of love. St. Paul says: "If I speak with human tongues and angelic as well, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 1:11).

Experience has led me to discover that one can proclaim Christ for reasons which have little or nothing to do with love. One can do it to proselytize, to legitimize one's own small church or sect or religious organization, especially if founded by oneself only recently. One can also proclaim Christ in order to

increase the number of the chosen, or to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth, and thus, hasten the return of the Lord.

Naturally, some of these are good and holy reasons, but they alone are not enough. Still missing are genuine love and compassion for all human beings, the true spirit of the gospel. Why did God send the first missionary into the world, his Son, Jesus? For no other reason but love: “Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn. 3:16). Why did Jesus preach about the kingdom? Solely for love, for compassion. “I have compassion for these crowds,” he said, “because they are like sheep without a shepherd” (cf. Mt. 9:36; 15:32).

One can announce the gospel of love only out of love. If we don’t love the people we approach, the words of the gospel are easily transformed into stones that do injury. We are often like Jonah. Jonah went to preach to the people of Nineveh, but he didn’t love them. God had to do more to bring about the conversion of Jonah, the preacher, than to convert the inhabitants of Nineveh! Jonah was obviously happier shouting, “Another 40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed!” than when he had to witness God’s forgiveness. He was more worried about the tree that offered him shade than about the salvation of the city. “You are concerned over the plant,” says God to Jonah, “and should I not be concerned over Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot distinguish their right hand from their left?” (Jon. 4:10).

In efforts to evangelize others, we must be motivated by our love for them, and even more so by our love for Jesus. “Do you love me?” says Jesus to Peter. Then “Feed my lambs” (cf. Jn. 21:15ff). The nourishment and preaching that can feed them must flow from a genuine friendship with Jesus. We must love Jesus because only those who love him can proclaim him to the world with deep conviction. No one speaks with passion about someone he does not love. Love makes us poets and to spread the gospel one needs to be some-thing of a poet. Søren Kierkegaard wrote,

As God has created man and woman, so too He fashioned the hero and the poet or orator. The poet cannot do what that other does, he can only admire, love and rejoice in the hero. Yet he too is happy, and not less so, for the hero is as it were his better nature, with which he is in love, rejoicing in the fact that this after all is not himself, that his love can be admiration. He is the genius of recollection, can do nothing except call to mind what has been done

He follows the option of his heart, but when he has found what he sought, he wanders before every man’s door with his song and with his oration, that all may admire the hero as he does, be proud of the hero as he is.¹³

For Kierkegaard the hero is Abraham and he himself is the poet. But how much truer this is when applied to the hero that Christ is and to the poets and orators who need to be his preachers. He is the one true hero of history and of the world. He is unique because he is also God.

9. Preaching ministry and theology

A final remark about the preaching ministry. The office of preaching must be given back its place of honor in our church! I was struck by these words of the French theologian Henri de Lubac:

The ministry of preaching is not a popularization of the doctrinal teaching which exists in highly abstract form and is somehow anterior and superior to preaching. On the contrary, preaching is itself doctrinal teaching in its highest form. This was true at the time of the first Christian proclamations, spoken by the Apostles, and it is equally true of these who have followed them in the church: the Fathers, the Doctors and our pastors at the present time.¹⁴

Hans Urs von Balthasar states decisively that the “theological mission is subordinate to the mission of preaching in the church.”

Such statements impress me because it seems that in our actual situation the reverse is true, at least in my Catholic Church. Most would say that preaching is only the popularization of a more technical and superior teaching, namely, theology. Yet St. Paul, the model for all preachers, certainly put preaching first; all else was subordinate to it. He put his theology into practice by preaching, not by leaving to others the task of extracting from his thoughts the more basic truths to be passed on to the faithful in sermons.

In the occasion of the Worldwide Priests retreat held in Rome in 1990 and attended by 5,000 priests and deacons, I plucked up my courage and cried out: “Theologians, back to preaching! Don’t spend all your time reading books and visiting libraries and academic institutions. Perhaps they have already given you all they have to give. There is another source of knowledge concerning the kingdom of God, another school: that of ministering to souls! They will teach you more than books and human masters are able to teach.

There’s a need only you can satisfy! There’s a need for people who are well prepared to synthesize and apply the gospel message to the world of today, to give our people doctrine at its best and not just a collection of second-hand ideas. There’s a need for leaders with a sound formation and good pedagogy to open for God’s people the vaults of Christian tradition, where immense treasures of experience, doctrine, saintliness and discernment are stored.”

I do not know how much you future Methodist preachers need to be reminded of this, but I let the calling resound among you as well. This, after all, is what your founder John Wesley did when he undertook the task of translating some classic books of Christian spirituality, including Catholic and Orthodox authors: helping ordinary people in getting in touch with the treasures of Christian holiness.

The service which theology already renders evangelization is certainly immense and varied, but it isn't enough. It is too indirect. It leaves to other ministers the development of a synthesis which theologians are better equipped to produce. Theologians are needed for action on the battlefield and not just behind the lines.

Would these men then be lost to research and high theology? To the contrary, I say there would be gain! Were not Origen, Augustine and Basil good theologians? Yet what did they do all day long if not preach to and educate the people? The most sublime theological treatises were born from their pastoral activities! Their marvelous clarity and relevance came from a need to explain their ideas, day after day, to a people who were often illiterate. They followed the maxim attributed to St. Augustine: "*Malo intelligi a piscatore quam laudari a doctore*," "I prefer to be understood by a fisherman than praised by a learned man," and in this way they ended up achieving both: being understood by simple people and admired by scholars.

Not everyone, of course, will be called to leave the world of research for direct preaching and the pastoral ministry—these would be trouble if that ever happened, but every theologian is called to assume a more active role in evangelization.

Proclaiming the Gospel can be the source of immense joy. When I was prayed over for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon me, someone spoke these words over me: "You will experience a new joy in proclaiming my word." It was true! Even in the spiritual domain, few joys are comparable to that of becoming a father of souls. Paul compares it to the joy of a man when he procreates. "It was I," he says, "who begot you in Christ Jesus through my preaching of the gospel" (1 Cor. 4:15).

At one conference, after I had spoken, I felt somebody from the crowd tug at my habit. I turned around. It was a young man who only had time to shout: "Father, I am a Christian thanks to you!" Then he disappeared from my sight. Oh, what a sense of excitement, what a sense of awe and gratitude toward God, who calls us to be his collaborators in generating incorruptible and eternal life!

At times every joy is taken from us and we feel only fatigue, anguish, tribulation and, above all, shame for the incompatibility between our words and our lives. Then we want to be silent and evasive. Yet that moment is the most precious, a chance to leave all the joy to Jesus!

Once, while I was preparing for a talk, I opened the Bible and these words came to me. I don't think they are meant just for me, but for all of us called to rediscover our vocation as preachers: "Like the coolness of snow in the heat of the harvest is a faithful messenger for the one who sends him. He refreshes the soul of his master" (Pr. 25:13)

These metaphors of heat and coolness made me think immediately of Jesus on the cross, who calls out: "I thirst!" He is the great harvester, thirsty for souls, souls which we are called to revitalize with our humble and devoted service. He is the hero for whom we are called to be poets and singers.

Lord Jesus Christ, we are men of impure lips living among a people of impure lips. Still, if you accept us, each one of us will sing with joy, "Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? If you call me I will hold your people in my heart "

End Notes

¹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. from the 6th ed. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 128-140, 365 ff.

² See Charles Harold Dodd, *History and the Gospel* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), pp. 36-37

³ See, for example, Mark 1:1; Romans 15:19; Galatians 1:7

⁴ See Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 7:25; John 15:12; 1 John 4:21.

⁵ Charles Péguy, "A Vision of Prayer" ["Vision de prière"], in *God Speaks*, intro. and trans. by Julian Green (New York: Pantheon Books, 1945), p. 52.

⁶ Tertullian, *Apology*, 39, 9 ("ad lucem expavescentes veritatis"), ed. by Robert D. Sider, vol. 2, *Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), p. 61.

⁷ Heinrich Schlier, *Die Zeit der Kirche [The Time of the Church]* (Freiburg: Herder, 1958), chapt. 15.

⁸ Quoted in Origen, *Against Celsus*, 1, 9, trans. by A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 4, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), p. 400.

⁹ Franz Kafka, "An Imperial Message," *The Penguin Complete Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir, ed. by Nahum N. Glatzer (London: Allen Lane, 1983), p. 4.

¹⁰ Kafka, p. 4.

¹¹ W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, Scene 2.

¹² Philo of Alexandria, *Quis rerum*, 266, in *Les oeuvres de Philon d'Alexandre*, vol. 15, Paris 1966, p. 300.

¹³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* ("Panegyric upon Abraham") in *Fear and Trembling and Sickness unto Death* intro., notes, and trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 30.

¹⁴ H. de Lubac, *Exegese médiévale*, Paris, 1959, p. 670.