

VERBUM DOMINI

(A summary of the document by Pathiaraj Rayappan SDB)

The XII Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was held in Vatican from 5th to 26th October 2008. The theme was: The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church. One of its aims was to review the implementation of the directives of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*. Another of its aims was to face the challenges of our day. And Pope Benedict XVI has summarized the findings of the Synod in his Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*. The document was released on 30th September, 2010. Here, I give a summary of that document. The document has three parts. Part I presents the Word of God and our response to it. Part II speaks of the Word of God in the life of the Church. Part III speaks of the Word of God in the world. I shall follow the same order. (Note: The numbers within brackets denote the paragraph numbers of the document *verbum domini*)

PART I VERBUM DEI

1. The God who speaks

First part of the document presents the Word of God. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the word was God ... and the Word became flesh." (Jn1:1, 14). It is God who begins a dialogue with us (6). When we say 'Word of God' to what do we refer? There are different significations of the "Word of God," i.e. different meanings of the term "Word of God." The term "Word of God" is used analogically. We can see at least four meanings:

(i) "Word of God" refers to the 'Word' spoken by God at creation and in the salvation history. God spoke. God speaks. All things are made by the breath of his mouth. We are creatures of the Word. We read in Psalm 33:3, "By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their hosts by the breath of his mouth." Man is created by the breath of God. Man is himself the word of God (8, 9). (ii) "Word of God" refers to Jesus Christ, the eternal son of the Father made man. The God who spoke to us through the creation, through the events of salvation history, through the judges, kings and prophets, as a climax of His revelation speaks through his Son. In His Son, the word of God finds expression not in discourse or concepts or rules but in the very person of Jesus (11) Christ is the culmination of revelation. (iii) "Word of God" refers to the word preached by the apostles in obedience to the command of the Risen Jesus. They faithfully carried it out by their oral preaching, by their example and by their ordinances. Their preaching consisted of what they heard from the lips of Christ, what they learned from his way of life and his works, and what they came to know through the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This is we call the apostolic tradition. The living tradition contains the very word of God and we need to recognize in the tradition the very word of God (15 - 17). (iv) "Word of God" refers to the word attested and divinely inspired, i.e. sacred Scriptures. Sacred scripture is the "the Word of God set down in writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit." All scripture is inspired by God. God is the author (19).

2. Our response to the God who speaks

We are called to make a free response (22). In dialogue with God, we come to understand ourselves and discover an answer to our hearts' deepest questions (23). In our dialogue with God, God Himself teaches us how to speak to him through his own words: the book of the Psalms, songs, intercessions (24). Our response to the word of God must be the obedience of faith (i.e. free submission of intellect and will), i.e. willingly assenting to the revelation (25). Sin is the refusal to hear the Word of God, breaking the covenant, being closed to God who calls us to communion with him (26). Mary, mother of God's word is our model of obedience of faith: completely open to the will of God (27). Mary's familiarity with the Word of God is seen in her *magnificat*. Her life was one totally shaped by God's Word (28).

3. Parameters for an authentic /correct interpretation of the sacred Scripture

The Bible is the Church's book and its essential place in the Church gives rise to its genuine interpretation (29). The Bible was written by the people of God, for the people of God and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (30). Therefore authentic interpretation of the Bible must always be in harmony with the faith of the Catholic Church. Secular sciences (historical-critical exegesis) are important but we cannot stop with that. Exegetes arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the Biblical text as God's Word for today (31-33). And the Biblical text must be interpreted with attention to the unity of the whole scripture (canonical exegesis). And account is to be taken of the living tradition of the Church. Respect should be shown for harmony between the elements of the faith (34). Interpretation of sacred Scripture presupposes the harmony of faith and reason (36). There is unity and interrelationship between literal sense and spiritual sense of the Biblical text (37). In rediscovering the interplay between the different senses of sacred Scripture, it becomes essential to grasp the passage from letter to the spirit (need to transcend the letter) (38). The Church likes to promote mutual esteem and co-operation between Christians and Jews in the study of the sacred Scripture (43). The fundamentalists have a literal interpretation of Scripture (God dictated it word for word!). Fundamentalism does not take into consideration the historical character of revelation (44). There should be a closer working relationship between pastors, theologians and exegetes (45). Biblical study (shared listening to the sacred Scripture, promoting common translation, etc.) promotes ecumenism (46). Study of the sacred Scriptures should be the soul of theological formation (47). In interpreting, we should listen to the saints, the ones who have truly lived the Word of God (48).

PART II VERBUM IN ECCLESIA

Part II presents how the Word is present and should be present in the various aspects of the life of the Church. God speaks to us. Our response is the obedience of faith. The Church believes and lives the obedience of faith. Church is the home of the Word. Christ is constantly present in the life of the Church (50, 51).

1. Liturgy, privileged setting for the Word of God

For the correct understanding of the Word of God, we need to appreciate and experience the essential meaning and value of the liturgical actions. Because, every liturgical action is by its very nature steeped in the sacred Scriptures. And because at the centre of the liturgical action

is the Paschal Mystery and around it the mysteries of Christ and the history of salvation become sacramentally present (52). Liturgy of the word is a decisive element in the celebration of the sacraments. This should be brought to the notice of the faithful (53). The Word of God and the Eucharist are so closely bound that we cannot understand one without the other. Eucharist opens to us to understand the sacred Scriptures and the sacred Scriptures illumine the mystery of the Eucharist (55). As Jesus is present in the appearance of bread and wine, so is he present in the proclamation of the Word. This is called the sacramentality of the Word (56). There are certain aspects that concern the Service of the Word. (i) Lectionary is important. The structure and the texts help us to understand the unity of God's plan. So in liturgy this interconnection between the various readings should be brought out (57). (ii) Those who read during liturgical celebrations should be adequately trained biblically, liturgically and technically (58). (iii) Homilies should bring the scriptural message to life in a way that helps the faithful see that God's Word is present and is at work in their everyday life (59). (iv) Preachers can avail such helps as Directory on homilies (60).

Role of the sacred Scripture in the sacrament of Reconciliation and Anointing of the sick is often overlooked. So, it needs to be given its proper place. Individual should be encouraged to prepare for confession by meditating on a suitable text of the sacred Scripture; to begin confession by reading or listening to a biblical exhortation. Also in anointing of the sick, Word of God is to be given its importance (61). Liturgy of the Hours emphasizes the sacred Scriptures. Those who have the obligation to pray it should do so faithfully. This prayer should be promoted among lay faithful (62). In using the book of blessings, attention should be paid to the space given for proclaiming, hearing and briefly explaining the Word of God (63).

There are some suggestions and practical proposals for promoting fuller participation in the liturgy. (i) Encourage celebration of the Word of God, where priests are not available. Encourage it also on pilgrimages, special feasts, popular missions, etc. (65). (ii) Pastors should encourage also moments of silence in the liturgy of the Word (66). (iii) Solemn proclamation of the Word of God preceded by a solemn procession; singing of the Gospel (67). (iv) Ambo is to be located in a place easily visible and is to be decorated. The Bible can be exposed in a prominent place (68). (v) Readings from the sacred Scriptures (including the responsorial psalm) should not be replaced by other texts (69). (vi) Preference should be given to liturgical songs that are scripture based (70). (vii) Visually impaired and hearing impaired can be helped to have contact with the Word of God (71).

2. Word of God in the life of the Church

Faithful should encounter God in the Scriptures. Many have spoken of the need for knowledge of the Scriptures in order to grow in the love of Christ (72). The Bible should inspire all pastoral work, i.e. the ordinary activities and movements should be examined to see if they are truly concerned with fostering a personal encounter with Christ, who gives himself to us in his Word (73). Catechesis should be permeated by the mindset, spirit and outlook of the Bible, using biblical personages, memorizing texts, etc. (74). All Christians, especially catechists, should receive suitable training in biblical apostolate (75). In ecclesial gatherings (such as eucharistic congresses, Word youth days, etc.) emphasis should be given to the Word of God (76).

All of us are called to holiness. All should grow in relationship with the Word of God not only because of baptism but also because of their various states in life. (i) The Word of God is indispensable in forming the heart of a good shepherd and ministers of Word in the case of ordained ministers (78-81). (ii) Candidates to Holy Orders should learn to love the Word of God. The Bible should become the soul of the theological formation (82). Consecrated life is born out of hearing the Word of God. Therefore, the religious communities should provide for solid instruction in the faith-filled reading of the Bible (83). Lay faithful should be trained to discern God's will through familiarity with the Word of God read and studied in the Church under the guidance of the legitimate pastors (84). Family prayer, reading of Bible and the knowledge of the Bible should be fostered in families. Every household should have a copy of the Bible (85).

Method of meditative reading of the Bible: One must avoid individualistic approach and adopt a communion approach. It should be in communion with the Church. It should be related to the Liturgy. It should prepare, accompany and deepen what the Church celebrates in the Liturgy of the Word in the Eucharist (86). And the method suggested is the ancient method of *lectio divina* with its basic steps of *lectio, meditatio, oratio* and *contemplatio* (87).

We should also encourage Marian prayers such as Rosary and Angelus, because they are an aid to meditating on the holy mysteries found in the Scriptures (88). In the same way we should also encourage pilgrimage to the Holy Land from where the Word of God spread to the ends of the earth (89).

PART III VERBUM MUNDO

Part III presents the Church's Mission to proclaim the Word of God to the World. Christ comes forth from God and returns to Him. And he reveals the Father to us (90). We have received that revelation and we should pass on what we have received. And the Church proclaims to the world the 'Logos of Hope' (91). And the Pope / synod wishes that there be revival of the missionary consciousness present in the people of God (92), because the Church's mission to proclaim the Word of God is not optional or supplementary. And the proclamation of the Word has as its content the 'Kingdom of God' which is the very person of Jesus (93). All baptized have the responsibility for the proclamation. More so are bishops and priests by their specific office. So are deacons, religious and laity and ecclesial movements and communities (94). And the Church cannot restrict her pastoral work to the ordinary maintenance of those who already know the Gospel of Christ but the Church is duty bound to proclaim to everyone the Word that saves (95). In this context even Christians (who are baptized but not sufficiently evangelized) should be proclaimed the Word of God. All new ways of effectively communicating the Word of God are called for: first, witness and second, explicit proclamation (96-97).

1. The Word of God and commitment to the World

The Word of God and its proclamation calls us to be committed to the world: (i) To the least of the brethren (99). (ii) To justice and equality: commitment to justice is an essential element of evangelization (100). (iii) To defending and promoting the human rights: it is part of evangelization (101). (iv) To reconciliation and peace between peoples. We should be

instruments of peace and justice in the society (102). (v) To selfless love of our brothers and sisters: if one does not love one's neighbour he has not understood the Scriptures (103).

The special categories of people to whom we need to proclaim the Word of God: (i) Young people: so that the Word of God becomes for them a compass pointing out the path to follow (104). (ii) Migrants: they are entitled to the Word of God. Word of God is to be proposed to them and not imposed on them. If they are Christians, they need pastoral care to grow in the faith (105). (iii) Physically, psychologically and spiritually suffering: they should be helped to read the Scriptures so that they realize that they are participating in Christ's own suffering (106). (iv) The poor: proclamation to the poor should always be accompanied by *diakonia* of charity (107). (v) Word of God denounces exploitation of the created realities. We should use it according to God's plan (108).

2. The Word of God and Culture

God does not reveal Himself in the abstract but by using languages, imagery and expressions that are bound to different cultures (109). And the Bible contains anthropological and philosophical values that have had a positive influence on humanity as a whole. So culture is important for the life of man and we can promote knowledge of the Bible among those engaged in the area of culture (110). Who are they? (i) Schools and universities: In these religious education should not be neglected. In religious education the emphasis should be on the sacred Scriptures (111). (ii) Artists (figurative, architectural, literature, music): They should be given solid formation in the Sacred Scriptures, Church's living tradition and magisterium (112). (iii) Those in social communication: Discovering new methods of transmitting the Gospel message is part of evangelization (113).

Word of God is inherently capable of speaking to all in the context of their own culture. Paradigm of inculturation is incarnation. Inculturation happens when a culture transformed and regenerated by the Gospel, brings forth from its own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought (114). Translation of the Bible into different languages is an integral part of inculturation (115). From the experience of the pentecost we learn that Word of God is capable of entering into and finding expression in various cultures, yet the same word also overcomes the limits of individual cultures to create fellowship between different peoples (116).

The essential part of proclamation of the Word of God is inter-religious dialogue. In this we need to follow the guidelines of *Nostra aetate* (117). With Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucianists ... (118-119). Inter-religious dialogue will not be fruitful unless it includes authentic respect for each person and freedom to practise one's religion. So the Synod urges that the freedom of conscience be effectively guaranteed to all believers (120).

CONCLUSION

The Pope encourages all to become increasingly familiar with the sacred Scriptures, convinced that the authentic Christian spirituality is based on the Word of God proclaimed, accepted, celebrated and meditated upon in the Church.