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**THE 'WORD' THAT IS JESUS: A
THEOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION**

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Introduction

Catholicism experienced a breakthrough in its theological thought during the years between 1962 and 1965. Bishops from different parts of the world had gathered for a worldwide meeting at Vatican City to discuss not only where the Church was, but more importantly, where it was to move towards. It was widely held that the Church was entrenched in conservative thought and defensive positions vis-a-vis the world of its times. As such it was failing to communicate precisely the Gospel as good news since what the Church stood for then was neither news nor was it good. There was an immense communication gap between the Church and the world. The Catholic Church, to use papal imagery, was likened to a room that had been closed for centuries and badly needed to open its windows to let fresh air in. Though unexpected, this gathering which became known as the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) or Vatican II, nevertheless gave the Church such an impetus towards renewal that it was never the same again ever since.

It all began in 1958 when Pope Pius XII died and necessitated, as Roman Catholic tradition would have it, a conclave in which a

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successor was to be chosen, was soon after held. The cardinals in attendance, failing to reach a consensus on a suitable candidate for the position, decided that it was better to elect someone who was old enough to die soon and too old to do anything. This man, who would be Pope only for a short period, would give the cardinals enough time to consider another candidate who could be Pope for a long term. They thought of and chose Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli as the right man to become an *interim Pope*. He came to be known as Pope John XXIII.

But much to the surprise of most people, especially those in the upper echelons of leadership in the Church, Pope John XXIII, the man who was considered to be old enough to die soon and too old to do anything, called for the holding of an ecumenical council soon after he officially took hold of the pontificate. Despite objections within the very cabinet of the Pope, John XXIII made it very clear that he wanted an ecumenical council held and that he wanted this council to be "pastoral" in character. No better description of what John XXIII meant by "pastoral" can be given than what the opening lines of one of the most important documents of this council would express: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, particularly the poor and the afflicted, these too are the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts."¹ The Church needed to be sensitive to and to correctly read the signs of the times in order to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church was communicating once again.

Two key phrases, one Italian and the other Latin, define the thrusts of Vatican II: *aggiornamento* (renewal) and *ad fontes* (back to the sources).² *Aggiornamento* spoke of "renewal." Change had to happen in order that the Church could be on track with what was going on in the world and communicate the Gospel accordingly. The renewal of the Church was imperative in order for it to be equal to the task regarding the questions raised, the concerns expressed and the issues being debated on in society. *Ad fontes* referred to a simultaneous return to its "sources," the Church's authentic tradition. The Church was tasked to communicate, yes. But it had to communicate precisely from the Spirit of the Gospel. One may want to visualize this double

¹*Gaudium et Spes*, art. 1. All quotations from Vatican II are taken from Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, New York: America Press, 1966.

²John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, 37-41.

thrust as “moving forward” by “moving back.” Another may prefer to use a different imagery to illustrate the movement of change envisioned by the Church: watching a ping-pong game where one keeps shifting sight from one player to the other. In the case of the Catholic understanding of the faith, attention is to be constantly given to Gospel while considering contemporary experience or to contemporary experience while considering the Gospel.

I. Vatican II and a Theology of Communication

The Second Vatican Council crafted and promulgated sixteen documents covering a wide range of theological topics and themes. Four may be considered as expressing its core spirit and thought: *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (The Decree on Sacred Liturgy) and *Dei Verbum* (The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation). Of the four, I consider the last mentioned to be theologically the most fundamental, the most important and, perhaps, even the most revolutionary in thought. *Dei Verbum* deals with the God-human/world relationship. And the way one comprehends this relationship affects all the areas of theological thought.

While *Dei Verbum* (D.V.) is not directly about communication, unlike the Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication, *Inter Mirifica*, I'd like to think that it has something to say very important about communication. It suggests important perspectives for communication in general, but for *Christian* communication it proffers critical perspectives by providing a vision of communication. Vision is important in providing a direction or an orientation, not in terms of giving specifics of know how. And what is useful about a vision is that it functions like a compass; it enables you to get back on track when you are lost and be on the right course once more.

The technical theological phrase “divine revelation” in *Dei Verbum* refers to “divine communication,” the foundation, inspiration and exemplar of the Church's own communication. The Church's message, however, is not mere information; it is a person or, more accurately, people's experience of this person. Because of his impact on people, Jesus of Nazareth had been called many names: “The Christ,” “Lord,” “Saviour.” But one which is particularly a *propos* to the world of communication is “word,” the Word which God has “spoken” once and for all, Jesus Christ.

Within the Judaeo-Christian Tradition, this Word representing God's action founds, inspires and models the Church's action. Divine

initiative is primary in Christian living and thinking. This is already clear in the way Christians are to love and care for others. As *foundational*, this Word enables us to love others: "We love *because he first loved us*" (1 Jn. 4:19). As *inspirational*, it reveals an enduring motive: "For God *so loved the world* that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). As *modelling*, it also gives the example of how to love: "*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another*" (Jn. 13:34). If we take this initiative of God enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth as primary in understanding Christian communication, and I think we should, reflection on it will surely benefit from what is embodied in the belief that Jesus Christ is "*the Word of God.*" The letter of John thinks this is the pattern for communicating the Gospel as disciples of Jesus Christ. Having "heard," "seen," "looked upon," and "felt with their hands" the Word of God, they are impelled to proclaim to others what they themselves have personally experienced (1 Jn. 1:1-4).

II. No Jesus, No Christian Way of Communicating

Jesus is crucial to Christianity. No Jesus, no Christianity. Christian faith and Tradition, Christian Churches, Christian mission would have no foundation and reason for existence without Jesus. The same would have to be said of Christian communication, particularly if we speak of Jesus as the very Word of God to us. For we are not just speaking about communication but of *Christian* communication, one that is derived from the prime and foundational source of the Christian faith and experience; namely, Jesus Christ. The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, states this conviction in rather technical theological terms. Inspired and oriented by the experience and thought found in the gospel and letters of John, the document explains how Jesus is God's Word to the world (cf. D.V., art. 4). There it is stated that He "speaks the words of God (Jn. 3:34), and completes the work of salvation which his Father gave him to do (cf. Jn. 5:36; 17:4)." It was he who "perfected revelation." In Jesus we are assured in faith that God's will is the total well-being of persons and peoples, the fullness of life. Jesus' life and ministry, passion, death and resurrection point decisively to what God wills to bring about in our world: life and its fullness. It cannot be otherwise, for to experience Jesus is to experience the God who is Life (cf. Jn. 14:9). Because of this, we have come to know who God is for us in and through Jesus. Indeed, in Jesus we have really seen the face of God. When seen in and through the person of Jesus, God's face is one of amazing goodness and humanness. God is a caring God

who looks after people and who compassionately champions the cause of their well-being, particularly the disinherited.

The above description of Jesus as God's word is better appreciated if we inquire further about the meanings the term "word" represents. In a very theological manner, *Dei Verbum* actually deals with the what, the why, the when and the how of divine revelation or communication. All these aspects, however, revolve around the Jewish metaphor "word of God" (Latin: *Dei Verbum*). The metaphor embodies, describes and underscores the biblical understanding of the way God relates and communicates with us; but it also assumes how human beings are to receive and respond to the divine communication. In fact it is from the point of view of its reception that we begin to grasp what it is that God does with His/Her "word."³ The Jewish cultural imagery it employs is that of God "speaking" and of people "listening." To adequately comprehend this way of speaking, it is necessary to spell out the significance of the Jewish term and concept "word" in the phrase "word of God."

III. Jesus as the "Word" of God

Intercultural sensitivity and the discipline of hermeneutics as well as contemporary biblical scholarship have made us aware of the importance of cultural context. This awareness is certainly operative in reading the Bible today. If Jesus was a Jew and his first disciples were Jews, then it makes much sense to take the Jewish cultural ways of understanding into account in understanding Jesus as God's enfleshed communication to us - His or Her "word" par excellence.

The Jewish concept and term for "word" is *dabar*.⁴ Its range of meanings, however, goes beyond our usual comprehension of what the term "word" stands for. *Dabar's* richness is expressed through its three interrelated characteristics. All three reveal something of the meaning of "word" and all three lend appreciation of Jesus as the Word God spoke. *Dabar* is, first of all, a relational concept within the relation-centred Jewish culture. It implies relationality. So *dabar* is the kind of "word" that is uttered in the context of relationships. Secondly, the notion makes no distinction between the person speaking and the word spoken. The word refers to both simultaneously. It denotes, thirdly, both deed and word, action and

³As article 1 of *Dei Verbum* puts it: "Hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it confidently, this most sacred Synod takes its direction from these words of St. John..."

⁴Cf. André Feuillet and Pierre Grelot, "Word of God," in Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Pasay City: Paulines, 1988, 666-670.

communication at the same time. We can glean from these characteristics that "word" is really a figure of speech, a metaphor for a dynamic relating. As we are exploring how Jesus is "word," our discussion of God's communication in Jesus Christ will be in the light of these characteristics.

A. Jesus the Word as God's Unconditional and Faithful Solidarity with Us

Dabar, first of all, is a relational concept. Because of its relational orientation, it assumes a speaker and a listener as well as a word given and received. The "word" is a conversational word; it is not merely expressive, but communicative as well. It presupposes some connection or bond between the speaker and the listener. Relationality characterizes exchanges. One can recall relationally-oriented statements in the Bible such as "I am your God and you are my people" and "I know my sheep and my sheep know me." Moreover, such communicative word is intended not only to initiate but also to strengthen and to deepen such relationship in an atmosphere truly respectful of human freedom. Hence, when the word expressing the experience of the disciples is proclaimed as in John's letter, it is done so through a relational category: fellowship. The letter speaks of "announcing...in order that (others) may have *fellowship*" with them and that such "*fellowship* may be with the Father, and with his son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn. 1:3).

This is why it is not surprising that Jesus, as the word of God, is given a name that speaks of an abiding kind of relationship: Emmanuel, the God who is always with us. This is typical of the Jewish relational understanding of who God is. When the divine became human in Jesus Christ, his very person embodied God's strong desire and commitment to relate with us and to be in solidarity with us. And when Jesus expresses such desire to relate with us not as servants, but as friends, we realize how serious God is about having a relationship with us. This relational view differs from the Graeco-Roman way of conceiving a detached God, metaphysically existing alone in an absolute manner, unmoved by any external influence.

Dei Verbum further characterizes this kind of relationality as initiated by God in article 2 of the document. It points this out by asserting that "God *chose* to reveal Himself..." God makes the first move, takes the first step to share life and love with us and this for no other reason than divine "goodness and wisdom." In the absence of any other external presence or power, the initiative can only come from within the very depths of God. To "speak" or "to reveal" is a

deliberate choice of God. This important aspect of the Judaeo-Christian Tradition suggests a passion within God for human beings. It differs from philosophy, which begins with a human question about the possibility, existence and activity of a transcendent being which could answer human longing. Revelation assumes that God's address to human beings is primary; it comes first and subsequently is followed by a human answer. The event of revelation, from our human perspective, is not an act of human seeking, but of being sought after. God's initiative of relating precedes the human counterpart of the relationship. As one Jewish poem puts it:

I have sought Thy nearness;
 With all my heart have I called Thee;
 And going out to meet Thee
 I found Thee coming toward me.

If divine revelation, that is, God's "speaking" is God's decision and not at all dependent on human merit, revelation must be further characterized as *unconditional*. Its only foundation and reason is God's gracious goodness. In accord with this understanding is the inclusiveness of such revelation: the offer is extended to all regardless of position, condition or situation. No one is excluded *a priori*. As unconditional, God's offer is firm and never revoked no matter how we respond to it. Precisely because this initiative does not depend on us, it is totally dependable. "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases," says the book of Lamentations (3:22-23) in witness to God's faithfulness towards us. "God's mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning."

Such witness of our Tradition is most consoling, for we know that, regardless of what happens to us and no matter how far we stray from the right path, God will never abandon us. On the contrary, God will always offer forgiveness, as Jesus' parable of the merciful father assures us (cf. Lk. 15:11-24). This parable describes how God's word is faithful to a failure, a loser. Love, which manifests itself as forgiveness in sinful situations, is never withdrawn at any time. This may be foolishness when measured by human standards, but God is much more concerned with what happens to us and what we do to one another than God is about his or her own divine reputation.

Still the Judaeo-Christian Tradition insists that God's unconditional initiative to relate with us passionately and faithfully neither implies a coercion nor manipulation to respond in return. God's word to us is an offer, not an imposition. This is not a matter of love me or else as some past theological understanding seemed to have suggested. *Dei Verbum* makes this clear when it describes faith as an entrusting of

the whole self freely to God (D.V. 5). But we must not, however, conceive this word to us as neutral. The offer which comes from God in and through Jesus Christ has a bias for life and love. The offer, for instance, of love to another person is hardly neutral or indifferent to the possible response it can elicit. Such an offer is seeking for a genuine life-giving relationship. Revelation, God's offer of life and love, seeks relationship with those to whom it is extended as we have noted earlier.

Furthermore, revelation is not neutral in the sense that it empowers persons and peoples to respond affirmatively to the offer. In the words of the document: "If this faith is to be shown, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God..." The same passage asserts that it is the same Holy Spirit who constantly brings faith to completion.

B. Jesus the Word as Revelatory of the God Who Gives Life.

The second characteristic of *dabar* pertains to its not making a distinction between the person speaking and the word that is spoken. The one and the same term refers to both simultaneously. Speaking is a mode of being of the person. One might say that *dabar* envisions persons as communicating persons, *homo communicans*. Referring to what is spoken automatically indicates the person speaking. Conversely, the person speaking is known through the word spoken. If this is what is meant by "word" as suggested by *dabar*, then the phrase "word of God" is a Jewish cultural idiom for the very Self of God relating with us. The word of God is the GodSelf. In the prologue of St. John's gospel we read, in reference to Jesus as word, that "in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God" (Jn. 1:1).

Dabar, we noted, does not make a distinction between the person speaking and the word that is spoken. Thus, the word of God represents God as "speaking," as communicating. Whatever God communicates necessarily refers back to the God who is communicating. This is certainly true of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God speaking and God's speech, God's "*dabar*." As God's word, the divine is authentically and fully present in his person. In his humanity people genuinely encounter the divinity communicating the GodSelf. As *Dei Verbum* puts it:

To see Jesus is to see His Father (Jn. 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 (D.V., art. 4).

In the context of this second characteristic of *dabar* we need to ask just what is God “saying” or communicating to us that reflects on or reveals who He or She truly is? What is God “talking about” that gives us a glimpse of who He/She really is? Perhaps, a good way to answer the question is to reformulate the question into “what do we experience in what God is saying?” Bearing in mind that we are talking about Jesus of Nazareth who is God’s word, we can do no better than refer to what the first disciples have expressed about their experience of him. What was the content of this experience? *Dei Verbum* answers this question by pointing us to the testimony of John: “We announce to you the eternal life which was with the Father, and has appeared to us. What we have seen and have heard we announce to you, in order that you also may have fellowship with us, and that our fellowship may be with the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn. 1:2-3). What has been experienced and is now being proclaimed is “eternal life.” In biblical thought, “eternal life” is not equated with what is still to come. Eternal life is a reality which is already present here and now (cf. Jn. 6:54). Furthermore, the biblical understanding of eternal life does not limit such life within a so-called spiritual realm divorced from earthly, historical realities. Unlike the popularly held view arising from the pre-Vatican II catechism, which put the heavenly and the earthly in opposition, eternal life in the Bible concerns the quality of life in this world and beyond.

The Greek term used in the text of the first letter of John for “life” is “*zoe*” rather than “*bios*.” While the latter speaks of existence, the former means a positive quality of such existence. “*Zoe*” refers to a life worth living, a truly good life. The same word is used in Jesus’ announcement of what he brings: “I have come to bring life (*zoe*), life (*zoe*) in its fullness” (Jn. 10:10). Article 2 of *Dei Verbum* repeats this thought as an offer of full humanness when it uses the idiom “to share in the divine nature,” that is, to become fully human as God intends. Eternal life, then, can be described as the fullness of life which begins here on earth, to say the least, but is ultimately not totally experienced in this world. There is more to life than history can ever possibly manifest. This is so because eternal life is life rooted in *The Eternal*, who is the inexhaustible God.

What ought to be paid attention to more carefully is that God’s word is really the offer of life and love which includes and, therefore, begins with the goodness of life in this world. We cannot just be

lamenting that we are “mourning and weeping in this valley of tears” while we await true life in heaven. This would hardly be a compliment to our God who created the world and life to be delighted in. To live life to the hilt would be the better option, and it would surely be a grateful way of praising God who made everything good.

Finally, because of this essential link between the person speaking and the word spoken in *dabar*, a harmony and a consistency are implied between the person speaking and what he/she says. The weight of the word spoken is such that it fully represents the person speaking. And so authentic and trustworthy is the person who speaks that his/her word are real and reliable as the person. *Dabar* connotes integrity!

C. Jesus the Word as God's Effective and Transformative Presence

Thirdly, *dabar* denotes both action and communication. As deed and word, *dabar* means an event in nature or history as well as a spoken or written word. Indeed it can be described either as an *active* word or an *eloquent* deed. From the viewpoint of communication, *dabar* is active communication or communicative action. Deed and word combined constitute the reality of *dabar*. When reference is made, therefore, to someone speaking, we should think of something happening or being realized. *Dabar* as speech is communicative action. The document *Dei Verbum* clarifies further this relationship between deed and word thus:

This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of human beings is made clear to us in Christ, who is the Mediator and at the same time the fullness of all revelation (D.V., art. 2).

Given this last characteristic of *dabar*, the phrase “word of God” designates a God who is dynamically present in our lives and in our world for our sake. *Dabar* is deed or action. This manner of imaging God tells us of the divine word as not only communicative, but as effective and transformative as well. God's marvellous deeds are seen within this perspective of God's words. The creation narrative is illustrative of this point. There, when God “says” (*dabar*) something, something happens as when God says, “Let there be light” and “let there be separation of the land from the waters,” light comes into existence and the separation of the land from the waters happens. In accord with this meaning of *dabar*, references like “thus says the Lord

God," "God speaks," or the "word of the Lord," ought to be understood as the very Self of God as active in our midst. But of all God's "words," Jesus is God's *dabar* par excellence. Jesus is what God does! Jesus as the presence of God is an active, effective and transformative sort of presence. But what he does is revelatory at the same time; it has a message. This is why the Dominican theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, prefers to call him "the parable of God."

Where is this word of God spoken? What is the setting of revelation? Taking our cue from Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh, revelation, according to *Dei Verbum*, happens in history. History is the setting of human experiences and it is there that salvation (referred to by John as *zoe*) is proffered. Interestingly, Vatican II did not choose between "revelation" and "salvation" in this document. It simply employed the terms interchangeably. Articles 2, 3, and 4 shuttle back and forth between the two terms. As far as the Council was concerned, the history of salvation is the history of revelation and vice-versa. We sense from this how revelation is salvific or how salvation is revelatory. By mentioning history, the Council wanted to convey the conviction that the offer of life and love (salvation) happens in and through ordinary human experiences or in the nitty-gritty of life.

Salvation is truly experienced, albeit provisionally and fragmentarily, in ordinary human situations. It is not to be sought in a so-called "supernatural sphere" above the "natural realm" of earthly, secular life in society. In a very real sense, there is no salvation outside the world (E. Schillebeeckx). God is truly at work in the ordinary. This is what is extraordinary about revelation; it happens in the ordinary. What we call the history of salvation is really about our own particular human histories as communities of people, in and through which God's offer of life and love is experienced. Just as Israel had its own history of salvation, so also every Christian community in a given culture and society will have its unique history of salvation.

Summing Up

Jesus as God's *dabar* indicates to us how we may interpret God's very own communication to us. *What* God communicates is that which is life-giving (*zoe*). Even further, God communicates the GodSelf because what God says or communicates stands for His/Her very person. The simple reason as to *why* God communicates is contained in the Johannine declaration that "God so loved the world..." without conditions. And *when* does God communicate? On the basis of divine assurance that He/She is with us always, God's communication

(*dabar* as making no distinction between the person communicating and what is communicated) is continuous and faithful. God's *dabar*, ever hopeful, never gives up on the world. The locus, the *where*, of God's communication is history, the setting of our ordinary experiences in life: in the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age. Finally, the *how* of God's communication is clarified by pointing to life-giving relationships that is truly respectful of human freedom, not coercive nor manipulative! The word that is *dabar* is a world of relatedness and connections that genuinely humanizes.

I would like to suggest that these points emerging from the metaphor "Word of God" as representing Jesus are hints for Christian communicators and communication. The "Word" that is Jesus founds, inspires and models our manner of communicating. As this Word is a life-bringer, Christian communication is about life and for life. As this Word is a relational word, Christian communication is about loving and caring rather than procuring what promotes and benefits the self. The bottom line of Christian communication is the well-being of people and the world. As this Word is unconditionally committed to us and takes initiatives, Christian communication is pro-active on behalf of the Kingdom and does not succumb to the temptation to give up. As this Word is historically spoken and enacted, Christian communication makes sure that "nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in [its] heart" (cf. G.S. 1). As this Word is a word of relationality, Christian communication will seek after what binds, connects, links or bridges rather than what separates, detaches, unfastens or breaks apart.