

LEX ORANDI, LEX PREDICANDI: PLACED IN COMPANIONSHIP WITH A LABORING WORD

Precis: The Ministry of the Word pervades Ignatian Spirituality from the very beginning of the First Jesuits' ministries with Ignatius as their master. How does our spirituality as lived by us today and our prayer purified and enriched through the Spiritual Exercises, condition, prepare and permeate our "preaching of the Word?" "Lex orandi, lex predicandi" helps us self-examine ourselves on this issue and leaves us challenged.

Ignatius presents a Christ who is on the move, traveling through villages and visiting synagogues to preach the Kingdom, going where people dwell and work... Ignatius and his companions saw this as their unique call and charism: to choose to be with Christ as servants of his mission, to be with people where they dwell and work and struggle, to bring the Gospel into their lives and labors. (CG 34, Decree One, #3)

Recent scholarship on the relationship between the proclamation of the Word and the sacramental memorial have focused on the dynamism of the preaching event as a present, graced moment in which the assembly gathers to hear a Word that moves their hearts in such a way that the invitation to join in Christ's self-offering at the Table consecrates them as the Body of Christ.¹ Given this sacramental and liturgical context, in what way does the preacher first "hear" the Word to which s/he will give voice in preaching as the very presence of Christ?

Jesuits, in particular, have been weaned on the practice of pondering

the Word in the *Exercises*, in which the retreatant continually asks, as a way of approaching the scriptural text, to be placed in the *perichoretic* presence of the Trinity in intimate conversation, to be centered in God's desire, so that everything might be for the greater glory of this magnanimous Divine Majesty. But Ignatius does not stop there, this relational way of praying begs Mary to be a part of this companion-making with her Son and boldly asks the Father to deepen this intimacy with His Beloved Son, so that Christ's joys and sorrows, his struggles and triumphs together might shape the desires and choices we make in freedom to serve the Kingdom. This continual plea to "be placed with Christ" is the grace of Ignatius' own experience at LaStorta and the heart of the ministry of reconciliation for which the "Formula of the Institute"

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(#1) directs us. Our way of praying shapes our faith, much like the traditional dictum, *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi (lex orandi, lex credendi)*. Could we also ask whether our Jesuit praying shapes our preaching (*lex orandi, lex predicandi*)? Fr. Kolvenbach has stressed in "The Word: a Way to God according to Master Ignatius" that ". . . the author of the *Spiritual Exercises* places great confidence in speech as an instrument, a way, in which to meet God." A personal encounter takes place

when taking a scripture passage or a prayer and "savoring its sense," and so Fr. Kovenbach reminds us that "we cannot remain trapped in the text on the level of words" but must engage the "symbolical dimension of language" as a dialogue that effects "a true meeting with him, our Father."² Our sacramental ministry of preaching the Word expands the conversational circle and deepens the assembly's intimacy with Source and Wellspring of our gathering.

"Indeed, the Word of God is living and active," the Letter to the Hebrews says, "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow..." (Heb. 4.12). We experience the quality of the active presence of God's Word as a revelatory event out of our regular and persistent practice of Ignatian prayer, especially the

Examen. How, then, does such an encounter with the Word as a present and graced moment with Christ inform the manner in which we preach in our apostolic lives? If it is true, as Nadal said, that an essential character of the *Exercises* is an experience in which “the Word of God is declared,” how do we share the character of that proclamatory event in our ordinary ministry of sacramental preaching, indeed in all our apostolic efforts to reveal God at work through the human story of salvation?³ These reflections, hopefully, will contribute to such an important conversation. The people we serve are hungry for a Word to move them and a spirituality to anchor their lives.⁴ Our proclamation of the Word in the liturgy provides a privileged moment when ‘our way of proceeding’ engages the Christ “who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church.”⁵

In June of 2001, Fr. Timothy Radcliffe O.P., the former Master General of the Dominicans, addressed a worldwide gathering of Jesuit liturgists in Rome on “The Sacramentality of the Word” and its relationship to Jesuit worship, life, and our mission to preach the Good News.⁶ Fr. Radcliffe challenged the gathered assembly to face the often stark reality “that our words are not always filled with the power of God” and often cannot reach the hearts of those to whom we seek to bring “the Word of life” (Phil. 2.16), Jesus Christ.⁷ Most of us know the distancing our tepid efforts produce when we have forgotten the life revealed to us, which we have seen with our own eyes, touched with our own hands, revelatory of grace and mercy (1Jn. 1.1-5). In a world full of individualism, noise and easy distraction, Fr. Radcliffe concluded, preachers of the Word must ‘begin in silence’ and humbly face the “No” that holds us so far from our communal heart and the patient God who dwells there. It is only in that simple act of trust in all that we *cannot* say to salve or placate the struggles of our world that we *can* begin to speak of Word of grace and redemption and liberation to those to whom we are set among as preachers of the Word.

A revelatory, life-giving Word, from the dry and dusty places of our common longing, begins *to gather a people into communion* around Christ Jesus, whom Karl Rahner called God’s uttered “word of grace, reconciliation, and eternal life,” *for us*, in this time and place.⁸ To be true to this precious responsibility of ‘gathering in,’ Radcliffe noted, we “must

first of all tell the truth about human experience, its joy and sorrow.” By doing this, we participate in a great act of trust that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God’s story of love to us, will “disclose the true meaning of our lives.”⁹ Finally, Fr. Radcliffe reminded us that such truth telling in communion with Christ and one another points us toward the fullness of the Kingdom, whose standard we choose to follow and under which we labor with Christ for the life of the world. This does not all happen at once, but is a rhythm, like the breath of the Spirit,¹⁰ in which we speak a Word, the community hears and responds, and the whole dynamic encounter reaches us beyond the narrow confines of our own struggles, doubts, hungers and fears to the wider world of God’s tent, the Kingdom of justice, love, and mercy Christ came to announce as ‘fulfilled in our hearing’ (Luke 4.21).

I must admit that I have shaped my description of Fr. Radcliffe’s exhortation from the text of his words, but also around my own experience of our hearing them together on that hot, summer afternoon in Rome, and around the common spirituality that shapes our lives as

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members of a diverse Society throughout the world. Our call to preach a Word of “grace, reconciliation and eternal life” necessarily flows through the filter of our shared companionship and mission as Jesuits. Reflecting on this praying/preaching relationship, and noting well the powerful expression of communal affirmation that echoed throughout the aula as Fr. Radcliffe spoke, reveals to me something about how our

spirituality anchors the possibilities for apostolic preaching in the Society. In truth, a sacramentality of the Word embodying rich dimensions of possibility *needs* the uniqueness of different spiritual traditions to add texture and timbre to the harmony of the “one whole Word of God”¹¹ in which we share as members of the Church.

Many rich traditions of praying illuminate the dynamic of *lex orandi, lex predicandi*. We do not own the arena of the ambo as Jesuits. We are

not Benedictines, for whom the Word announces itself in the privileged arena of the *Opus Dei*, where *lectio continua* is the mode of the revelatory Word that rhythmically shapes the monastic community in their communal life of praise and work. Nor do we ponder and savor the Word in community, as Dominicans do, in order that they themselves, as an Order of Preachers, may become what Dominic himself affectionately called the early community, “The Holy Preaching,” a community of friars and sisters, learned and skilled laborers, vigorous and aged, all preaching the Word through every task of the life they share. We are challenged by Franciscan poverty, a call to honesty and simplicity for us as Jesuits, which gives voice to a Word-made-flesh in the poor and voiceless, and this spiritual lens shapes their ministry of preaching the Word in the world today. All of these charisms participate in the tapestry of God’s endlessly eventful Word, and at the same time they ask us to imagine how the spirituality of our worldwide brotherhood might nourish the God we proclaim, the Jesus we reveal as Word of life, and the Spirit that moves and breathes in all that is. In short, how does a Jesuit encounter with the Word help us “to find God in all things” and thereby help the world to know and choose and honor Christ, the glory of the Father, who together share their gifts of mutual loving in the power of the Spirit, poured out upon us?

Placed as Companions with a Laboring Word. In light of this question, I propose that we imagine our peculiarly Jesuit identity as preachers of the Word in terms which the 34th General Congregation offered us so powerfully. We are companions of Christ, who calls us ‘to labor with him as he labors in the world’ (*GC34, D.1, #4-5*). Even more, in the spirit of Ignatius’ own desire that courses throughout the prayers, meditations, and contemplations of the Exercises, we ask to be *placed* with this laboring Word. The dynamism of intimacy and mission situates *how* we ponder the richness of the texts we encounter and *whose heart* interprets them within us. Within Christ’s own

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Body (in all the multivalent richness that suggests to us), we imagine the God who speaks through the movements of affection, praise, contrition, and challenge that often arise in that interchange between the Laborer, his Companions, and the Keeper of the Vineyard in which we work together to sow the seeds of life today. It is important to note here that the field of God's sowing, the people with whom we work and live and pray, is the primary locus of the harvest proclamation. In truth, as true apostolic servants of the Word who honor the grace of this field of our laboring, we can only say, 'We are merely servants of a laboring Word; we have done no more than our duty.' Our Jesuit encounter with the Word is always a gift, given for the service of the whole Body, for the life of the world.

I encourage us to consider the intentionality of being "placed with Christ," which was Ignatius' great desire in his prayer and vision at LaStorta. This orienting desire, which springs from a well much deeper than any proximate wish of the early companions to go to Jerusalem or gather into a corporate body in a common purpose, locates us first "with him" and invites us to contemplate the Word "through him" and to allow its transforming grace to act "in his Body" and thus, in our laboring. What does this deeper desire mean, other than Ignatius' own continual refrain at every stage of the Exercises: to know him, to love him, and to follow him at every dimension of our lives, i.e. in the height, breadth, and depth of the One who calls us into union with his Father, 'in whom we live and move and have our being.'¹² Near the beloved Christ is the place in which we choose to be, the air of discerning breath we breathe, the eyes and ears and voice that bodies forth the power and mercy of a God who called us all out of darkness into his own wonderful light, to proclaim the mighty acts of Jesus. (1Pet. 2.9).

In light of this, Paul's powerful testament to the absolute freedom we have in Christ, in light of which everything else is "loss" and "rubbish," if only "I may gain Christ and be found in him" (Phil. 3.7-11), marks this intimacy of place as sacramental and incarnate and transformative, as much for Paul as it was for Ignatius and, I believe, for every Jesuit. *Placed as companions with a laboring Word* means that we have a new life orientation, a consecration in which Christ is rendered present as a redemptive Word in our midst when we seek his intimate presence at the

heart of all life. Again, in the words of the great preacher Paul,

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nothing to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rm. 8.35, 37-39)

The intimacy with Christ for which we pray so insistently throughout the *Exercises*, therefore, provides a standpoint from which the lectionary and sacramental expressions of the assembly truly come alive and are fulfilled in the faithful hearing, in us who preach and those who hear. We are always asking: *where is Christ in this place and where are we? How is he acting and how might we act in solidarity with him? Where is the light and darkness? What tugs at heart of the Body of Christ as she labors within this world in this time and place?* Placed in companionship with a laboring Word effects this true meeting and animates our zeal to preach the Good News.

Whoever wishes to come with me has to be content with the same food I eat, and the drink, and the clothing which I wear, and so forth. So too each one must labor with me during the day, and keep watch in the night, and so on, so that later each one may have a part with me in the victory, just as each has shared in the toil. (*SpEx* #93)

Preaching the Word: vulnerable, incarnate, and laboring. ‘Seeing him, loving him, and following him,’ the gift of our way of praying, can certainly begin to transform our preaching when every person, text, and sacramental moment becomes a field in which the treasure of his presence and life-giving Spirit are buried. Such a task recognizes that the Word, first of all, is *vulnerable*. “The Word of Life” does not exist in isolating splendor, cut off from the field in which it is sown. Consequently, simplistic interpretations and univocal meanings can never

open up a Word whose vulnerability lies in the very desire of the Trinity to send Christ to be with the sons and daughters of humankind, where they are and as they are (*Sp Ex #106*). Immersing ourselves in the real world in which the laboring Word is active asks that we ourselves know and ask to be placed in that world, love it from within, and intensely desire its freedom to respond to this gift which God is offering us (Jn. 4.10). That is a vulnerable place to be, a dynamic and organic field of planting, which continually needs to be tilled afresh. We are the instruments who are not afraid to be employed to do a little digging, especially when the biblical Word we hear sounds hollow and dry and disengaged from the sacramental context and the lives of the people in which Christ comes in the proclamation.

The laboring Christ acts as the *incarnate* Word of the Father. To know, to love, and to follow this Word-made-flesh suggests that theological ideas must always be accompanied by images and experiences of being human and creaturely and relational. An embodied Word such as this looks also at the gaps and inconsistencies in the stories and prayers and exhortations that make up the Good News in all its richness, and always seeks to find a thread of grace weaving itself through conflict and resolution, lament and joy, condemnation and affirmation... even to the point of leaving the ultimate answer in the hands of the mysterious God we ponder. Furthermore, lectionary passages are part of a greater revelation and they are set against the sacramental Word enacted at font and table, expressed in reconciliation, vocational commitment and the balm of anointing, embodied in minister and assembly, the poor and the rich, the sick and the healthy, the revered holy ones and the forgotten and voiceless. We must always ask as Jesuit preachers: can every one who gathers find an *incarnate Word made flesh* that they can see and hear and recognize as brother and Savior and Lord? Celibate men do not have the corner on humanity. We all need to see a fresh face of Christ, 'alive in eyes and limbs not his, through the features of many different faces.' The poor and the voiceless especially, as our documents remind us, who are most in number in our world, yet at the same time the most invisible and silent in articulating its longing and desires, orient the preaching task of finding Christ and following him. Choosing to be where the incarnate Christ labors as a starting point for preaching, begging Mary to show us,

and the Father to bring us, to their Son, bodies forth the Word as truly “in our midst.” Our mission is intimate and conversational, always in companionship.

Finally, the Jesus who companions us is a *laboring* Christ, with all the activity and toil that implies. Labor is hard work. Fashioning words and images, phrases and transitions, silent pauses and rhythmic tension comprises the mode of proclamation of a dynamic, sacramental Word. For the preacher, poetry, narrative literature, and the arts provide a way to knead the imagination, so that time-honored texts invigorate themselves in the artistic unfolding and the rhetorical enactment. Nor can we ignore the sciences. Puzzling about nature, the environment, and the glories of creation stimulate wonder and widen the parameters of our own narrow little worlds. This insatiable curiosity about life and the cosmos has infected Jesuit mission from its early inception. Every field of human creativity provides help in preaching a laboring Word. Our ongoing formation as preachers, therefore, surpasses the familiar confines of biblical exegesis. The “matter” and “form” of this sacramental activity requires labor that stretches us out of the safe and familiar, wrestles with the paradoxical, and orients the hope and glory in the One who labors to redeem the world through our labors. Christ could use an easier way to speak a Word of grace. The vulnerable, incarnate, and laboring Word chooses this world, real people, faltering voices and talents. Such is the awesome Mystery. “Take, Lord, and receive,” we say, “all is yours now.”

As “Servants of Christ’s Mission,” therefore, our rich legacy of spirituality which Ignatius has given to the Church bodies forth a life of prayer for us that gives meaning and zeal to everything we do as Jesuits. The preaching ministry, from the beginning, found a central place in Ignatius’ vision of that mission.¹³ How these labors inform and enrich one another – *lex orandi, lex predicandi* – continually needs to be mined and employed in our search to be placed with Christ “for the greater honor and glory of God.”

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ENDNOTES

1. Cf. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: the Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001), Mary Katherine Hilker, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997), Paul A. Janowiak S.J., *The Holy Preaching: The Sacramentality of the Word in the Liturgical Assembly* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000).
2. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach S.J., *The Road from LaStorta* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000), 155-156, 158. He cites *SpEx* #54 and Ignatius' *Diary* 127, 128 as examples of this intimacy with the Trinity through word and speech.
3. *M Nadal Epistolae P. Hieronymi Nadal Societatis Jesu ab anno 1546 and 1577*, 5:343. For a historical and theological account of the broad role of "word-sacrament-works" in the early Society, cf. John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), ch. 3, "Ministries of the Word of God," 91-133.
4. Authentic preaching and a dynamic spirituality are the two highest hopes and expectations of an ecumenical sampling of Christian denominations, including Roman Catholic, in the important American study by Dean R. Hoge, et al, *Patterns of Parish Leadership: Cost and Effectiveness in Four Denominations* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1988). The hunger is real and the desire of the "millions in the middle" of the Church could not be more clearly articulated. Our preaching, then, is not a matter of personal taste or temperament.
5. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Vatican II, #7.
6. Radcliffe's address is reprinted in a compendium of the Rome, 2001, meeting in *Liturgy in a Postmodern World* (London/NY: Continuum, 2001), ed. Keith F. Pecklers S.J., 133-147.
7. *Ibid.*, 134.
8. Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, trans. W.J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 15.
9. Radcliffe, 139, 141.
10. *Ibid.*, 146.
11. Rahner, "The Word and the Eucharist," trans. Kevin Smyth in *Theological Investigations*, vol. IV (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 279.
12. Cf. Acts 17:28; Preface for Sundays in Ordinary Time VI.
13. Cf. O'Malley, 92.