

Experiencing the Word of God in the Celebration of Sacraments and Para- Liturgical Services

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Introduction

Experiencing the Word of God has got its foundation from the time beyond history and from the beginning of the salvation history. That is, Noah not only entered into the Ark (cf. Gen 7:13) but also experiencing the Word of God, he entered into the Mystery of God, the first covenant God ever made with humankind (cf. Gen 8:1; 9:10-17). Abraham also entered into the Mystery of God by experiencing and believing the Word of God. Likewise, on the one hand, we can further see in the Old Testament that Moses (Ex 4:1-17), Isaiah (Isa 6:1-9), Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-10), Ezekiel (Ezek 2:9-3:4) were touched by God's word and experiencing His word, they believed in Him. On the other hand, in the New Testament that Mother Mary, the first and the foremost disciple of Jesus Christ and the other apostles were touched by the Word of God and delved into the mystery of God.

The word, proclaimed to the above mentioned biblical persons, is again and again proclaimed in the church communally and in some devotions particularly. The Word of God is experienced by everyone according to his/her own situation. Here we look into the different experiential

aspects of the Word of God in the celebration of the sacraments and para-liturgical services.

Part – I: In the Celebration of the Sacraments

1. The Importance of the Word of God in the Sacraments

The Word of God has occupied an important place in the liturgical celebration as well as in the public and the private life of every Christian. The Conciliar and the post-Conciliar documents emphasize upon the importance of the Word of God used in the liturgical/sacramental celebrations (Cf. General Instruction to the Roman Lectionary – GIRL, 1). For, it redeems all people; it heals the sick; it supports the weak; it comforts the discomfort; it protects the poor; it helps the hopeless; it shows sympathy; it fights against evil and it shares God's providence to all. Thus we can see here the unity between the Word of God and the sacraments (Cf. *Verbum Domini*, 53). Hereby we explain more about the importance of the Word of God in the celebration of the sacraments through some dimensions.

1.1. The Initiative Act of the Primordial Sacrament

All the sacraments are the initiative acts of the Primordial Sacrament (*Ursakrament*), Christ who instituted them. In the celebration of all the sacraments, the Word of God plays an important role which specifies, first of all, that God still speaks to his people (GIRL, 12) and all the same we can say that Christ Himself, the Word proclaimed is proclaiming the salvific will of God, the sign of the eschatological salvation (J. McManus, *The Healing Power of the Sacraments*, 19). Christ's initiative acts are further

manifested through the word in the sacramental celebrations. As Jesus Christ was on the earth, wherever he went, he could, through his presence, do good things and healed all those under the power of the devil (cf. Acts 10:38) so also through His presence in the word in all the sacraments He brings mercy, kindness, compassion and love to us whenever they are administered. As a result the reign of God is started in the heart of humankind and the continuity of God's action in each and everyone and in the world is realized.

Christ, the Good Shepherd, revealing the loving heart of the Father, proclaims His presence – *Immanuel* – in our own joys and sorrows. He brings happiness to us through His words of concern and expels the darkness in a person and enkindles his heart that he may see the new light. Here the ministry of Christ in the sacramental celebration is to make one happy in Him and to heal the whole person and the community of the faithful. Thus He promises us through the word that He is our saviour, redeemer, deliverer, rock, protector, stronghold and friend.

1.2. The Proclaiming Act of the Fundamental Sacrament

At the outset, the Word of God is God's gift to the Church, the fundamental sacrament. In return, the Church has the desire and the mission of unfolding the richness of the Word of God throughout the Liturgical Year whenever the celebration of the sacraments takes place (GIRL, 3). The mission of the Church is the ministry of the Word. Therefore, she proclaims the wonderful works of God who saves, heals, delivers, comforts, strengthens, enlightens, blesses and above all loves immensely and further she makes us known the Mystery of Christ found both in the

Old Testament and the New Testament. Through the proclamation the Church brings out the message which is Christ himself; she also communicates in abundance the treasures of the truth of Christ;¹ she manifests the whole ministry of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and nourishes her children (cf. GIRL, 5, 10, 24) as they receive Christ from the proclamation in the celebration. The Church further announces in the celebration of sacraments the word of faith, the word of hope, the word of charity, the word of strength, the word of healing, the word of forgiveness, the word of light, the word of joy, etc.

The proclamation done by the Church really makes the congregation prepare to listen to the Word of God attentively with thirst and hope and to celebrate the sacrament worthily and fruitfully with praise and thanks. As a result, the proclamation of the Word of God builds up the Church or a community of believers as one family and also the Kingdom of God under and by the primordial sacrament. Through the proclaiming act the Church makes the people obedient children of God and it strengthens them by showing the Lord's love and her concern towards their bodily and spiritual welfare.

1.3. The Witnessing Act of the Partaker of the Sacrament

God Himself who proclaims the Good News and the name of Jesus² Christ and who is proclaimed by His Son and the Church blesses the people through showering the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, who strengthened the apostles to experience and witness the Word of God and who continues to give power to a Christian to call God 'Abba', 'Father' (cf. Gal 4:6) also gives the same power to the partaker – receiver, listener and seer – of the sacrament

to be a life witness to the Word of God (cf. GIRL, 12). As apostles, by proclaiming the Word of God, preaching the Good News and healing the society in His name (cf. Lk 10:17; Phil 2:9-11)³, had witnessed to the Name of Jesus, so also we have to honour and witness to his name through experiencing the presence of name, Immanuel in the celebration of the sacraments.

Since the celebration of the Word of God is an integral part of each sacramental celebration, a Christian by hearing and experiencing the word of God receives strength through the union with Christ, the Word to face his/her own life condition. As he/she receives a message of hope, that is the salvation of the world, from the proclamation, he/she has to bear witness to it by living according to the Word. Witnessing here means that by listening to the proclamation of the Word of God one becomes certain and sufficient of God's grace. By receiving grace and power coming out of the Word of God, he/she is able to make the Church of Christ grow. It is, therefore, a witness of a partaker of the sacrament in praying, praising and thanking for one another as a result of listening to the Word of God in the sacramental celebration. It is also a witness of a Christian when he/she feels the need, desire, wish and the sickness of the other through the experience of the Word of God. Thus the relationship between God and humankind, among men and women which is maintained and relived shows the witnessing character of a partaker in building up the Kingdom of God through the sacramental celebration.

2. The Word of God in the Celebration of the Sacraments

2.1. Word – A Call to enter into God’s Mystery

While the sacraments are doors to the sacredness of God, the Word of God in the sacramental celebration is the key to enter into the Mystery of that Sacred. As the Word of God is presented during the sacramental celebration, it brings to our mind the salvific act of God (cf. GIRL, 4) and the experience of the Living God who continues to reveal Himself to his people. Experiencing the Word of God becomes an immediate source for entering into the mystery of God that one may enter in the saving act of God. This immediate source calls for, on the one hand, *metanoia* (a ‘U’ turn) in one’s life that he/she may approach the mystery of God, His divine, loving and blessing providence and on the other hand, for glorification of God and sanctification of humankind.

2.2. Word – A Call to experience the Love of Christ

As the whole mystery is entered in us, there is a call to experience the love of Christ through the mystery of incarnation, resurrection and salvation. As St Paul says that all what he wanted was to know Christ (Cf. Phil 3:10), so also the Word of God treats us to know Christ and to experience his purifying love, strengthening love, sacrificing love, forgiving love, healing love, shepherding love and thus his unconditional love. By his new and everlasting covenantal love we are washed, strengthened, nourished, forgiven, healed, called to serve and love one another.

2.3. Word – A Call to Encounter with Christ

When Pope John Paul II addressed the Asian Bishops, he emphasized upon their absolute priority that was to be paid attention in evangelization of the death and the resurrection of Christ. As the Word of God is presented during the sacramental celebration, it calls us to encounter with Christ or with the death and the resurrection of Christ through our response (cf. GIRL, 6) in singing, praying, reflecting in silence, etc. in the same expressions of God's words. This leads us to the active participation in the celebration through which the grace of God flows into everyone (cf. GIRL, 44). By partaking actively in the sacramental celebration, the Word of God, which "is alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword" (Heb 4:12) pierces into our hearts to live in Christ (cf. Gal 2:20). As every sacramental celebration is a joyful celebration, the Word that we hear during every celebration, whether of joyful situation or of sorrowful situation, it takes us to enter into union with Christ.

2.4. Word – A Call to deepen One's Faith

As Faith has got its beginning in the Word of God (GIRL, 10), the word further invites us to delve into the Mystery and to deepen our faith in God. This will pave the way for the continuous spiritual growth in us. There is a call to us from the proclamation of the Word of God to get healed from the sickness of the lack of faith in God's infinite love and mercy to deepen our faith in Him. It is not only the liturgy of the Word of God that contains the biblical words, but also the entire sacramental celebration is incorporated with the Word of God that evokes and becomes an activating tool of faith. By having deep faith in the Word

of God during the sacramental celebration only, the community of faith and the faithful of the Christian community can listen, ponder and pray with more confidence (SC, 9).

2.5. Word – A Call to be a People of God

By the deep Faith we are called to be built up as the Church, as a People of God (cf. GIRL, 7; cf. *Evangelii Gaudium* – EG, 112). Being the People of God, we are commissioned to proclaim the Word of God and to witness to it (GIRL, 7). As there was a call to Christ to be a suffering servant through the Word of God (Behold my beloved Son), as there was a call to Mary to be the Mother of God (cf. Lk 1:30b-31a) and as there was a call to some to be disciples (cf. Mt 4:19) through the Word of God, so also to us through the Word of God in the sacramental celebration to be his brother, sister and mother (cf. Mt 12:50), disciple (cf. Mt 8:22), that is, to be His people (cf. Lk 9:23). Becoming His people we have to share His word to the others so that the Lord can enter into the lives of others and bless them too. By sharing God's word with the others we announce them the good news of God's strengthening, comforting, healing and forgiving love.

Part – II: In the Para-Liturgical Services

Para-liturgical services, whether they are devotions to Eucharist, to Mary, to saints, etc., or prayers or pilgrimages or novenas or manual of devotions or personal and public prayers in the churches or any blessing or ceremonies or rituals, though not part of the official Liturgy, have got a very special role in the life of the Catholic Church

and in every catholic. They bring the richness of the Liturgy within the reach of all. That richness is found through the Word of God read, explained and celebrated in those services. As the para-liturgical services are also *Christocentric*, in the light of the Scriptures, the entire mystery of Christ is understood, for example Son of God, uncreated wisdom, infinite charity, principle of the salvation and sanctification of humankind. The Church, proclaiming the Word of God in these services unfolds the mystery of God achieved in the life of the saints, hidden in the prayers, celebrated in the other popular devotions and realized in the sacramentals. The Word of God becomes the privileged and the essential instrument of the Holy Spirit in the worship of the Catholics.⁴

Celebration of the Word of God in the para-liturgical services offers different elements of expressions, for example, in the form of prayers, songs, meditation and sharing. The Word of God, by its very nature of proclamation, also creates a catechesis in the participants.⁵

Even though the para-liturgical services also start with the Trinitarian formula, after that we are led to very important scriptural word, "The peace of the Lord be with you always". The concept of plural, *vobiscum* invites every single person to share this 'peace of the Lord' with all. This invites all to be in union and harmony with one another gathered in the faithful community. Here we are going to explain about the various visions and pastoral orientations imbued in the Word of God, a part of para-liturgical services.

1. Different Visions in the Para-Liturgical Services

The para-liturgical services have got certain following visions which, of course, hail from the background of scriptural words:

1.1. Conversional Vision

The Word of God in the para-liturgical services motivates the faithful for self realization and conversion (cf. Lk 15:17-19). In the conversation between God and man through the Scriptures a conversion takes place. Finally it leads to achieve a full, perfect and new life (cf. Gal 2:20).

1.2. Celebrative Vision

The Word of God takes the faithful to listen and to enjoy the mystery of God (cf. Mt 6:9), of Christ (cf. Mt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19), of the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments (DPPL 89), of the Church (cf. Mt 16:18) and of every single participant (cf. Rom 12:10).

1.3. Liturgical Vision

Not only the liturgical celebrations, but also the para-liturgical services have the liturgical vision. The Word of God moves the hearts of the faithful to ponder over the mysteries of Christ, to encounter Christ, and to lead to and to find and worship Him in the liturgy and to follow him in relationship with human (cf. SC, 13).

1.4. Apostolic Vision

At the end of the Holy Mass every member of the Church is sent away as an apostle to live and preach the Good News in the society. The para-liturgical services, in which the Word of God forms us to be messengers of God, are also the further channels to carry out the mission of

witnessing to one's faith in Christ alone and to his unique role of universal salvation.

1.5. Communitarian Vision

In their journey towards the Kingdom of God, the Word of God invites the faithful to be steadfast in the teaching of the apostles, to have a good relationship, to share bread and the property with one another and to pray together (cf. Acts 2:42; 3:32). Thus the Word of God spotlights on the communitarian aspect of building up the community.

1.6. Ecclesial Vision

The Word of God is proclaimed by the Church, in the Church and for the Church. That means, all actions of a Christian through the power of the Holy Spirit are by their very nature ecclesial. The Word of God brings the faithful together to form the mystical body of Jesus Christ, the Church. It builds up the new temple of the New Testament (cf. 2 Cor 6:16). The vision of the Church is, therefore, to save the members of the Church as the new people of God.

1.7. Eschatological Vision

In the para-liturgical services processions are also carried out. They signify the eschatological procession that leads to heaven which is our motherland as St Paul says (cf. Phil 3:20). The Word of God which gives the eternal life (cf. Jn 6:68) helps us to recall the salvific act of God and to find the way to heaven.

2. Pastoral Orientation

a. In the para-liturgical services we should remember the teaching of the Church. That is, the faithful should be encouraged to read the Scriptures during these periods of

para-liturgical services which become also an inexhaustible source of inspiration and prayers. The reading of the Word of God should be promoted in the families on the basis for preparation for the reception of sacraments and celebration of all popular devotions. It is recommended that these services should take account of biblical texts with necessary commentary.⁶

b. Para-liturgical services should be centred on Jesus Christ and his mission to the wider community and rooted in the culture of the people.

c. Para-liturgical services imbued with the Word of God should create in a catholic the liturgical and the spiritual responsibilities for welfare of the Church and community.

d. They should be harmonized with the liturgical year and seasons so that the Word of God will prepare the faithful to enjoy the liturgical day accordingly and meaningfully. Therefore the Word of God should be proclaimed adequately.

e. Time for sacred silence, the atmosphere of prayer and knowledge of poor are very much needed to meditate on the Word of God who lives amidst us, and to have a dialogue with him and to take care of the poor respectively.

f. Time should be found to give catechesis to the people during the celebration of the Word of God in order to have spiritual and integral growth, to meet today's challenges and to find meaning to their lives.

Part – III: The Challenges Departing from the Word of God

The Word of God gives us the way,

□ to pray,

- like Jesus that the will of God may be done (cf. Lk 22:42) and to pray with a deeper faith using the scriptural word, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46);
- like Mary that the will of God may be done (cf. Lk 1:38) and to pray with a deeper faith using the scriptural word, “My soul magnifies the Lord” (Lk 1:47);
- like Peter, that is, to put one’s trust in Him (cf. Jn 6:68).

□ to open our minds,

- to the mystery of God;
- to the mystery of Cross;
- to receive and to rejoice in the Word of God;
- to understand the Scriptures, that is, with one mind and heart.

□ to say total ‘yes’ to the will of God,

- like Christ;
- like Mary; that is, complete offering to God.

□ to repent and forgive,

- marching towards a new life, that is, becoming conscious of our need for repentance and forgiveness.

□ **to proclaim,**

➤ His message/word with all boldness in His name, that is sharing one's mercy, love and forgiveness.

□ **to face,**

➤ today's challenges; that is, self-confidence and trust in the Word of God will be the criteria for that.

□ **to hope for the Eternal Life, that is, to enjoy the everlasting relationship with God.**

□ **(Added) to love,**

➤ the sacraments and the para-liturgical services:

- 33rd Week, Monday: John writes to the seven Churches of Asia, esp. to the Angel of the Church of Ephesus, "the love which was in you in the beginning is not found now" (Rev 1:1-4; 2:1-5a);
- that enkindles me when this reading was read and I applied it to my celebration of sacraments, etc.

Conclusion

Hearing the Word of God in the sacramental celebration one could personally experience the real and the greater value of the word of Jesus Christ/God, during the proclamation of the Word of God in the celebration of the sacraments and the para-liturgical services, that it is pierced into his/her and my heart adaptively as follows: "You are my beloved child" (Baptism - cf. Mt 3:17); "You will be my witness till the ends of the earth" (Confirmation - cf. Acts 1:8); "I am the vine and you are my branches" (Head and body respectively, Eucharist - cf. Jn 15:1ff); "You are also a forgiver as I am" (Confession - cf. Mt 18:35);

“You are precious to me” (Anointing of the sick – cf. Mt 8:2); “You are the light of the world” (Priesthood – cf. Mt 5:14) and “You are the salt of the earth” (Marriage – cf. Mt 5:13) and “You are a worshipper” (Para-liturgy – cf. Gen 22:5; cf. Rom 12:1). With such examples can everyone feel and experience like the Psalmist “How sweet are thy words to my taste, sweeter than honey in my mouth” (Ps 119:103) and like the Emmaus disciples that “Were not our hearts filled with ardent yearning when he was talking to us on the road and explaining the scriptures?” (Lk 24:32)?

Evaluating the Experience of the Word of God

A. Criteria for Evaluating the Celebration of the Sacraments

1. The celebration of the word of God – ritual oriented or life oriented?
2. Do the people give importance to the liturgy of the Word?
3. What are the pre-occupations that hinder in listening to the word of God?
4. Is the Word of God as source of Christian Life?
5. Are we the messengers of the word of God?

B. Criteria for Evaluating Para-Liturgy

1. Do they promote the values of the Kingdom of God: justice, collaboration, equality, fellowship and freedom?
2. Do they have a special role for the liturgy of the Word?
3. Does para-liturgy play a greater role in the life of the Catholics?

4. Do they promote any superstition and selfish motivation among the faithful?
5. Do they give any inspiration for the better participation in the liturgy?

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Source

Church Documents:

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1. Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 2011.
2. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2014.

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3. McMANUS, Jim, *The Healing Power of the Sacraments*, Mumbai: St Paul's, 2010.
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2. NEUNER, J., "Theology of Popular Devotions", *Word and Worship* 14/6 (1981) 181-188.
3. SOOSA PAKIAM, M., "Re-dynamising the Life of the Church with the 'Word'", *Word and Worship* (2009) 20-28.

Endnotes

¹ J. McManus, *The Healing Power of the Sacraments* (Mumbai: St Paul's, 2010), 28, 39.

² Cf. Phil 2:9-11: "... God ... gave him the name that is greater than any other name".

³ "... even the demons obeyed us when we gave them a command in your name"; "... all will openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father".

⁴ Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Directory on Popular Piety and The Liturgy. Principles and Guidelines*, (Hereafter DPPL) NBCLC, Bangalore 2007, n. 166, 87, 89; cf. SC 104.

⁵ DPPL, n. 194

⁶ DPPL, n. 165; 68, 88.