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The Word in the penitential service for the formation of conscience

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Abstract

The Word in the penitential service for the formation of conscience

Among earthly creatures, the human person alone is capable of discerning truth, goodness, and beauty. His path toward knowledge of what is most essential is marked by proposals and presupposes making choices. Human freedom in decision-making is bound up with the gift of life and the right to life. In his development, the living human person is oriented toward community—through bonds of blood, of faith, and of mutual support. Within the human community, one discovers and comes to know oneself and others through the word. In accepting the gift of faith, one hears the words of Jesus Christ: “Repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15). Common listening to the Word of God is an extraordinary opportunity to know the truth and to embody it with courage. Contemporary social conditions are marked by the atomization of individuals and, at the same time, by a profound longing for community and security. Through the word, the human person discovers the path to a well-formed conscience and to the cultivation of attitudes ordered to the good of both the individual and the community.

Keywords: Word, community, unity, conversion, forgiveness, love

Abstrakt

Słowo w nabożeństwie pokutnym w służbie kształtowania sumienia

Wśród ziemskich stworzeń jedynie osoba ludzka jest zdolna do rozeznawania prawdy, dobra i piękna. Jej droga ku poznaniu tego, co najistotniejsze, jest naznaczona propozycjami i zakłada dokonywanie wyborów. Ludzka wolność w podejmowaniu decyzji jest nierozzerwalnie związana z darem życia i prawem do życia. W swoim rozwoju żyjąca osoba ludzka jest zorientowana na wspólnotę – poprzez więzy krwi, wiary i wzajemnego wsparcia. Wewnątrz ludzkiej wspólnoty człowiek odkrywa i poznaje samego siebie oraz innych poprzez słowo. Przyjmując dar wiary, słyszy słowa Jezusa Chrystusa: „Nawracajcie się i wierźcie w Ewangelię” (Mk 1, 15). Wspólne słuchanie Słowa Bożego jest niezwykłą okazją do poznania prawdy i mężnego realizowania jej w życiu. Współczesne uwarunkowania społeczne charakteryzują się atomizacją jednostek, a jednocześnie głęboką tęsknotą za wspólnotą i bezpieczeństwem. Przez słowo osoba ludzka odkrywa drogę do dobrze uformowanego sumienia oraz do kształtowania postaw ukierunkowanych na dobro zarówno jednostki, jak i wspólnoty.

Słowa kluczowe: Słowo, wspólnota, jedność, nawrócenie, przebaczenie, miłość

The Church lives by the Word sent by the Father—Jesus Christ; in Him we encounter the living God through the sacraments. Contemporary teaching underscores the value of the first sacrament—the holy Baptism, which cleanses from the stain of original sin and introduces into the community of believers. From this perspective arises the doctrine of sin and Redemption. In the face of a weakened sense of sin, it seems that the doctrine of penance and reconciliation can help to rediscover a personal relationship with God. Reconciliation is not merely an external sign or an appearance of peace achieved. Preaching must emphasize that the human being is a child of God: sinful, yet redeemed and beloved. Preachers are to serve as witnesses and mystagogues, plumbing the mysteries of Sacred Scripture and Tradition so that both the one who proclaims and the one who listens welcome the reflection on the Word of God as a salvific event.

In this way moralism and laxism alike are avoided. Proclaiming the truth of God who reconciles humanity in Jesus Christ opens out onto the realism of life. Preaching aimed at conversion and the formation of attitudes is never a mere catalogue of the effects of sin or a subjective description of the human condition; it is an entry into relationship with God and with others. Since the apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* of St. John Paul II, relational and personal dimensions have been emphasized in the sacraments and in the Word that is to transform and strengthen the person from within; at the same time, a Christological orientation becomes manifest.

1. The Word for reconciliation and the building up of communion

God accomplishes His Revelation through the word. It is a personal act of the self-revealing God, who enters into a relationship with the human person founded on truth and love. God engages the human being both intellectually and dynamically. The Word of God contains the very essence of reality as it discloses itself in action, thereby becoming graspable in time and space. God reveals Himself through the mission of the prophets, who uncover the meaning of salvation history and guide us in its understanding and fulfilment. God manifests Himself in the work of

creation and gives signs that forge a bond with humanity. All anticipations reach fulfilment in the written word of the Old Testament and find their plenitude in the full Revelation of Jesus Christ, the Word, “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15). The glory of the Incarnate Word, “full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14), is made present in the person, words, and deeds of Jesus Christ. He speaks “as one having authority” (Mk 1:22); “His words will not pass away” (cf. Mk 13:23, 31); and life and salvation depend upon receiving and fulfilling them (cf. Mt 7:24–27; Lk 8:11–15; 11:28; Jn 15:7–8). The Church bears the deposit of the Revelation accomplished in Jesus Christ in the words of Sacred Scripture and through authentic witnesses.¹

The Word of God is addressed to the human person for dialogue, for encounter. Dialogue is something more than the communication of truths. This is not about things but this dialogue touches the good within the human person that must be discovered. In the light of the Holy Spirit, the words written in Scripture serve the truth, enabling us to look with humility and gratitude upon our role in speaking and in listening². On December 2, 1984, Pope John Paul II promulgated the apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, fruit of the Synod of Bishops on penance and reconciliation in the contemporary world. The document opens with an image of a world marked by division, yet yearning for reconciliation:

The church's charism and likewise her unique nature vis-a-vis reconciliation, at whatever level it needs to be achieved, lie in the fact that she always goes back to that reconciliation at the source. For by reason of her essential mission, the church feels an obligation to go to the roots of that original wound of sin in order to bring healing and to re-establish, so to speak, an equally original reconciliation which will be the effective principle of all true reconciliation.³

In this document, the Pope uses biblical images and, by invoking the parable of the prodigal son, leads to Christ, the agent of reconciliation. Notably, John Paul II devotes considerable attention to the elder brother

1 Cf. S. Hareźga, *Słowo*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 18, ed. S. Wilk, Lublin, c. 403–406.

2 Cf. Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24.11.2013, 142 and 146.

3 John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 2.04.1982, 4.

who refuses to enter the feast, a figure whose egoism breeds jealousy, blinds the eyes, and hardens the heart; indeed, the father's love irritates him and fills him with bitterness. The parable shows that reconciliation is God's gift and initiative. The Church is presented as the great sacrament of reconciliation, both as a reconciled community by its very existence and through its ministry of the Word and the interpretation of Scripture⁴. In a climate of lost sense of sin, arising, inter alia, from forms of humanism detached from God, the Church is bound to proclaim God's presence, His fatherhood and lordship in human life. John Paul II observes that even within ecclesial thought and practice certain tendencies lead to the eclipse of the sense of sin: one excess is replaced by another, some see sin everywhere, others nowhere; some overemphasize fear of eternal punishment, others proclaim a love of God that excludes any punishment for sin. Confusion likewise arises when undue severity is used to "straighten out" errors of conscience, or when "respect for conscience" is invoked to the point of abolishing the obligation to tell the truth⁵. At the threshold of the third millennium, John Paul II stresses again that Christ entrusts to the Apostles the mission of proclaiming the Word of God and preaching the Gospel unto conversion, encouraging a renewed pedagogy of Christian community to address the crisis in awareness of sin.⁶

The role and ministry of John Paul II in the Church are often treated superficially or sentimentally, his words and gestures are recalled without reflection. Many remember his cry from 22 October 1978 at the inauguration of the pontificate: "Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ. To his saving power open the boundaries of States, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization and development. Do not be afraid. Christ knows «what is in man». He alone knows it."⁷ These words retain great value, yet their reception calls for deep reflection. The same is true of his invocation of the Holy Spirit over Polish

4 See John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 11.

5 See John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 18.

6 Cf. John Paul II, *Misericordia Dei*, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/pl/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_20020502_misericordia-dei.html (12.07. 2025).

7 John Paul II, Homily for the inauguration of his pontificate, 22.10.1978, 5.

soil in Victory Square (Warsaw, June 1979), which he repeated on 9 June 1991 before the Polish Parliament and the authorities of the Republic, urging his listeners to become co-workers of God.⁸ God's Word transcends every human word; nevertheless, God entrusts His Word to the Church as a deposit and a task. One can never renounce the preaching of the Word upon which life and immortality depend. Yet authenticity of life is essential if the Word is to sound credible.

Through the Word and the sacraments the Church leads believers to full encounter with God within a community that supports and draws them into deeper knowledge of Him. Among the forms of pastoral service that build unity is the proposal of penitential services, assemblies of God's People for the hearing of the Word. In the Word of God the person receives the call to conversion and renewal of life, along with the joyful proclamation of liberation from sin through the death and resurrection of Christ.⁹ The structure of a penitential service includes readings and meditation on Scripture, the singing of hymns and psalms, and litanic prayer engaging the faithful in active participation. It concludes with the Lord's Prayer so that the plea for the forgiveness of sins, mirroring our forgiveness of offenders and the petition for deliverance from evil may resound. The Introduction to the Rite of Penance stipulates that penitential services are not to be identified with the celebration of the sacrament of penance; rather, they are to foster conversion and purification of heart, to develop a spirit of penance in the Christian community, and to educate toward an ever-clearer awareness of what sin is in human life and of liberation from it through Christ.¹⁰ The wealth of biblical texts proposed, The Old and the New Testament alike, should be noted; readings, psalms, and Gospels in their richness can greatly aid both preachers and listeners. A weakness, within and beyond sacramental rites, is the restriction to a small set of readings, as at weddings and funerals, and likewise in penitential services, by which the preacher deprives himself and his hearers of access to the well-furnished table of the Word.

8 Cf. M. Guzewicz, *Wartość Słowa Bożego w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II*, in: *Ioannes Paulus II—in memoriam*, ed. W. Chrostowski, Warszawa 2006, pp. 110–111.

9 Cf. *Obrzędy pokuty dostosowane do zwyczajów diecezji polskich*, Katowice 1996, p. 31.

10 Cf. *Obrzędy pokuty*, pp. 32–33.

2. Word for dialogue and conversion

Anyone who proclaims the Word of God knows that this Word is not his own possession. After the Second Vatican Council, the element of witness, speaking the truth, emerges with particular clarity. Contemporary complaints about the quality of preaching may be linked to the preacher's stance when he loses the awareness and faith that preaching shares in God's economy of salvation. From this stance of faith it follows that preaching manifests the mystery of the personal God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In God's economy of salvation, Jesus Christ holds a unique place as the One who bears witness to the truth (cf. Jn 18:37).¹¹ The aim of preaching is not merely to transmit a certain quantity of information but to lead to a personal encounter with God, which takes place in faith. Such accompaniment should begin already in preparation for First Holy Communion or even more precisely, from one's first confession. Current demands, in circles hostile to the Church, which question the validity and need of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, especially for children, stem from a failure to understand interpersonal relations. The lingering expression "the sacrament of confession" narrows the vision of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation to one of its necessary conditions. The witness to the Word is also a mystagogue: he accompanies and forms others in the true knowledge of God's mystery; he helps them to enter into God's way of thinking and acting. It is crucial to be conscious that God acts "now," that the history of salvation is continually unfolding.¹²

The Word of God is not mere recollection of the past but this Word is the very presence of God in dialogue with human being. Special significance is attached to the use of biblical narration of various events, which become spiritual nourishment for the faithful and a source for living by faith. Every preacher finds his own style of communication and naturally refers to biblical texts which are closer to his heart, then his proclamation sounds more authentic. It remains important take into account the literary context and to draw out leading ideas (e.g., within

¹¹ Cf. G. Siwek, *Kaznodzieja jako świadek*, in: *Sługa słowa*, ed. W. Przyczyna, Kraków 1997, pp. 84–85.

¹² Cf. W. Świerżawski, *Kaznodzieja jako mystagog*, in: *Sługa słowa*, pp. 109–111.

the Synoptic Gospels). In homiletic communication, great weight must be accorded to spiritual experience: by the gift of faith, the disciple of Christ is invited to the banquet of the Word, where he is strengthened and takes up the path of conversion, knowledge of God, and fulfilment of His will.¹³

Calling to conversion is often associated with moralizing and the perspective of the Last Judgment and of eternity is frequently eliminated from consciousness. Pope Benedict XVI notes that today Christian faith is individualized and oriented toward personal salvation. Progress becomes humanity's governing idea; yet the true meaning of awaiting the Last Judgment has not vanished. Benedict observes that modern atheism has become moralizing and a protest against the injustices of the world and of universal history. In such a view, a world so rife with injustice cannot be God's work; and if it were, such a God could be neither good nor just, hence the project of constructing a human morality and justice¹⁴.

On March 25, 2024, Pope Francis approved the document of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas infinita*, which opens:

Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter. This principle, which is fully recognizable even by reason alone, underlies the primacy of the human person and the protection of human rights. In the light of Revelation, the Church resolutely reiterates and confirms the ontological dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ.¹⁵

Much is said today about peace and fraternity, yet appeals to human dignity are often reduced to ideological usage, as in the contexts of uncontrolled migration or the undermining of the family's role. When God's place as the giver of life is challenged, the human person is treated instrumentally and natural rights are questioned. Wrong

¹³ Cf. W. Przyczyna, *Homiletyczna interpretacja opowiadań biblijnych*, Kraków 2000, pp. 96–109.

¹⁴ Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical letter *Spe salvi*, 30.11.2007, 42.

¹⁵ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dignitas infinita*, 2.04.2024, 1.

understanding of human dignity fosters ideologies, genuine injustices, and human alienation. In biblical language, we rediscover a new image of God and man: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (Deut 6:4). Commenting on this, Benedict XVI points out that the God who speaks to Israel is the one God; other "gods" do not exist. All reality in which we live derives from and is created by Him; though the idea of creation appears elsewhere, God is one and the author of reality by His creative Word. Hence His creation is willed and fashioned by Him.¹⁶

Fr Leszek Kuc, reflecting on post-conciliar theology of preaching, observes in the line with the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church that the saving Mystery is effected first through the word, which determines one's personal participation in the salvific Mystery and one's response to the voice of God.¹⁷ Preaching the Word of God belongs to the very essence of the Church's life. Its content is kerygma, dogma, and the mystery of Christ. Such integral content enables the formation of attitudes that avoid reducing religious life to emotions or to the search for security in some form of community. Religious ignorance remains a constant challenge.¹⁸ Preaching leads to the sacraments; in the case of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, one discovers the personal bond of the penitent with Jesus Christ. Thus subjectivism is avoided, the notion that it suffices to meet God only in one's own heart.¹⁹ The pastor is a theologian who plumbs the riches of the Word—riches not his own but entrusted to him for the community; the preacher, therefore, is a servant of faith.²⁰ At the same time, the word he proclaims is both God's Word and his own word; thus the Word of God, as it were, clothes itself in a human garment. Hence both preacher and listener need faith and critical discernment.²¹

16 See Benedict XVI, Encyclical letter *Deus caritas est*, 25.12.2005, 9.

17 See L. Kuc, *Krótki traktat o teologii komunikacji*, Leszno 1997, p. 157.

18 Cf. Por. H. Sławiński, *Misterium Chrystusa, kerygmat i dogmat w przepowiadaniu*, in: *Głosimy Pana Jezusa Chrystusa. Treść przepowiadania*, ed. H. Sławiński, Kraków 2017, p. 119.

19 Cf. G. Siwek, *Misje ludowe w teorii i praktyce Kościoła*, Kraków 1999, p. 291.

20 Cf. H. Simon, *Kaznodzieja jako teolog*, in: *Sługa słowa*, p. 139.

21 Cf. E. Staniek, *Wychowanie do słuchania słowa Bożego*, in: *Słuchacz słowa*, ed. W. Przyczyzna, Kraków 1998, p. 299.

3. Word for forgiveness and love

On 11 April 2015, on the vigil of the Second Sunday of Easter (Divine Mercy Sunday), Pope Francis announced the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. In the bull *Misericordiae vultus* he invites us to discover Jesus Christ, the face of the Father's mercy, and writes:

We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.²²

The contemporary person faces many crises; among them, perhaps pre-eminent is the lack of hope. Questions about temporal life collide with the desire to be loved and the longing for happiness. In announcing the Ordinary Jubilee of 2025, Pope Francis presents happiness as the opposite of fleeting joy or passing satisfaction, which can lead into a spiral of spiritual greed and perpetual dissatisfaction.²³ The conviction that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (cf. Rom 8:38–39) frees us from fear of God's judgment, which concerns the salvation won in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. The Holy Year, according to Pope Francis, renews our assurance that God removes our sins. Sin leaves traces and consequences, inward and outward alike. "The sacrament of Reconciliation is not only a magnificent spiritual gift, but also a decisive, essential and fundamental step on our journey of faith. There, we allow the Lord to erase our sins, to heal our hearts, to raise us up, to embrace us and to reveal to us his tender and compassionate countenance"²⁴ —states Pope Francis. Forgiveness opens both heart and mind: the past cannot be changed, yet forgiveness transfigures the future.

²² Francis, Bull *Misericordiae vultus*, 11.04.2015, 2.

²³ See Francis, Bull *Spes non confundit*, 9.05.2024, 21.

²⁴ Francis, *Spes non confundit*, 23.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that “spreading of the Gospel... is carried out by the witness of life and by the word”²⁵. Hence bearing witness to God in word and life, proclaiming the true vision of God and giving personal testimony of Christian faith, is the primary method of evangelization. Its scope extends to believers, to deepen their faith, and to the indifferent and non-believers, to awaken them to faith. The “new evangelization,” in the spirit of Vatican II, is directed especially to those who have succumbed to religious indifference or atheism. The Church’s task is to stir Christians whose faith is endangered by weakness to engage in the deeds that flow from encounter with Christ. This encounter may be fostered by soundly presented doctrine and by the unblemished life of the Church and her members. The foundation of Christian doctrine is the truth of God’s existence; receiving this truth entails faith which is not mere doctrine, but concrete life and religious experience.²⁶

The relationship between Christ, the Father’s Word, and the believer cannot be treated as a past event but as a living bond to which every Christian is called. The abiding presence of Jesus Christ with the person of every age is realized in His Body, the Church. In the Church, Christ gives Himself to humanity, and in the Church we receive the power to become children of God (cf. Jn 1:12).²⁷ The message of salvation brings true joy and peace. In the apostolic exhortation *Christus vivit*, Pope Francis writes: “Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world, and everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life.”²⁸ His reflection begins from the perspective of the Word of God, which speaks through biblical persons and images, through the figures of the Old Testament, especially the prophets, and through the parables of the New Testament.

²⁵ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium*, 21.11.1964, 35.

²⁶ Cf. A. Lewek, *Nowa ewangelizacja w duchu Soboru Watykańskiego II*, Katowice 1995, pp. 18–19.

²⁷ Cf. Benedict XVI, Post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, 30.09.2010, 51.

²⁸ Francis, Post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christus vivit*, 25.03.2019, 1.

Conclusions

The call to conversion and penance does not derive from a desire to moralize or to depreciate the human person; on the contrary, it is the privilege of those who desire true freedom. Jesus' descent into the waters of the Jordan with others, even though John the Baptist tried to prevent Him, manifests His solidarity with humanity. Sound formation of conscience through the Word, immersed in Sacred Scripture, leads to authentic Christian attitudes, where in freedom one meets God and neighbor. Preparation for the sacrament of penance and reconciliation is indispensable for genuine human and spiritual growth. In pastoral practice, one sometimes sees the preached word being treated as a "meta-word"; and yet many gladly receive preaching rooted in parables and other biblical images. Then the listener becomes, as it were, a participant in salvation history and can experience walking in God's presence. In Sacred Scripture we have the words of Jesus, ever living and ever timely: He speaks to the human person interiorly; He leads us to the best place—to His Heart.²⁹

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²⁹ Cf. Francis, Encyclical letter *Dilexit nos*, 24.10.2024, 43.

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