

This is the transcript of the Lattey Lecture delivered by Father Timothy Radcliffe OP at the Von Hügel Institute, St Edmund's College, Cambridge, on 23rd October 2013.

What authority does the Word of God have in the Catholic Church?

I feel very honoured to be invited to give this year's Lattey lecture. Mind you, when I accepted, I had not realised that he was a Jesuit! As my Dominican brother, Herbert McCabe, used to say: 'I love the Jesuits, but I would not want my daughter to marry one.'

Father Cuthbert Lattey was the first president of the English Catholic Biblical Association, and so the lecture should be on Scripture. I must confess that I can make no claim to be a Biblical scholar. In 1976, when I was a University chaplain, brother in charge of studies for the Province asked me to return to Oxford, to teach Scripture. I replied that I had no expertise in Scripture at all. 'Don't worry', he said, 'You will pick it up as you go along and it is only for a year.' I taught Scripture for twelve years. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. My Hebrew was shameful, my Greek poor; I was always waiting to be exposed as an impostor. So it was with a mixture of sadness and relief that I stopped teaching when I was elected Provincial.

John Loughlin asked that I focus on Faith and governance, the theme of this year's lectures at the Von Hügel Institute. So I want to talk about the authority of the Word of God in the government of the Church. Last March I attended the mega-jamboree of the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress, with more than 30,000 participants. A willowy figure danced up with the Bible and placed it on a lectern in the middle of the arena. At the back, and slightly higher, the Archbishop sat upon his throne. I was reminded of the old story, well known to some of you, of the terrifying George Patrick Dwyer, Archbishop of Birmingham in the seventies. He watched a young woman dancing up with the offertory gifts and turned to the parish priest, seated beside him, and said, 'If she asks for your head on a platter, I am going to give it to her.'

Back in Los Angeles, I asked myself: but what is the relationship between the authority of the Word of God on its lectern and that of the archbishop on his throne? Where does the buck stop? Pope Benedict wrote a beautiful exhortation after the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God, *Verbum Domini*, in which he unambiguously asserts the primacy of the Word for our faith. He writes: 'It is the word itself which impels us towards our brothers and sisters: it is the word which illuminates, purifies, converts; we are only its servants' (93). So the Archbishop on his throne, like all of us, is a servant of the Word.

But that is not always how it seems. Cardinal George of Chicago has complained that the Church ‘is not a Christ-centred church, as it is supposed to be; it is a bishop-centred church.’¹ Biblical scholars do not usually receive the recognition that they should deserve if all Christians are servants of the Word. I suspect that in the Roman Pontifical Universities more people are doing doctorates in canon law than in Scripture. So the Church clearly asserts the primacy of the Word of God, but does she really recognise it? This question has vast importance for the healing of divisions between the Christian churches, some of which doubt our real obedience to the Word.

Let us begin by reflecting very briefly on the nature of revelation. In *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict wrote: ‘The novelty of biblical revelation consists in the fact that God becomes known through the dialogue which he desires to have with us’ (6). The life of God is the eternal dialogue of the Father and the Son in the Spirit. Revelation is God’s invitation to us to be at home in that eternal, equal loving conversation. Benedict writes: ‘The Word, who from the beginning is with God and is God, reveals God himself in the dialogue of love between the divine persons, and invites us to share in that love.’ (6) Revelation is not about receiving messages from a divine outer space. It is being taken up into the eternal conversation which is the life of God.

So it is utterly fitting that the Word of God became flesh in a man of conversation. St. John’s gospel, for example, is a succession of conversations, from John the Baptist’s conversation with the priests and Levites until Jesus’ final conversation with Peter on the seashore. On the night before he died, we have what is usually called ‘the last discourse’, but it is really the last conversation with his friends. Pilate brings the conversation to an end: ‘What is truth?’ The Word is silenced. But the conversation is renewed when Mary Magdalene meets Jesus in the garden. It is no coincidence that the first Christian documents were not books or creeds but Paul’s letters, half of his conversation with the people.

The New Testament has at its centre the conversation between the four gospels. Francis Watson wrote: ‘A consensus slowly emerged that the four gospels are to be read alongside each other and that no other gospel is permitted to share in their intertextual conversation.’² The differences between the gospels are a dialogue that can never end, pushing us towards a glimpse of the mystery that no gospel can contain.

So the Word of God does not address us with an unsullied purity, preceding our interpretations. We cannot get back behind the biblical authors to some truth in itself, a naked word. Much of the Bible is our word addressed to God, in praise, complaint, puzzlement, anger and joy.

Children flourish by finding their place in the conversation of their parents. We learn to love by immersion in the loving conversation of our parents. This expands our hearts and minds.

¹ National Catholic Reporter October 7 2009. Quoted Michael Crosby p.83

² Francis Watson *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* Grand Rapids and Cambridge 2013 p.614

And that is how we attend to the Word of God, struggling to understand, getting it wrong, starting again. That is our apprenticeship in the divine friendship of the Trinity.

And so we can never preach our faith except in respectful, loving dialogue. It is no coincidence that the Order of Preachers finds its origins in a long conversation between Dominic and an Albigensian inn keeper. As one of my brethren said, Dominic cannot have spent the entire night saying: ‘You are wrong, you are wrong, you are wrong.’

I hope that Father Lattey will forgive me for calling to mind a conversation between a Dominican and Jesuit, who were amicably discussing the comparative achievements of our Orders. The Dominicans were founded to oppose the Albigensians, and the Jesuits to oppose Protestantism. When did you last meet an Albigensian?

But if conversation is at the heart of our service of the Word, then surely it must be fundamental to all Church life, including its government. If the Church is to be an image of the life of the Trinity, as Pope Benedict asserted, then surely our common life should be sustained by a dialogue. Nearly everyone would agree. But here we arrive at the neuralgic question: What do you mean by ‘dialogue’? On this depends one’s understanding of the proper government of the Church.

In 1996, the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, under the leadership of Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago, published its manifesto: *Called to be Catholic: Church in a time of peril*. It was an invitation for the polarised Church of the United States to stop tearing itself to pieces and seek unity. It wanted to bring together all Catholics who would affirm the basic truths of our faith: ‘Chief among those truths’, it affirmed ‘is that our discussion must be accountable to the Catholic tradition and to the Spirit-filled living church that brings to us the revelation of God in Jesus.’³ It was in no way a wishy washy liberal document. It clearly affirmed the role of the bishops united with the Pope in preserving the true faith.

The reactions were fascinating. A bevy of American cardinals reacted swiftly and sceptically⁴. None of them denied that we must have dialogue, but they were all suspicious of where it might lead us. Bernard Law insisted: ‘Conflict cannot be dialogued away.’ Bevilacqua said that seeking this common ground would promote confusion and a mentality of ‘the lowest common denominator.’ Hickey believed that it would undermine the authority of the Magisterium, ‘accommodating those who dissent from church teaching.’

One of the more considered responses was from the Jesuit, Avery Dulles, who was subsequently made a cardinal⁵. He feared that in the liberal culture of America, dialogue will ‘inevitably’ be interpreted in a relativistic way. True dialogue must start from the truths of our faith which cannot be debated. He wrote: ‘Theologians do not have the authority to change the doctrines of their churches.’ The only basis for dialogue is ‘the hope of making

³ Bradford Hinze *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments* New York and London 2006 p.113

⁴ Cf. Hinze p.115 – 116.

⁵ ‘The Travails of Dialogue’ in *Church and Society: The Laurence J. McGinley Lectures, 1988 – 2007* pp 221 - 223

the one Word [of God] better known. In a sense, therefore, Christianity is monological. Authentic dialogue would be futile unless it helped us to hear the one divine Word. “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.””

Of course it is true, as Bernardin fully accepted, that the truths of our faith cannot be denied. Dialogue cannot be the negotiation of compromise. But Dulles underestimates how far these truths *always* engage us in dialogue, question us, puzzle us, and lead us deeper into the mystery. Of course one cannot be a Catholic and deny the divinity of Christ or his resurrection from the dead, or the Trinity. But these are not simple truths that one can simply and univocally know, as we know scientific facts. The Church is faithful to them precisely in wrestling with them and letting them probe and interrogate us. Otherwise we fall into what Karl Rahner called ‘dead orthodoxy’ which is a form of heresy. Dialogue is how the tradition remains alive.

Nicholas King SJ wrote a beautiful little book called *The Strangest Gospel: A study of Mark*⁶. He wrote: ‘This gospel is written for puzzled disciples like ourselves who perhaps see instinctively that God is at work in Jesus, but also recognise that there is much we simply do not understand (precisely because it God who is at work).⁷ ‘Mark’s approach to Jesus is to sketch a vast question mark in the air which you, the reader, have to answer.⁸’ The gospel is filled with questions: ‘What is this new teaching?’ (1.27); ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ (2.17); ‘Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him?’ (6.2); ‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ (11.28). The great question at the pivot of the gospel is: ‘Who do people say that I am?’ Peter, of course, answers correctly but does not understand what he is talking about.

These are not questions which have simple answers which you can simply tick. Well, I’ve got that sorted now: Next question. The disciples’ misunderstanding, their puzzlement, belongs to their coming to see. And all the while we are being lead to the conclusion of the gospel, which is surely verse 8: ‘And [the women] went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and fear had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.’ As one scholar said, I forget who, it is like hearing a shoe drop. You hang on waiting for the other one. We are left in an expectant suspense which will never be closed until the Kingdom, if then.

I believe that Mark wanted his original hearers to identify with those women. He may well have been writing for the church in Rome, torn to pieces by persecution and division, puzzling over Jesus’ absence. Why hasn’t he come? Where is he? Who is he? And who are we, his disciples? We draw near to the mystery at the heart of our faith by dialoguing with the text and with each other. This belongs to what Bonaventure calls our *Itinerarium mentis in*

⁶ Stowmarket 2006.

⁷ P. 30

⁸ P. 60

*Deum*⁹, the unending journey of the mind into God. As T. S. Eliot wrote: ‘The well-known is what we have yet to learn.’¹⁰

The disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus ran home to Jerusalem saying ‘Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road?’ The revelation happens in the burning of their hearts. The speaking of God’s Word is not a celestial radio emission. It happens in our lives like yeast. The Hebrew word for ‘word’, *dabar*, means ‘a happening.’ Plonking statements don’t do it. I wonder if anyone has ever been moved by those notices outside churches which shout at you: ‘God is love’, or ‘Repent and believe in the gospel.’ I like the one which says: ‘Would you rather keep watch with the wise virgins or sleep with the foolish ones?’

St Augustine says in *De catechizandis rudibus* that the teacher should communicate with *hilaritas*, so as to provoke delight in his students. *Hilaritas* is usually translated as ‘cheerfulness’, which suggests that he or she should liven things with a few jokes, to stop the pupils going to sleep. But *hilaritas* here, I suspect, means something more like exuberance, mirth, an ecstatic joy. When teaching takes off, we are exhilarated. *Hilaritas* carries us out of ourselves.

This is an experience of what Cornelius Ernst OP called ‘the genetic moment.’ He wrote: ‘Every genetic moment is a mystery. It is dawn, discovery, spring, new birth, coming to the light, awakening, transcendence, liberation, ecstasy, bridal consent, gift, forgiveness, reconciliation, revolution, faith, hope, love. It could be said that Christianity is the consecration of the genetic moment, the living centre from which it reviews the indefinitely various and shifting perspectives of human experience in history. That, at least, is or ought to be its claim: that it is the power to transform and renew all things: “Behold, I make all things new.”’¹¹ (Book of Revelation 21.5)

So giving primacy to the Word of God, whose servants we are, does not mean just sitting there and listening passively. We are caught up in the happening of its grace. We feel the joy without which it cannot be understood. St Catherine of Siena said that there is no greater joy than to talk of God with one’s friends. St Albert the Great delighted in the ‘the pleasure of seeking the truth together’: ‘*in dulcedine societatis quaerere veritatem*’¹². For the early Dominicans the key metaphor for the gospel was the new wine that makes us drunk with joy. And it seems not to have been just a metaphor. The Province of Rome ruled that if the brethren drink too much wine after Compline, they must recite it again¹³. And do not leave the bottles outside the back door since it only scandalises the neighbours.

⁹ Hinze p. 266

¹⁰ *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* London 1969 p. 204

¹¹ *The Theology of Grace* Dublin 1974 p.74

¹² *Libri viii Politicorum*

¹³ Paul Murray OP *The New Wine of Dominican Spirituality: A drink called Happiness* London and New York 2006 p.152

Let us return to the opening ceremony of the Religious Education Congress in Los Angeles. What form of government would place such a service of the Word at the centre of the Church's life?

The American Franciscan Michael Crosby has argued that we need to move from a monarchical to a Trinitarian model of the Church. A good ecclesiology puts the mutuality of God's Triune love at the centre. Monarchy begins from the oneness of God; Trinity puts relationship at the core of the divine life and of the Church. This is the theology of Pope Benedict. *Caritas in veritate* has a Trinitarian model of the Church. Pope Benedict once said, 'The Trinity is truly perfect communion! How the world would change if in families, in parishes and in all other communities relationships were lived following always the example of the three Divine Persons, where each one lives not for themselves but with the other, for the other and in the other.'¹⁴ The challenge is for the government of the Church to be at the service of such mutuality.

The Church has become much like a monarchy since for centuries the Church has been fighting for her freedom against monarchs and emperors and, in the last century, communist dictators. It was almost inevitable that the Church should come to look much like that which she opposed. But today our challenge to earthly powers must surely lie incarnating that Trinitarian mutuality of which Benedict speaks. Jürgen Moltmann wrote: 'It is only when the doctrine of the trinity vanquishes the monotheistic notion of the great universal monarch in heaven, and his divine patriarchs in the world, that earthly rulers, dictators and tyrants cease to find any justifying religious archetypes any more.'

Pope Benedict proposed a Trinitarian ecclesiology. I suspect that Pope Francis is trying to implement it, which is why there is less discontinuity between him and his predecessor than some imagine. From the moment he appeared on the balcony of St Peter's, he has subverting the symbols of papal monarchy. His commission of eight cardinals is reviewing the structures of Church government, so that the Bishop of Rome is again embedded in the college of bishops. He wishes to transform the function of synods, so that they become places of real debate.

But we too who are not Popes and bishops are challenged to live with Trinitarian mutuality and reciprocity. It has become common for people to distinguish themselves from 'the official Church' or 'the institutional Church.' To talk in this way is to marginalise ourselves and to promote a vision of the Church which is unTrinitarian. It is to flee from identification with this community of saints and sinners. It is to disenfranchise ourselves, as if we, the baptised, were not officially Christian. To talk about the 'official church' is to embrace a position on the edge. If we believe that the Church is the Body of Christ, then we are no less 'official' than anyone else and so please let's just stop talking about the 'official church'.

And there is no such thing as *the* institutional Church. The Catholic Church is a rich texture of multiple overlapping institutions: 24 different churches, with their own rites and canon

¹⁴ Quoted Crosby *Repair My House: Becoming a Kingdom Catholic* New York 2012 105 and 106

law; dioceses, the religious orders, universities, thousands of NGOs, fraternities, the new movements, periodicals, pilgrimages, weird and wonderful devotions. The media think that the Church is one great big monolithic organisation but it is anything but that.

Secondly, a Church at the service of the Word of God needs to recognise that there are different authorities in the Church. There can only be an adult conversation if the proper authority of each voice is recognised, otherwise there will only be a crushing monologue or shrill dissent. There is of course the authority of the bishop, who is above all the teacher of his people, charged with holding us together in the truth. The bishop is the guardian of our unity with the past, handing on the tradition. As St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, 'For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you' (1 Corinthians 11.23). This is an essentially conservative task. Pope Benedict wrote that 'The true meaning of the teaching authority of the Pope is that he is the advocate of Christian memory.'¹⁵

But bishops are teachers because they listen to the people of God on whom the Holy Spirit is poured. Bishops do not have some independent telephone line to the truth. Richard Gaillardetz wrote: 'The great attention that the Roman Catholic Church has given to the *teaching* acts of the bishops needs to be matched by equal attention to the *listening* process of the bishops. If the bishops are the authoritative teachers of the apostolic faith, it is only because they are first hearers.'¹⁶ St Cyprian of Carthage wrote to his clergy that 'from the beginning of my episcopate, I decided to do nothing of my own opinion privately without your advice and the consent of the people.'¹⁷ The bishop should have care for the conversation of the Church, which is our sharing in the life of the Trinity, ensuring that no one is prematurely excluded.

Of course one of the voices that needs to be given its proper authority is that of the theologian or Biblical scholar. St Thomas Aquinas recognised both the pastoral Magisterium of the bishops and the Magisterium of the teachers. In recent centuries the rightful authority of the theologian has been largely ignored. Scholarship is part of our attention to God's word and so of our sanctification. The First Vatican Council argued for the rationality of Christian belief but made no mention of theologians at all. Simon Tugwell says that 'at the Second Vatican Council there were only two voices raised to suggest that theologians played some part in the transmission of divine revelation, and they were both Dominicans and no one took much notice of them.'¹⁸ Father Lattey, what were the Jesuits up to?

But with that participation of theologians in the conversations, comes a refusal to sit on the touch line, as if academia was a self-contained world free from accountability to the Church. Orthodoxy and official teaching is not just a matter for this so called 'official Church'. Sister Margaret Farley wrote a book called *Just Love* in which she proposed a sexual ethic which

¹⁵ Values in a Time of Upheaval 95.

¹⁶ *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* Collegeville 1997 p. 84 - 85

¹⁷ Epistle 14.4

¹⁸ 'Scholarship, Sanctity and Spirituality' An address given at Gonzaga University in the States, and published in pamphlet form, March 1983 p.2

departs from the Church's official teaching. It might be a wonderful book for all I know. But I was alarmed by the defence she gave: 'In the end, I can only clarify that the book was not intended to be an expression of current official Catholic teaching, nor was it aimed specifically against this teaching. It is of a different genre altogether.'¹⁹ And Lisa Sowle Cahill, of Boston College added: 'Theologians do not see or present their work as 'official church teaching' and few of the faithful are confused about this fact.' Maybe I have misunderstood, but that sounds to me like accepting a gulf between the 'official Church' and the rest of us. The bishops teach officially and we academics do what we want. But we all teach and preach as Catholics, as part of the Church. We are all part of the conversation by which the Church journeys towards the truth.

Thirdly we need a good dialogical understanding of obedience. Obedience is often seen as the submission to the will of another, whether that is God, the Pope, or the Bible. I am truly obedient when I let the will of another determine my actions, even when what we are commanded to do seems crazy, as when St Teresa of Avila commanded a nun to plant a wilted cucumber lengthwise in the hot sun. That sort of obedience stops intelligent conversation.

More than forty years ago, my community in Oxford began to give the chalice at Mass every day. Our Archbishop, George Patrick Dwyer, commanded us to stop. We said that we would like to talk to him about it. He wrote back: 'Why can't you Dominicans just do what you are told. Stop!' We had a long community meeting and again wrote to him asking have a conversation. We waited with bated breath. He wrote back and said, 'OK, do whatever you like!' Anything rather than talk!

But there is an older understanding of obedience, which is not primarily a virtue of the will but of the intelligence. *Oaudiens* means to listen profoundly. It is about arriving at a common understanding. Herbert McCabe argues that 'obedience only becomes perfect when the one who commands and the one who obeys come to share one mind. The notion of blind obedience makes no more sense in our tradition than blind learning.'²⁰ The perfect obedience of Jesus to his Father was not a robotic mindlessness, but the perfect mutuality of the Trinity. We are living through a crisis of obedience in the Church because we are not use our intelligence to listen to each other well.

We have fallen into a voluntaristic understanding of obedience, which is more a fruit of our secular culture of control than it is of Christianity. Blind obedience is stupid. "Be not like horse and mule, unintelligent", says the psalmist, "needing bridle and bit." In a wonderful article in *America* Nicholas Lash points to the ambiguity of the word 'instruction'. It can mean teaching or command. He says, it is 'important not to subordinate instruction as teaching to instruction as command'²¹ if the Church is to be a school of wisdom and holiness.

¹⁹ Jerry Filteau 'Vatican criticizes US Theologian's book on sexual ethics' NCR June 4th 2012

²⁰ *God Matters* London 1987 p.229

²¹ *America* December 13 2010

The Bible is the long conversation between God and his people. From the moment that Adam hid in the bushes from God, it is a history of a word of friendship offered, sometimes accepted and sometimes refused. It is a story of communication and deafness, of illumination and misunderstanding. So it has been in the long history of the Church. Sometimes there has been the *hilaritas* and *delectatio* of grace filled speech. But often people, including great scholars like Marie-Joseph Lagrange and Yves Congar, have been silenced. Think again of that small, young uneducated lay person, Catherine of Siena, going to Avignon to speak the truth to the Pope and the Cardinals. She said: ‘The honour of Almighty God compels me to speak bluntly.’ And then she let rip. Raymond of Capua, her Dominican brother, says that the Pope was silent ‘and I myself was completely stunned.’²² Not surprising! She said: “Be silent no longer. Cry out with a hundred thousand voices. I see that the world is destroyed through silence.”²³ But for all the failures and silences, ‘the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.’ (John 1.5)

²² McDemortt p.68

²³ L 16