

# That the Word May Become Flesh, Again

As we have been commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves,  
let us seek to understand that we have also received from God  
the power to fulfill this commandment.

Nothing, in fact, is as proper to our nature  
as communicating with one another, needing one another,  
and loving all of the human race.

BASIL OF CAESAREA <sup>1</sup>

For at least the last four hundred years, people in the West have assumed that what characterizes us as human is our ability to reason in a detached manner, and that each of us is ultimately a self-enclosed ego, a radically private “individual.” Many contemporary thinkers are posing significant challenges to this notion of the private self, affirming that we are inherently relational-persons-in-communion-and that our distinctive use of *language* manifests this. We speak words to one another, words embodied in a way of living, and in speaking we create a shared world of meaning. The languages of word and silence are interwoven, as we “hear one another into speech.” We know from experience that we can also hurl words *at* each other, turning them into projectiles that wound and separate. Yet we are also capable of speaking words that offer life and comfort-words welling up from our depths.

More profound than *speaking* our word, men and women arrive at threshold moments in which they *give their word*, making a *gift of themselves*. In giving our word into the future, we are most like the Holy One, who, as Genesis tells us, speaks forth the word of creation-“Let it be!”-and pours forth the divine life, eliciting a response from all that God creates. In Jesus of Nazareth, we discover God's offer of love *made flesh* in our history. In his radiantly humble life, poured out for others, God's gift and humanity's response have become completely one. The great twentieth-century theologian, Karl Rahner, SJ (d. 1984), was fond of saying that, in the Word-made-flesh, our humanity becomes a dwelling place for divinity.<sup>2</sup> Jesus is the promise of all that we are invited to become. When we accept God's gift of love, that grace makes it possible for us to go out from ourselves, to grow in trust and freedom, and to respond by making our own lives a *gift*.

Our monastic forebear, Pachomius, with whom cenobitic (communal) monastic life began, became a Christian because of the love shown him by villagers he did not know, while he was being forcibly conscripted into the Roman army. His first contact with Christianity was with persons attentive to the needs of their neighbor, out of love for God. *Pachomius was captivated by the Love of God enabling the love of neighbor*. Henceforth, his life would be marked by concrete compassion and a search for communion and unity. He set his heart on forming a community of brothers, in which fraternal relationships were the “stuff” of their life. To the question posed to him by a young monk, “What must I do to be saved?”, Pachomius answered that we are saved *together*, helping and strengthening one another in active compassion. He described clearly what he understood as our way to God:

at the end of his life, he said, “We were all as *one person*.”<sup>3</sup> This becomes the exhortation which Benedict offers to his community near the end of his *Rule*: “Let them be the first to show honor to one another. And may Christ lead us *all together* to everlasting life.”<sup>4</sup>

Centuries later, another monastic forebear, Bernard of Clairvaux, wrote: “God's beauty is God's love, all the greater because it always comes first. The more we understand that we have been loved before we ever became a lover-and with the voice of the deepest affection-*we are enabled to love in turn*. The Eternal Word's speaking is *the giving of the gift*... The more that we grasp that we are simply lavished in loving, the more we love.”<sup>5</sup>

Bernard points us, as brothers, to the heart of the Gospel, reminding us that monastic life-as all Christian life-is an unfolding process of the Word becoming flesh once again, as we give flesh to the gift of *our word*. And so, on the brilliant day that opened the month of October, we celebrated the first monastic profession of our brother Alvaro. Coming from Brazil, and having lived in community with us for several years, brother Alvaro with his brothers arrived at a threshold. In becoming brothers to one another, we discovered a desire to *give our word* in the presence of the living God. Brother Alvaro, together with his brothers, promises

- to live our discipleship by embracing the gospel-inspired values of the Rule of Benedict,
- as reflected in the monastic tradition and in the tradition of our community;
- through a life of **STABILITY**: a rootedness in relationship, by which we invest all our energies in the building of a genuinely fraternal life, a parable of reconciliation, for the sake of the reign of God;
- a life of **MUTUAL OBEDIENCE**: the choice of free persons to listen deeply and widely for the voice of the Spirit of God, and to respond lovingly; embracing a special attentiveness to the cries of the poor, and a willingness to risk together;
- in **FAITHFULNESS TO A CENOBITIC MONASTIC LIFE OF DIALOGUE AND COMMUNION** (*Conversatio Morum*): in the encounter with the living Word in communal and personal prayer, in *lectio*, in the cultivation of silence and reflection (“listening for the God who listens”<sup>6</sup>), and in just and loving relationships;
- all the while striving to be faithful to the lay, prophetic charism of monastic life as a sign of Pentecost in today's church and the world.

At the origins of the monastic movement, “profession” referred to the entire *living out of the monastic way of life*, over a lifetime.<sup>7</sup> As the tradition developed, “profession” came to mean the public act of commitment, and this understanding has perdured to our own day. Both meanings reveal important truths, which Benedict seems to have united in his *Rule*<sup>8</sup>. The promise, spoken and given, becomes flesh over time. We promise to speak our “yes” each day, in the hope that our humble grains of wheat may, by God's grace, become bread to be shared-God's love and our response becoming more fully one, through the gift of our common life. ✚

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1. Saint Basil of Caesarea, *Ascetikon*, Question 3. Cited in Fabio Ciardi, OMI, *Koinonia* (London and New York: New City Press, 2001) 95, slightly emended.
  2. Cf. Mark F. Fischer, *The Foundations of Karl Rahner* (New York: Crossroad / Herder and Herder, 2005), especially pages xix-xxvii.
  3. Ciardi, *op. cit.*, 79-81.
  4. From the Rule of Benedict, Chapter 72, "On the Good Zeal Which Monks Ought to Foster."
  5. Bernard McGinn and Patricia Ferris McGinn, *Early Christian Mystics; The Divine Vision of the Spiritual Masters* (New York: Crossroad, 2004) 207ff., slightly emended.
  6. Shawn Carruth, OSB, "The Monastic Virtues of Obedience, Silence, and Humility: A Feminist Perspective," *The American Benedictine Review*, June 2000: 132ff. This entire paper is highly recommended as a creatively faithful contemporary interpretation of monastic spirituality.
  7. John Manuel Lozano, CMF, in *Religious Life in the U.S. Church: A New Dialogue*, edited by Robert J. Daly, SJ, et al. (New York: Paulist Press, 1984) 109. Cf. Lozano, *Discipleship* (Chicago and Manila: Claret Center for Resources in Spirituality, 1983).
  8. Aquinata Böckmann, OSB, *Perspectives on the Rule of Saint Benedict: Expanding our Hearts in Christ* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005) 103ff.; Laura Swan, OSB, *Engaging Benedict: What the Rule Can Teach Us Today* (Notre Dame: Christian Classics / Ave Maria Press, 2005) 11-24.
  9. Aquinata Böckmann, OSB, *op. cit.*, 103
  10. Sarah Coakley, in "Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity," writes: "Divine and human desires are no longer set in fundamental enmity with one another, no longer failing in their alignment. ...Unless we have some sense of the implications of God's desire for us, then we can hardly get rightly ordered our own desires at a human level. The God we desire is, in Godself, a desiring trinitarian God: the Spirit who longs for our response, whose searches the hearts, and who takes us to the divine Source, transforming us Christically as we are taken" (*Anglican Theological Review*, Spring 1998).

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