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The Joy of Conversation: Evangelization, Wisdom, and Dialogue

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What comes to life in the many issues of *Word & World* I have received in recent years is conversation: between scholars and pastors, teachers and students, Scripture and theology, practice and theory, past and present. As a Roman Catholic member of the Advisory Council of the journal for almost seven years, I have been impressed not only by the dialogue in the pages of the journal about the interrelation of biblical word, Christian tradition, and facets of human existence today. I have also been struck by the lively back and forth among Advisory Council members that generates themes for the issues. The wellspring of ideas from pastors imaginatively reaching out to touch the lives of all in their congregations, in particular, has frequently stirred my admiration and awe. The dialogue boosts hope in the vitality of Christ's call to bring the good news into the whole world and, as a sign, to speak in new languages (Mark 16:15–17). I'm grateful to have been a small part of it.

Both of the articles that anchor this anniversary issue of *Word & World* highlight the central place of conversation in the origins and continued production of

Although produced at a Lutheran seminary, Word & World *has always sought to widen its perspectives by incorporating the ideas of those from other religious traditions, partially through its Advisory Council. An active member of this group is Old Testament scholar Katherine Hayes, who teaches at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception, Huntington, New York.*

the journal. In fact in his article, Fred Gaiser, the most recent editor, quotes the article of Jim Burtness, the founding editor:

> We [also] know that there are those who struggle very hard to work at the congruities and disjunctions of Word and world, and we look forward to a long and lively conversation with those readers. We shall keep at it.

Gaiser adds: "That remains our goal."

In another *Word & World* article Gaiser reflects, further, that such conversation, even when biblically and critically informed and prayerfully considered, is often "messy." That is to be expected, and "Christians will understand that they disagree as brothers and sisters in the faith, as communicants gathered around a common table."[1] New syntheses and the marking out of common ground do not just happen, however: "We read, study, pray, preach, worship, debate, discuss, and write journal articles, and we have faith that, through the process, the Spirit will do its work."[2]

Since the world keeps changing, the word continues to be illuminated and heard in new contexts, and there seems no reason to think that conversation on the relationship between the two will exhaust itself soon. The dialogue manifest today in the journal forms part of a long chain of probing and parrying, extending far back to the beginnings of the church and far forward, we expect, into the future. If the venues and modes of transmission of these discussions alter, the basic elements of word and world do not.

What I would like to contribute in this short essay is a presentation of how my Roman Catholic tradition echoes and affirms the ideal of amicable dialogue, giving it a central role in evangelization. As an Old Testament scholar and seminary teacher, I will at the same time offer a few thoughts on dialogue as a means to growth in the wisdom and knowledge of God in the books of Proverbs and Job.

Pope Francis

Pope Francis opens his apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel* (which itself reflects the dialogue of a world synod of bishops and other church leaders in 2012), with a vision of evangelization that moves outward beyond the familiar to the peripheries, to reach all in need of the light of the Gospel. To follow this path an evangelizing community gets involved in people's daily lives, bridges distances, and embraces human life. Evangelizers take on the "smell of the sheep," and the sheep are willing to hear their voice.[3] The Pope sketches here a process of engagement that leads to recognition of the essential connection between evangelizer and

[1]Frederick J. Gaiser, "For the Nations through the Nathans: When Word Speaks to World," *Word & World* 33/3 (2013) 217.

[2]Ibid., 219.

[3]Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 24. A copy of this Apostolic Exhortation can be found at the Vatican's website: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#I.%E2%80%82A_Church_which_goes_forth (accessed July 16, 2016).

evangelized, making reception of the word possible. In his address to the US Catholic bishops in Washington, D.C. in 2015, Francis spoke of this engagement as a quasi-sacramental encounter through dialogue:

> We are the promoters of the culture of encounter. We are living sacraments of the embrace between God's riches and our poverty.... Dialogue is our method, not as a shrewd strategy but out of fidelity to the One who never wearies of visiting the marketplace, even at the eleventh hour, to propose his offer of love (Matt 20:1–16)....
>
> The path ahead, then, is dialogue among yourselves, dialogue in your presbyterates, dialogue with families, dialogue with society. I cannot ever tire of encouraging you to dialogue fearlessly.[4]

The only caveat the Pope offers is that this eager conversation should be entered into with humility, "otherwise we fail to understand the thinking of others."[5]

The preacher or proclaimer of the word is not only compelled to contemplate its intricacies and its history in faith and practice in the church. Evangelizers must contemplate as well the people to whom they will speak.

In *The Joy of the Gospel* Francis turns to the Gospel portrayal of Jesus, marveling at the "resources the Lord used to dialogue with his people, to reveal his mystery to all, and to attract ordinary people to his lofty teachings and demands."[6] Jesus' model of self-extension through communication conveys a sense that "the Lord truly enjoys talking with his people" and that joy is fundamental to dialogue:

> Dialogue is much more than the communication of a truth. It arises from the enjoyment of speaking, and it enriches those who express their love for one another through the medium of words.... This is an enrichment that does not consist in objects but in persons who share themselves in dialogue.[7]

The Pope brings these observations into the context of preaching: "A preaching which would be openly moralistic or doctrinaire, or one which turns into a lecture on biblical exegesis, detracts from the heart-to-heart communication that takes place in the homily."[8] The preacher or proclaimer of the word is not only compelled to contemplate its intricacies and its history in faith and practice in the church. Evangelizers must contemplate as well the people to whom they will speak and must be able to "link the message of a biblical text to a human situation, to an

[4]Pope Francis, Address to the Bishops of the United States of America, Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle, Washington, D.C., September 23, 2015.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 141.

[7]Ibid., 142.

[8]Ibid.

experience that cries out for the light of God's word."[9] They need to grow in a "broad and profound sensitivity to what really affects other people's lives."[10]

Francis places his promotion of dialogue in evangelization within the frame of a philosophical view of time and space. As a first principle of building a people in peace, justice, and solidarity, time is greater than space. Preoccupation with space entails self-assertion and command of the present moment. Giving priority to time, on the other hand, "means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces."[11] Time has to do with the fullness of the horizon that opens into the future. In the end, time illumines spaces and makes them into links

> in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return. What we need then, is to give priority to actions that generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit.[12]

Francis shakes his head over the apparent lack of people in today's world who

> are really concerned about generating processes of people building, as opposed to obtaining immediate results that yield easy, quick, short-term political gains but do not enhance human fullness. History will perhaps judge the latter with the criterion set forth by Romano Guardini: "The only measure for properly evaluating an age is to ask to what extent it fosters the development and attainment of a full and authentically meaningful existence, in accordance with the peculiar character and the capacities of that age."[13]

By this measure editors, advisors, and contributors to *Word & World* seem fully committed to the process of exploring and seeking means for enhancing human fullness in the present.

The Second Vatican Council

In emphasizing the need for dialogue in evangelization, Pope Francis echoes the foundational documents of the Second Vatican Council, a worldwide gathering of Roman Catholic bishops, advising theologians, and religious and lay observers, including some from other Christian denominations. The documents produced by the Council set forth authoritative guidelines for the Roman Catholic Church in the modern era. Two in particular bear on the theme of word and world: "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*) and "The Constitution on Divine Revelation" (*Dei Verbum*), both promulgated in 1965. These documents responded to changes in both the world and the interpretation of the word that bespoke the need for ongoing interaction between the two. *Gaudium et Spes*, then, begins with a call for dialogue:

[9]Ibid., 154.

[10]Ibid., 155.

[11]Ibid., 223.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid., 224. The Pope here cites Guardini's work, *Das Ende der Neuzeit* (Würzburg: Werkbund-Verlag, 1965) 30–31.

> Though proud of its discoveries and its power, humanity is often concerned about current developments in the world, about humanity's place and role in the universe, about the meaning of individual and collective endeavor, and finally about the destiny of nature and of humanity. And so the Council as witness and guide to the faith of all of God's people gathered together by Christ, can find no more eloquent expression of this people's solidarity, respect, and love for the whole family of which it is a part, than to enter into dialogue with it about all these problems, throwing the light of the Gospel on them and supplying humanity with the saving resources that the church has received from its founder under the promptings of the holy Spirit.[14]

Aspects of this hoped-for dialogue are elaborated later in the document, in a chapter entitled "Humanity's Activity in the Universe." Here the document sets out the premise that it is the task of the laity to integrate human, scientific, professional, and technical activity with religious values, to "cultivate a properly informed conscience and to impress the divine law on the affairs of the earthly city."[15] This is to be carried out under the guidance of Christian wisdom, with careful attention to the teaching authority of the church as well as with the spiritual insight and strength of clergy, but it also must be done in a spirit of open dialogue:

> No one is permitted to identify the authority of the church exclusively with his or her own opinion. Let them, then, try to guide each other by sincere dialogue in a spirit of mutual charity and a genuine concern for the common good above all.[16]

As for bishops and pastors, entrusted with the task of leading the church, "let them prepare themselves by careful study to meet, to enter into dialogue with the world and with people of all shades of opinion."[17] In view of its mission to gather "in one spirit all women and men of every nation, race, and culture," the church serves as a "sign of that amity that renders possible sincere dialogue and strengthens it."[18]

Such dialogue is not simply a persuasive technique but a means by which the church is enriched, through which "greater light is thrown on human nature and new avenues to truth are opened up":

> With the help of the holy Spirit, it is the task of the whole people of God, particularly of its priests and theologians, to listen to and distinguish the many voices of our times and to interpret them in the light of God's word, so that the revealed truth may be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and more suitably presented.[19]

[14]Second Vatican Council, "The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*), 3, at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed July 16, 2016).

[15]Ibid., 43.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid., 92.

[19]Ibid., 44.

Fred Gaiser's observation parallels this statement:

> God's world, yes; but we still have a lot to learn about how it works. With a Lutheran understanding of vocation, this means we must be ready to learn from the world (God's world, after all), not just be eager to speak to it.[20]

Growth in the perception and interpretation of both the word and the realities it communicates is explicit in Vatican II's "Constitution on Divine Revelation" (*Dei Verbum*), which states: "This tradition which comes from the apostles makes progress in the church with the help of the holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on."[21] This growth stems from the contemplation and study of believers and their experience of spiritual realities as well as from the preaching and teaching offices of the church. Thus over the centuries, *Dei Verbum* asserts, the church draws closer to the "plentitude of divine truth," until in time "the words of God are fulfilled in it."[22]

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Expansion in the church's perception and understanding of the word is demanded by the changing contexts in which the word is heard, implanted, and enculturated in new habitats over time. If the word is presented in a way that lacks vital connection with the lives of its hearers, if it sounds remote and hermetic, as if intended for someone else, the church is in danger of shrinking into itself. And the word can become hidden and inert. *Gaudium et Spes* says of the church:

> In language intelligible to every generation it should be able to answer the ever remaining questions people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other.[23]

The Second Vatican Council set this principle for the witness of the Roman Catholic Church as a whole. Pope Francis illustrates it in the realm of preaching in *The Joy of the Gospel*. Becoming accustomed to one's own language and assuming that everyone else uses and understands it is the greatest risk for a preacher.[24] To avoid this risk involves more than breaking down erudite theological terminology into plainer language. It means breaking out of one's own pre-set verbal and narrative patterns to let the word breathe in the lives of its hearers. In the Pope's words, "If we wish to adapt to people's language and to reach them with God's word, we need to share in their lives and pay loving attention to them."[25]

[20]Gaiser, "For the Nations," 213.

[21]Second Vatican Council, "The Constitution on Divine Revelation" (*Dei Verbum*), 8, at www.vatican.va/archive/.

[22]Ibid., 8.

[23]Second Vatican Council, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," 4.

[24]Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 158.

[25]Ibid.

Biblical Wisdom

An evangelizing community presupposes a fundamental sense of encounter with Jesus Christ, and the new eyes and new life—the new wisdom—that ensue from this encounter. In the words of Pope Francis:

> It is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it. . . . It is not the same thing to try to build the world with the Gospel as to try to do so by our own lights. . . . This is why we evangelize.[26]

In *Gaudium et Spes* the Second Vatican Council speaks in broad terms of wisdom as drawing the human mind to look for and to love "what is true and good and that can see through visible realities to those that are invisible."[27] The modern age is sorely in need of such wisdom, "indeed the future of the world is in danger unless wiser people are forthcoming."[28] The evangelizing church hopes to understand the good news of the Gospel more deeply as it strives to draw others to recognize and embrace it.

The biblical wisdom books illuminate the elements and stages of growth in wisdom rooted in a fundamental reverence for God and God's wisdom (Prov 1:7). Training in wisdom is a lifelong endeavor, intended for the young and unformed but also for others, like Job, who can already be called wise, so that they can "gain in learning," "acquire skill," and more fully understand wise words (Prov 1:4–6).

One of the many threads of wisdom that weave through the Book of Proverbs is the benefit of taking counsel or advice (*'esah*), a practice that contributes to the virtue of deliberation in all things that Proverbs promotes. Seeking and accepting advice offers a rubric for the listening, critiquing, and weighing of insights that lie behind and are manifest in the articles and reviews of a typical issue of *Word & World*.

Many of the individual sayings in Proverbs contrast the fool, who is averse to hearing other points of view, to the wise person, who welcomes instruction and correction and asks for counsel. For example:

> The fool takes no pleasure in understanding
> but only in expressing personal opinion. (Prov 18:2)

and

> Scoffers do not like to be rebuked;
> they will not go to the wise. (Prov. 15:12; cf. 15:5,10)

The insistence of the foolish on their own limited vision causes trouble, preventing them from benefitting from the perspectives of others:

> By insolence the heedless make strife
> but wisdom is with those who take advice. (Prov 13:10)

[26]Ibid., 266.

[27]Second Vatican Council, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," 15.

[28]Ibid.

In a more sweeping assertion:

> Without counsel, plans go wrong,
> but with many advisors they succeed. (Prov 15:22; cf. 11:14)

In the most epigrammatic example:

> Iron sharpens iron,
> and one person sharpens the wits of another. (Prov 27:17)

The sharing of parental wisdom with the child in Prov 2 offers a longer reflection on the process of attaining wisdom. Through the active practice of attentive listening to the instruction of parents and elders and earnestly seeking to understand it, God graces the seeker with wisdom:

> if you indeed cry out for insight
> and raise your voice for understanding;
> if you seek it like silver,
> and search for it as for hidden treasures—
> then you will understand the fear of the LORD
> and find the knowledge of God.
> For the LORD gives wisdom,
> from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding. (Prov 2:3–6)

Then wisdom "will enter your heart" to enlighten, guide, guard, and save from false steps and wrongful ways (Prov 2:10–15).

Proverbs' promise of finding in wisdom an intimate, lifesaving companion may seem to conflict with the premise of the book of Job, which casts doubt on the human capacity for understanding the ways of God in creation. The poem in Job 28 states flatly that wisdom is hidden from human sight:

> Mortals do not know the way to it,
> and it is not found in the land of the living. (Job 28:13)

Only God

> understands the way to it
> and he knows its place.
> For he looks to the ends of the earth,
> and sees everything under the heavens. (Job 28:23–24)

Yet acknowledging human limitation in face of the divine is a maxim of wisdom in the last verse of the poem: "Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom" (Job 28:28).

Job echoes this insight with new eyes at the conclusion of his dialogue with God. He affirms his trust in God's purposes as he diminishes his own understanding:

> Then Job answered the LORD:
> "I know that you can do all things,
> and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
> 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." (Job 42:1–3)

Before God appears to him in the storm, Job receives much human counsel, but it has not led him to greater wisdom. In response to his persistent appeal to hear the divine voice, God answers Job. By a prolonged sequence of questions, God both brings before Job's eyes realms and dynamics of creation that are unknown and strange to humans and compels Job to ponder them (Job 38:1–42:6). God's questions prompt Job to wider knowledge of divine wisdom and justice along with an enhanced understanding of what the fear of the Lord—a quality Job had to some degree to start with—means.[29]

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The dialogue between Job and his three friends has also played a part, however. Through recurring rounds of conversation with his trio of advisors, Job moves from paralyzing despair and doubt to recognize his need for a direct hearing from God. His friends do not convince him that his suffering is related to any failing on his part. Yet in wrangling with their counsel he summons the courage to ask God (whom he regards as unpredictable and hostile), for a face-to-face dialogue (Job 13:14–16; 29–31).

What is more, once Job fully recognizes the deficiencies of his own understanding, his mistaken terrors of God vanish like phantoms, and he looks forward to more intimate dialogue:

'Hear, and I will speak,
I will question you, and you declare to me.'
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you. (Job 42:4–5)

Job relinquishes his hold on complete understanding of God's purposes but implies that he still hopes to grow in understanding of God's ways. Granted, he evokes a personal, interior or spiritual dialogue with the Lord. Yet hope for ongoing dialogue with God is enfolded into the book of Job and becomes part of our human dialogue with it as an inspired word. In this multifaceted dialogue, we together read, listen, witness, and ponder the fullness of our humanity as seekers of and partakers in God's wisdom, believing that the Holy Spirit is also at work in our shared endeavor. ⊕

[29]Job is introduced as a blameless and upright man who "feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3).