

# ***Verbum Domini The Word of the Lord*** **Presenting the Post-Synodal Apostolic** **Exhortation of** **Benedict XVI on the 2008 Synod**

Teresa Okure, SHCJ

CABAN drew inspiration for the theme of its inaugural convention from the Synod on the Word of God. The process of the synod, a consultative meeting of the bishops of the Catholic Church, started in 2006 and reached its climax in the issuance of the Post-synodal Exhortation of Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (The Word of the Lord) in 2010. We think it fit to enrich our publication by introducing this Apostolic Exhortation to our readers. This presentation aims to encourage the reader to make a personal encounter with this rich document (which has received great praise from the public), so as to appreciate its richness and use it to deepen (for personal and communal renewal) whatever insights are gained from this publication.<sup>1</sup> The Pope himself encourages “a rediscovery of God’s word in the life of the Church as a wellspring of constant renewal” with a “hope that the word will be ever more fully at the heart of every ecclesial activity” (*VD*, 1). He further encourages research on diverse aspects of the word of God as we will see later.

We give a brief background of the synod process and then highlight the structure of *VD*, its special features and the major topics treated. In doing this we pay attention to how these issues in *VD* relate to the theme of our convention and to our mission as life-long students of the word of God; scholars committed to serving the ministry of the word within the Church in our Nigerian and African contexts and in the universal Church.

## **1. Background of the Synod on the Word of God**

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<sup>1</sup>Google search on “*Verbum Domini* of Benedict XVI” reveals a plethora of websites apart from the Vatican website where diverse readers interact richly with the document.

Pope Benedict XVI first mentioned the idea of the synod on the word of God in October 2006; in April 2007 he officially convoked this synod with the theme, “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church”. In the preliminary “Guidelines” for the *Lineamenta* the Pope gave the purpose, aim and objective of the Synod. The purpose, “primarily pastoral”, was “to spread and strengthen our encounters with God’s Word”. Its objective was “to spark an appreciation and deep love of Sacred Scripture so that ‘the faithful might have easy access’ [DV, 26] to it; to renew listening to the Word of God, in the liturgy and catechesis, specifically through *lectio divina*, duly adapted to each circumstance; and to offer a word of consolation and hope to the poor of the world”. Accordingly, the Synod would aim at fostering “a proper approach to biblical hermeneutics and to correctly direct the process of evangelisation and inculturation”. Further it would “encourage ecumenical dialogue” and “promote an encounter and dialogue of not only Christians and Jews but also those engaged in inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue”.<sup>2</sup>

The pastoral and life oriented emphases in these Guidelines were carried into the entire synod process as the contents of *VD* show. From 5 to 26 October 2008, the Twelfth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops discussed at the Vatican the issues surfaced in the Guidelines; by now they had developed from the *Lineamenta* to the *Instrumentum Laboris*. The Post-synodal Exhortation is the Pope’s official communication “to the whole People of God [of] the rich fruits which emerged from the synodal sessions and the recommendations which resulted from our common endeavour”.<sup>3</sup> His introduction to *VD* gives a detailed account of the synod process which led to the issuance of *VD*.

To better appreciate the Pope’s interest in Scripture, we note that he is said to be the first Pope with expertise in biblical theology “ever to occupy the chair of St Peter” (excluding, of course, St Peter himself) and that his pontificate “to a degree not seen perhaps since the medieval papacy of Gregory the Great has borne the stamp of a distinctive biblical

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<sup>2</sup> For the draft “Guidelines”, see, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc-20070427\\_lineamenta-xii-assembly\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/documents/rc_synod_doc-20070427_lineamenta-xii-assembly_en.html); cited in Olson, “A Symphony of the Word”.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, “Introduction” to *VD*, 1.

theology”.<sup>4</sup> Further evidence of this stamp was his declaration of the Year of St Paul which ran parallel with the Year of the Word in 2008. Throughout that Year the Pope made constant references to St Paul in his homilies, addresses and catechesis as he does in *VD* itself.<sup>5</sup> His first book as Pope was the popular and highly acclaimed *Jesus of Nazareth*.<sup>6</sup> A Vatican report states that in *Verbum Domini*, “Benedict XVI writes about the topic he’s most passionate about: Holy Scripture”.<sup>7</sup> This passion is very evident in the exhortation. The Pope’s singular interest in Scripture is largely the fruit of his many years as Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Doctrine and Faith during the long papacy of John Paul II.

## 2. Structure of *Verbum Domini*

*Verbum Domini* consists of three major parts, each with three subdivisions: i) *Verbum Dei*, the Word of God (6-49)<sup>8</sup>; ii) *Verbum in Ecclesia*, the Word in the Church (50-89); and iii) *Verbum in Mundo*, the Word in the World (90-120). It has a short introduction (1-5) and a conclusion (121-124). Part I, “*Verbum Dei*” is subdivided into: “The God who speaks” (6-21); “Our response to the God who speaks” (22-28); and “the interpretation of sacred

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<sup>4</sup>Carl E. Olson, “‘A Symphony of the Word’. A Short Guide to Pope Benedict XVI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*” (Ignatius Insight, December 21, 2010);

[http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2010/colson\\_verbumdomini\\_dec2010.asp](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2010/colson_verbumdomini_dec2010.asp). (Assessed 20 August 2012). Olson cites as source for his views, Dr. Scott Hahn’s “Opening Chapter on *Covenant and Communion: The Biblical Theology of Benedict XVI* (Brazos, 2009)”.

<sup>5</sup> References to St Paul occur from beginning to end of the document; see nos. 4, 9, 12, 13, 38, 40, 43, 46, 77, 79, 87, 91, 103, 122,

<sup>6</sup>Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*; this was followed by volume two: Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth. Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*.<sup>6</sup> A third volume on Jesus’ birth and infancy is said to be in the offing.

<sup>7</sup> Rome Reports TV News Agency, “Top 10 Vatican news stories 2010. Date: 2010-12-27 12:26:51”. <http://www.romereports.com> (accessed 20 July 2012).

<sup>8</sup> The number or numbers in parenthesis in the body of the work refer to the paragraphs in *Verbum Domini*.

Scripture in the Church” (29-49). Part II, *Verbum in Ecclesia* has “the word of God in the Church” (50-51); “the liturgy, privileged setting for the Word of God” (52-71); and “the Word of God in the life of the Church” (72-89). Part III, *Verbum in Mundo* is devoted to “the Church’s mission to proclaim the Word of God” (90-98); “the Word of God and commitment in the world” (99-108); and “the Word of God and culture” (117-120).

Consciously or unconsciously the double tripartite structure underlines the work (three major parts, each with three subdivisions) reflects the trinitarian grounding of the entire exhortation. Scripture is seen as the word, activity, self-revelation and self-communication of our trinitarian God. God gives us this self-revelation through creation, in the history of salvation and climactically in the Incarnation and the entire Christ event. The exhortation recalls that the Father does nothing without the Son and the Holy Spirit whom Irenaeus considered as “the two hands of God” (VD, 15). We now highlight some key elements in each major part of the document.

## Introduction (1-5)

*Verbum Domini* is addressed to all Christ’s faithful (bishops, priests, consecrated persons and the laity) so that “our joy may be complete” (cf. 1 *Jn* 1:4) (2). The word “joy” opens and closes the exhortation. In the introduction (2) it is the joy of proclaiming and communicating the good news; in the conclusion (123) it is “the joy born of the awareness that the Lord Jesus alone has words of everlasting life (cf. *Jn* 6:68)”; that this joy has “its roots in the very heart of the trinitarian life” and “is communicated to us in the Son”<sup>9</sup>; the “joy” of Mary Mother of the Word also reflects it (124). Fundamentally it is the joy of sharing in the very life of the Trinity which is God’s gift to us.

VD highlights the close link between the Synod on the Word of God and the previous Ordinary Synod on the Eucharist: In this current synod “we were conscious of dealing in a certain sense with the very *heart* of the Christian life, **in continuity with** the previous synodal assembly on *The Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church’s Life and Mission*”; as

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<sup>9</sup> VD, nos. 1 and 123, respectively

the Church is fed and nourished by the Eucharist, so is it born from and draws life from God's word (3). The ecclesial character of the synod is reflected throughout in the "we" language juxtaposed with the "I" language. It is also evident in the account taken of the diverse inputs for and from the synod.<sup>10</sup> The universal import of the Synod is heightened by the awareness that the Church is living "a new Pentecost" (4): it "speaks in many tongues", embraces many nations and cultures and welcomes diverse ways of worshipping and listening to God.

Because the synod is essentially consultative, the Pope registers his personal stamp by making John's Prologue his mantra for the exhortation. Because this Prologue (John 1:1-18) reveals and "offers a synthesis of the entire Christian faith" (5), it serves as a fitting basis for underscoring throughout the exhortation the need for each person to do what the Evangelist John did: have a personal encounter with Jesus ("lean on the breast of Jesus"; John 13:25)" in a manner that transforms our personal and ecclesial lives. Each of the three main parts of *VD* is introduced with quotations from the Prologue,<sup>11</sup> a further indication of "the intimate relationship between Sacred Scripture, the written word of God, and Jesus Christ, the Word of God".<sup>12</sup>

## **Part I: The Word of God (6-49)**

The first major part of *VD*, by far the largest, gives as it were, the theological foundations or principles for the rest of the document. The central insight is that God, who is love, is in dialogue with us, starting from creation through the history of Israel to the incarnation, passion death and resurrection of Christ: "the novelty of biblical revelation consists in the fact that God becomes known through the dialogue which he desires to have

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<sup>10</sup> These are the *Lineamenta*, the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the *Relationes ante* and *post disceptationem*, the texts of the interventions, both those delivered on the Synod floor and those presented in written form, and the reports of the smaller groups, the Final Message to the People of God and, above all, a number of proposals which the Fathers considered significant" (no. 1).

<sup>11</sup> Part I: John 1:1, 14; Part II, John 1:12, p. 65; and Part II, John 1:18.

<sup>12</sup> Olson, "A Symphony of the Word" (see note 3 above)

with us". "At the heart of the divine life there is communion, there is absolute gift. 'God is love' (*1 Jn 4:16*)" (6). "Born of the Virgin Mary", the Word of God became "consubstantial with us"; speaks to us and requires our response. Ours therefore "is not a religion of the book, but a religion of the living and active word of God" (7). God's word, though present in every creature in virtue of the fact of creation, is uniquely present in each man and woman, created in God's image and likeness (*Gen 1:26-27*) (8-9). This truth calls each and all to openness and heart-filled receptivity of this divine gift.

In response to the God who speaks to us, we are called to become in turn living dynamic and active expressions of God's word. This requires faith such as Mary had, through the working of the Holy Spirit. Mary is "the Mother of God's Word, the Mother of Faith" from the Annunciation to Pentecost; she is "the synthesis of word and faith" (124). As one whose very soul and words were aligned to God's, she images "the Church in attentive hearing of the word, which took flesh in her". "Mary also symbolizes openness to God and to others; an active listening which interiorises and assimilates, one in which the word becomes a way of life" (27). Her "Magnificat – a portrait so to speak of her soul" – celebrates her full awareness of God's action in her and her welcoming of that action in joy and complete freedom with the whole of her being (28).

Our response like hers requires developing a living relationship with God's word, paying attention to the Church, the authoritative interpreter of God's word, cultivating a hermeneutics of faith as opposed to that of secularism and philosophy, and imitating the saints whose lives were sound hermeneutics of God's word. They offer us example of "effective hermeneutic" of Scripture (48). Other issues addressed in this section – Christology, the role of biblical studies and interpretation, the unity of Scripture, false interpretations of Scripture (fundamentalism, literalism, spiritualizing the Scripture away from its life contexts), the need for dialogue between pastors, theologians and exegetes and Scripture and ecumenism – are all intended to help us develop a hermeneutic of a life of faith, a reading of Scripture that is grounded in life and aims at transforming life at all levels and for every human being.

## **Part II: Verbum in Ecclesia, The Word of God and the Church (50-89)**

Part II focuses on the Church as the recipient of God's word (50); and on "the relationship between Christ, the Word of the Father, and the Church" (51). The theological principles enunciated in part one are here applied to the life and worship of the Church. The relationship between Christ and the Church is "a living relationship which each member of the faithful is personally called to enter into" (51). Other issues treated are gathered under the subheading, "the liturgy, privileged setting for the word of God" (52-71), including "the relationship between the Word of God and the Eucharist". The worship or faith-life of the Church centers in the liturgy, with the Eucharist as the source and summit of all Christian life and worship. Aspects of the liturgy addressed include the lectionary, the ministry of readers, the importance of homilies, the sacraments of reconciliation and anointing of the sick, the liturgy of the hours, the book of blessings, silence and liturgical music. It will be recalled that the first document of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council was *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Decree on Sacred Liturgy, because of the importance of the liturgy in the life of the Church. Properly understood and conducted, the liturgy becomes a most effective setting for encountering, celebrating, assimilating and drawing strength for living the word of God daily and in all activities.

The subsection on "the word of God in the life of the Church" (72-89) includes the need to prepare the hearts of the faithful to encounter the word of God (72). This can be done through catechesis, bible-inspired pastoral activity, biblical formation of Christians, rooting in Scripture the vocations to the priesthood, the consecrated life, the diaconate (the permanent one included), marriage and family life and the role of the Christ's lay faithful. In short, the import of the word of God for the different functions and states of life in the Church are highlighted, with repeated encouragement and emphasis on *lectio divina* (86). Also encouraged are Marian prayers, especially the Rosary, Angelus and the litany and other expressions of the Marian piety of the Byzantine tradition (88); not left out are pilgrimages to the Holy Land which the synod viewed as "the Fifth Gospel", because here "the Word of God became flesh in the womb of Mary of Nazareth" (89).

### **Part III: "The Church's Mission: To Proclaim The Word of God to the World" (90-120)**

The third part of *VD* focuses on the Church's mission and commitment to proclaim God's word in and to the world. The Pope notes that the synod "forcefully reaffirmed the need within the Church for a revival of the missionary consciousness present in the People of God from the beginning" (92). What the Church proclaims is the "*Logos of Hope*" (91).<sup>13</sup> The word of God is the source of the Church's mission (92). This mission is first and foremost "to let the Holy Spirit assimilate us to Christ himself, and thus to share in his mission" (that is, to be sent as God sent Jesus, John 20:21) (93). Aspects of this mission treated from the scriptural standpoint include the responsibility of all the baptized to proclaim God's word; the abiding nature of *missio ad gentes* (the Church's missionary outreach to unbelievers); the new evangelisation; Christian witness; service and commitment to justice, reconciliation and peace between peoples; practical charity; care for migrants, the suffering and the poor, and the need to protect creation. Equally important is the need to engage the youth in the Church's mission, to reckon with the reality and value of culture (aware that the Bible itself is "The Great Code of Culture"; 110); the need for education, social communication, inculturation, ecumenical translations of the Bible; the importance of interreligious dialogue, and religious freedom, and of art in biblical interpretation. Throughout *VD* follows closely and builds on *DV* of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent church documents, especially *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI and *Redemptoris Missio* of John Paul II.

Of particular interest for evangelisation is the emphasis on the value of **culture** in the life of "every man and woman". Since "the phenomenon of culture is, . . . an essential datum of human experience" the indispensability of addressing it in the work of evangelisation is also an essential datum: "Every authentic culture if it is truly to be at the service of humanity, has to be open to transcendence and, in the end to God" (109). The gospel gives life to culture by promoting inter-cultural relationships and cultural transcendence (116). This awareness makes the task of inculturation

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<sup>13</sup> This is a reference to 1 Pet 3:15; also referring to his encyclical, *Spe Salvi*.



imperative, what “Pope Paul VI called *the evangelisation of cultures*”,<sup>14</sup> for “the authentic paradigm of inculturation is the incarnation itself of the Word ‘when a culture, transformed and regenerated by the Gospel, brings forth from its own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought’”.<sup>15</sup> The necessity to address culture in proclaiming the gospel cannot be overemphasised, especially since the Bible itself, “the Great Code of Culture”, is a record of God’s word expressed in human language and thought in diverse cultures and successive ages. To germinate and bear fruit, the seed, God’s word, inevitably has to fall on cultural soils operative human hearts and lives.

### **The Conclusion (121-123)**

The conclusion recalls the fact that the exhortation is the Pope’s effort “to gather up and examine more fully the rich fruits” of the Synod of Bishops on the word of God in the life and mission of the Church. The Pope once more encourages “all the People of God . . . to become increasingly familiar with the sacred Scriptures”. Not to forget that “all authentic and living Christian spirituality is based on *the word of God proclaimed, accepted, celebrated and meditated upon in the church*” (121).<sup>16</sup> To this end the Pope emphasises the necessity of *a new evangelisation and a new hearing*”; where we would “rediscover the centrality of the divine word in Christian life” (122).<sup>17</sup> This rediscovery “will create a *communion*’ and bring about complete and lasting joy because it originates “in the very heart of the trinitarian life” (123). All are encouraged to imitate Mary who heard God’s word, believed it and thus “received God’s word into her womb in order to give him to the world”. *VD* concludes with a prayer that “everyday of our lives” may “be shaped by a renewed encounter with Christ, the Word made flesh” (124).

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<sup>14</sup> *VD*, 114; citing Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, AAS 68 (1976), 18-19.

<sup>15</sup> *VD*, 115; citing John Paul II, *Address to the Bishops of Kenya* (7 May 1980), 6: AAS 72 (1980) 497.

<sup>16</sup> Italics are original as in all citations, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>17</sup> To concretise this need for a new evangelisation, the Pope has announced a Synod on it for 2012 and has created a Pontifical Council for it alongside the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples.

### 3. Special Features and Themes of *Verbum Domini*

The above overview of *VD* does not and was never intended to do full justice to the document. To savour its richness, one needs to have a “personal encounter” with it, to use the Pope’s favorite phrase in the work. For a deeper understanding and appropriation of the exhortation we now highlight select features of this document, pointing out how they relate to our Nigerian and African contexts.

#### A Word of Encouragement

*Verbum Domini* is essentially an exhortation. The English word “exhortation” is the translation of the Greek *exortatio*. In classical rhetoric and in Scripture, especially in NT letters, the hortatory section is generally the goal to which the works tend. *VD* displays a marked consciousness of its nature as an exhortation. The phrase “I encourage” with its equivalents (“I urge”; “I ask”; “I recommend”; “it is my hope that”) occurs many times. This encouragement is directed to all the addressees: bishops, pastors, consecrated persons, the faithful; biblical scholars and theologians. The Pope includes himself when he says, “let us encourage one another to do good and to commit ourselves to justice, reconciliation and peace” (99). By far the greatest encouragement seasoned with gratitude goes to biblical scholars and theologians (including members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission) and at their own level pastors and men and women committed to proclaiming the gospel. This hortatory character reflects the spirit of the Synod itself. *VD* cites instances where the Synod encouraged and thanked biblical scholars, theologians, the PBI, pastors and the faithful for their different contributions based on their expertise, and urged them to keep going and mine deeper into the rich treasures of the word of God.

The exhortation surfaces a variety of needs requiring attention: the production of a Directory on the homily similar to that of the Eucharistic Compendium (60); ecumenical translations of the Bible (47); preparation of priests and lay persons to instruct God’s people on the “genuine approach to Scripture” (as opposed to approaches promoted by “the proliferation of sects”); proper celebration of the liturgy of the hours and Marian prayers

(88); adequate catechism and catecheses (74); “frequent personal reading and study of sacred Scripture, in imitation of Mary” (recommended to pastors and all the Pope’s brother bishops 66, 124); fostering the people’s full participation in the liturgy; celebration of the word of God in communities (65); outreach to the poor, the sick and the physically challenged (71, 107), expertise commitment on the part of the media (113); formation of artists (113); holding interfaith meetings with Christians and Muslims (118); and encouraging the promotion of right ethical values by each religion (102).

## **Inclusiveness and Interconnectedness**

Inclusiveness and interconnectedness characterise the exhortation in many ways: in the recognition and of the work done during the Synod and of all other sources used in the exhortation. The inclusiveness extends to patristic authors (especially Augustine mentioned about 12 times), works of the Second Vatican Council, past popes, and Pope Benedict’s own previous works, including those he wrote as Prefect of the CDF (e.g., *Dominus Iesus*). In particular *VD* makes about 47 references to *DV*, which the Pope regards as “a milestone in the Church’s history” (3). Throughout the Pope remains faithful to his introductory word that he would use all the itemised documents of the synod process to produce his reflection in the exhortation. Inclusiveness extends to the sections where all categories of church members and church personnel are addressed and in the outreach to other religions: Jewish, Muslim, oriental and traditional (117-119).

While citing these previous works, the Pope makes clear what his own interjections are, as he said in the introduction. First he uses John’s Prologue as his mantra. Then he pinpoints his personal contributions throughout by such phrases as “I would suggest”, “I urge” and, when he joins his voice to those of the Synod, previous Popes and patristic authors, “I would like to echo” (e.g., “the words of the Synod”). These cited sources

invite biblical scholars to further study the importance of the word of God in the life and mission of the church.

In this feature, the Pope gives a good example of accountability. He is conscious that this exhortation has an ecclesial as well as a personal character that derives from his office. Scholars normally acknowledge the contributions of others in their work. It will be desirable that church personnel recognize, acknowledge and celebrate the works of their predecessors, while making their own contributions, rather than feel threatened by what others did, since one and the same Spirit operates in all and through all.

### **Excitement about the Newness of the Word of God**

In *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (At the Dawn of the Third Millennium) John Paul II said that the word of God has not lost its luster after two thousand years of existence and called for a return to this word as the divine energy which will energise the life and mission of the Church in this new millennium. *Verbum Domini* displays a noticeable excitement about the newness of discovering God's word. The term "new" and related words such as "novelty", "newness", "renew" and "anew" permeate the exhortation. The call for "a new evangelisation" based on "a new hearing" of the word (96, 122) is rooted in and encapsulates this motif of newness. A major purpose in calling the Synod on the word was to help the Church "confront the new challenges which the present sets before Christian believers" (3); "to stress anew something we risk taking for granted in every day life: *the fact that God speaks and responds to our questions*" (4) and "to renew the Church's faith in the word of God" (27). The OT had already foretold "God's new ways" (12). Jesus, the new Adam inaugurates the new creation through the new and definitive covenant which rules out the possibility of "a new public revelation" (14). Through Jesus' passion, death and resurrection, God offers us "the merciful possibility of starting a new way of life in Christ" (26).

On his part, Benedict XVI believes that "renewed attention to the Fathers of the Church and their exegetical approach" can lead to "the recovery of an adequate scriptural hermeneutic" (33). The paschal mystery sheds new light on the Old Testament when re-read "in the light of this new

context, which is that of life in the Spirit” (37). All new forms of Marcionism which set opposition between the OT and NT are to be rejected and the unity of Scripture sustained (39-40). A proper understanding of the Old Testament can bring out “the newness of Christological interpretation” (41).

As members of “a community that hears and proclaims the word of God . . . [and] discovers ever anew the direction for her journey;” every Christian must understand and commit himself or herself to this new approach since “only those who first place themselves in an attitude of listening to the word can go on to become its heralds” (51). Like the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), all must begin to “look at the Scriptures in a new way in the company of this traveler” (Luke: 24:27); like these two disciples we must learn to turn our apparent failures into a “new beginning” and “experience in a new way” our previous experiences with Christ (55). Benedict XVI rejoins John Paul II who in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* asks all to listen to Christ’s instructions and launch into the deep as Peter and his companions did (Luke 5:1-11), in order to make the great catch of the century. With the Synod Fathers, the Pope expresses his “heartfelt hope for the flowering of ‘a new season of greater love for sacred Scripture on the part of every member of the People of God, so that their prayerful and faith-filled reading of the Bible will, with time, deepen their personal relationship with Jesus’”.<sup>18</sup>

This newness must urgently be brought to bear in the proclamation of the gospel: “We need, then, to discover ever anew the urgency and the beauty of the proclamation of the word for the coming of the Kingdom of God which Christ himself preached”. By preaching a word that disrupts, we help towards the emergence of “a new humanity” (93). *Missio ad gentes* even “in the most difficult situations” demands a readiness “to adapt to new situations and for setting out courageously and boldly along fresh paths in meeting new challenges for the effective proclamation of God’s word” (94). The “new communities” are “a great force for evangelization in our times and an incentive to the development of “new ways of proclaiming the Gospel”.<sup>19</sup> With *EN* of Paul VI, *VD* calls for “a new missionary season for

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<sup>18</sup> *VD* 72; citing Proposition 9.

<sup>19</sup> *VD* 94; Proposition 38;

the entire people of God” so that all “may discover anew the attraction of Christ” (96). The “complexity of today’s situation” and the “immense horizons of the Church’s mission” call for “new ways of effectively communicating the word of God” (97). The situation of migrants also offers new possibilities of proclaiming the word of God in new ways (105).

Engagement with the world, as God’s word demands, requires that we look with “new eyes at the entire created cosmos” (108). The fact that the Gospel is spreading and taking root in different cultures, new western cultures included, calls for a renewed encounter between the Bible and cultures (109). The modern means of communication, the media and the Internet can serve in “discovering new methods of transmitting the Gospel message” even to believers. And “operating within communities with a worldwide network enables us to discover and give new meaning to the word of Christ” (113). By entering into communion with others across cultures we experience a new exodus (116). “In this way the Church will always be renewed and rejuvenated, thanks to the word of the Lord which remains for ever (cf. *1 Pet* 1:25; *Is* 40:8). (124). Newness defines the work of the Spirit who delights to make all things new and whom we daily invoke to “renew the face of the earth”.

The sense of newness which permeates the exhortation finds a home in Nigeria and Africa. Since the Second Vatican Council and especially in the wake of Pentecostalism, the wave of excitement over the word of God has swept through the country and continent. It is felt by all and sundry (including politicians, artists and even Muslims) in all walks of life. The question is whether this excitement translates into bearing the desired fruit: the transformation of lives, personal, communal, ecclesial and national, as Jesus intends his gospel to do. Have we become a new creation (2 Cor 5:17); people driven by passion, love and zeal to proclaim Jesus, God’s Gospel, to the ends of the earth, across all boundaries as Paul did (2 Cor 5:14-6:10)?

## **The Centrality of the Bible in the Life of the Church**

During the sixteenth century Reformation, the Protestants took to the Bible (*Scriptura sola*); in reaction the Catholic Church took to Dogma. As a result the Catholic Church was not in the forefront of the newly invented methods

of biblical studies. The order of ecclesiastical discipline was Dogma, followed by Scripture and other disciplines. Scripture studies served mainly to furnish proof texts to buttress the dogmatic pronouncements of the Church. In the pontificate of Leo XIII, however, the Church started a slow journey back to the embrace of Scripture: “Beginning with the pontificate of Leo XII, we can say that there has been a crescendo of interventions aimed at an increased awareness of the importance of the word of God and the study of the Bible in the life of the Church” (3).<sup>20</sup> *DV* of the Second Vatican Council occupies a pride of place in this task and offers a major impetus for the slow return; the Pope’s words on this deserve citing in full.

Everyone is aware of the great impulse which the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* gave to the revival of interest in the word of God in the life of the Church, to theological reflection on divine revelation and to the study of sacred Scripture. In the last forty years, the Church's magisterium has also issued numerous statements on these questions. By celebrating this Synod, the Church, conscious of her continuing journey under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, felt called to further reflection on the theme of God's word, in order to review the implementation of the Council's directives, and to confront the new challenges which the present time sets before Christian believers.<sup>21</sup>

Frequent references to *DV* heighten this re-appropriation and re-installation of the Bible in the life of the Church and faithfulness to the Council’s directive, tagged “a directive to be appropriated” (34). Outstanding are the important reminders that ““the study of the sacred page

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<sup>20</sup> This slow journey of the Church’s “interventions” include *Providentissimus Deus* of Leo XIII, *Spiritus Paraclitus* of Benedict XV, *Divino Aflante Spiritu* of Pius XII, climaxing in *Dei Verbum* of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. Benedict XVI’s *Verbum Domini* which is part of this has been rated the most important pronouncement on the Bible since the Second Vatican Council.

<sup>21</sup> *VD*, 3; in note 8, the Pope gives a detailed list of the statements of the magisterium on the issue.

should be is as it were the very soul of theology”<sup>22</sup> and that the magisterium “is not superior to the word of God, but is rather its servant”; it listens to, teaches, guards and reverently and faithfully expounds “only what has been handed on to it”, “with the help of the Holy Spirit”.<sup>23</sup> To underscore the importance of all this, the Pope adds his own hopeful voice “that, in fidelity to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the study of sacred Scripture, read within the communion of the universal Church, will truly be the soul of theological studies”.<sup>24</sup>

The newness of the word of God mentioned in the last section finds its reinforcement in this section. If Jesus, God-Word Incarnate, is the “head” of the Church, the source and summit of its life and mission, then it goes for granted that he is and must be visibly seen to be central in all that the Church does. Catholics in Nigeria and Africa may need to wake up to this reality and abide by its imperatives. Can we truly say that Scripture (the written word), and Jesus, God’s Gospel form the “soul” of all that we do as Church? Are we truly “servants” of God’s word, not its superiors, with a disciple’s ear (Isa 50:4-5) and a heart accountable to God, not to ourselves or the people?

### **Personal Relationship with the Word through Dialogue and Encounter**

*Verbum Domini* has a sustained focus and emphasis on the relationship between God’s word and life. This comes almost in every paragraph of the document. This relationship as noted earlier defines the very purpose of God’s self-communication to us. Since God-Word (the *Logos*) became flesh to give us life in ever increasing abundance (John 10:10), the Bible can only be understood if and when lived; living the word is the best school of biblical hermeneutic. This hermeneutic is variously defined as a hermeneutic of life, of love, of faith. This is because “God’s Word is something alive and active, not a mute letter of the past; not a lame word of false consolation, but one that challenges, probes, converts, disturbs (or cuts like “a two-edged sword”; Heb 4:12). Ours therefore is not “a religion of the

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<sup>22</sup>VD 31, citing DV 24.

<sup>23</sup> VD 47; citing DV, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, citing further DV 24.



Book, but of the word of the living God” (7). Proclaiming the word is therefore “not a matter of preaching a word of consolation, but rather a word which disrupts, which calls to conversion and which opens the way to an encounter with the one through whom a new humanity flowers” (93). It rules out a selective, spiritualised or secularized hermeneutic and calls for dialogue.

Often the words “dialogue” and “encounter” remind us of interfaith, intercultural and ecumenical dialogues and so forth. True as this is (114-119), and true as is the need for dialogue between theologians and exegetes (45) in the exhortation these two words are closely related to the hermeneutic of life needed for understanding the Bible. “The novelty of biblical revelation consists in the fact that God becomes known through the dialogue which he desires to have with us” (6). Dialogue defines the interpersonal relationship within the Trinity itself. It originates from God who reaches out to us humans and invites us to enter into a personal relationship with the Trinity. It should in turn mark our response to the God who speaks to us (24).

The repeated emphasis on dialogue in *VD* has a novel character: it entails encountering the word and developing “a personal relationship with the word of God”. Many of us may never have thought in terms of having a “personal relationship” with the written word of God. Yet the exhortation frequently calls us to do this: to cultivate a personal relationship with the word of God and with Jesus, God’s word par excellence. *Lectio divina*, a systematic, contemplative and prayerful reading of the Bible, helps us to develop this personal, intimate relationship with God’s word; so too, attentiveness to God’s Word in the liturgy. *Lectio divina*, which dates back to Origen and was re-emphasised by the Second Vatican Council,<sup>25</sup> occurs many times in the document. In case we forget, the Pope takes pains to recall the stages of this divine activity which are: *lectio* (reading the text carefully to get the meaning in its own context), *meditatio* (pondering on the meaning of the text in our current diverse situations), *oratio* (prayer, praise, thanksgiving and petition based on the word heard), and *actio* (putting into practice or living what one has heard) (87).

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<sup>25</sup>Origen, *Epistola ad Gregorium* (Letter to Gregory) 3; and the Second Vatican Council, *DV*, 25; both cited in *VD*, no. 86.

The call for *lectio divina* is very necessary in the Nigerian and African contexts. It provides a solid and complete process for encountering the word not only personally but also in groups; for the word by nature is something to be communicated and shared. The need for this is heightened by the way the Bible is proclaimed today by TV evangelists and consumed by almost all. *Lectio divina* challenges and serves as a solid corrective to the popular music of “the word of God says” with little or no attempt to give that word life in its own socio-historical and religious contexts. *Lectio divina* helps create awareness that God’s word wants to convict, convert and enrich us today, as it did its first hearers, in our diverse life contexts. It helps us to develop and sustain a dynamic, ongoing all-round relationship with God’s word in every situation.

### **Need for Life-oriented Biblical Hermeneutics**

Citing the 1993 document of the PBC, *VD* reminds Catholic exegetes never to forget “that what they are interpreting is the *word of God*”. Therefore they cannot limit “their common task” to simply determining sources, defining forms or explaining literary procedures. “They arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the biblical text as God's word for today”.<sup>26</sup> For this reason all types of hermeneutics must serve the “ecclesial hermeneutic” of the Second Vatican Council (34), which is essentially “a hermeneutic of faith” (31, 35c). “The lack of a hermeneutic of faith with regard to Scripture entails more than a simple absence; in its place there inevitably enters another hermeneutic, a positivistic and *secularized hermeneutic* ultimately based on the conviction that the Divine does not intervene in human history.” This secularized, philosophical hermeneutic explains away the divine element in the Scriptures and reduces “everything to the human element” (35c). Also to be avoided is the sharp dichotomy between a purely scientific, secularized and philosophical hermeneutic and a hermeneutic which spiritualises “the meaning of the Scriptures” thus failing to respect the historical character of revelation” (35).

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<sup>26</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (15 April 1993), III, C, I: Enchiridion Vaticanum 13, no. 3065; *VD*, 33.

In short an “ecclesial hermeneutic” or a “hermeneutic of faith” maintains a balance between faith and reason, recognizes that the Church is the primary setting of biblical hermeneutics; pays an ever deepening attention to the criteria set forth in *DV*, 12; is undertaken as an ecclesial enterprise and is ever conscious of the philosophical and cultural underpinnings of all philosophically inspired hermeneutics; it adopts no criteria which rules out “in advance God's self-disclosure in human history” (36).

This feature reminds us that life is the first school of hermeneutics, as Third World theologians have long observed. Life is the seed on which God’s word falls and bears fruit in individuals and communities, welcome or unwelcome (cf. Isa 55:10-11). The challenge is for biblical scholars and pastors to groom ourselves and the people to become aware that our daily life experiences invite us to interact with God’s word and find new meanings, new life in them, even in apparently hopeless situations. The strong tendency among pastors and people to sidetrack the gospel challenge to take up our lives and live in preference for “miracles on the way” needs to be countered by a life-oriented hermeneutic such as Jesus and the first disciples had. That hermeneutic commits one to see God at work in every situation in life and to respond accordingly.

### **Attention to Mary, the Mother of Jesus**

The exhortation devotes a section to the Mother of Jesus (27-28) and mentions her dotted throughout the work. She is “‘Mother of God’s Word’ and ‘Mother of the Church’” (27-28); “Mother of God and mother of joy” (124). Her Marian Prayers get special mention (88). In terms of reception of the word, she is the perfect example of “faith-filled hearing of God’s word”; one who by her faith “remained completely open to God”. By her “‘yes’ to the word of the covenant and her mission, she perfectly fulfills the divine vocation of humanity”; “the word of God becomes her word, and her word [especially the Magnificat] issues from God’s word”. She is thus “the image of the Church in attentive hearing of the word of God, which took flesh in her” and “symbolizes openness to God and others”. In sum, she models that “active listening which interiorise and assimilates” God’s word such that “the word becomes a way of life”. Her unique closeness to God’s word

empowered her to become the Mother of God Word Incarnate. In view of all this, her “closeness to the Word”, merits a special “study of the relationship between Mariology and the theology of the word”

Mary is mentioned especially in connection with the work of the Holy Spirit and the mystery of the incarnation: Jesus was conceived in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit; the same Spirit that effected the conception of God’s word **in her womb** guided Jesus throughout his mystery (15); she was present at prayer on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended “on the Twelve”; analogically we can say that “as the word became flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, so sacred Scripture is born **in the womb of the Church** by the power of the same Spirit (19). As we contemplate Mary’s familiarity with the word, “her life totally shaped by the word”, “we too are called to enter into the mystery of faith, whereby Christ comes to dwell in our lives” (28); whereby we become other Christ in virtue of our baptism.

If there is a single most strong devotion in the Nigerian church, it is the Marian devotion. This is true even for some separated brethren. On the other hand, the baseless attacks by Pentecostals, many of whom were once Catholics, can lead to exaggerations in the devotion. True Marian devotion should not be limited to prayers, processions, polemic choruses and novenas. It should equally encourage devotees to do what Mary did: recognize and celebrate God’s mighty deeds for them (sing their own Magnificat), reach out to those in need and be ready to hear and keep God’s word in faith no matter the consequence. In this way true devotion to Mary leads us to truly become Jesus’ “mother and sister and brother” (c

### **Essentiality of Faith for Receiving the Word of God as Mary Did**

The exhortation emphasises the essentiality of faith (“personal and ecclesial”) for receiving, studying, understanding, contemplating the word of God (25). “The intrinsic link between the word and faith makes it clear that authentic biblical hermeneutics can only be had within the faith of the Church, which has its paradigm in Mary’s *fiat*”. (29). By her fiat she becomes a model and archetype for a faith of the Church (29). Mary is pre-eminently the woman of faith as Elizabeth declares in Luke 1:45. “Mary is

blessed because she has faith, because she believed, and in this faith she received the Word of God into her womb in order to give him to the world” (124). Faith is mentioned over 100 times in the exhortation, excluding the kindred words “faithfully” and “faithfulness”. Strikingly, the Pope’s preferred word for the laity is “the faithful” (over 60 times, excluding an occasional use of “the lay faithful” in the references to the Synod and the Council). Not surprisingly, the exhortation reiterates that these faithful be helped and formed to understand God’s word, develop a faith-filled relation with the word and make God’s word their way of life as Mary did.

What was said in the last section in relation to the African situation applies in this section. Our people’s faith is more directed to obtaining miracles from God than to believing in the God who works the miracles. An example is “claiming” “Abraham’s blessings” without awareness that the height of these blessings was Abraham’s trust in God to the point of accepting to sacrifice his son through whom God’s promises were to be realised. Let us inculcate faith in God through sound proclamation of the word.

## **Call for Ongoing Biblical Research**

*VD* calls for a holistic and balanced study of Scripture, one that integrates scientific research and faith in service to life; one where faith in the God who warmly communicates the divine self to us guides and monitors “scientific” historical and all other approaches. The balance in the exhortation is marked by the frequent use of the phrase, “one the one hand . . . and on the other”. This stands out in the section on biblical hermeneutics (29-49), where the Pope calls for a balanced research between biblical exegesis, theology and biblical spirituality. It embraces ecumenical biblical studies. In interreligious worship, care is to be taken not to betray our Catholic beliefs in the name of ecumenism (for instance, replacing Sunday Mass with ecumenical worship).

The Pope recalls that this balance was maintained even by the 1993 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission which urged Catholic exegetes never to “forget that what they are interpreting is the *word of God*” and that their “common task is not finished when they have simply determined sources, defined forms or explained literary procedures” But to

remember that “they arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the biblical text as God's word for today” (VD 33). Today’s academic exegetes must guard against the extremes which create a dichotomy between “mystical” and “scientific” exegesis. As they are “highly competent in the field of historical-critical methodology and its latest developments,” so must they “pay comparable attention . . . to the theological dimension of the biblical texts, so that they can be more deeply understood in accordance with the three elements indicated by the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*”.<sup>27</sup> The indispensability of learning the biblical languages must be maintained, not forgetting the spiritual dimension in biblical research.

While the historical critical method of reading the Bible is important, a type of research which can be done even by an atheist is not interpreting the Bible according to the mind of God. To be carefully examined, and when necessary rejected, are fundamentalistic, literal, a-historical and certain Pentecostalist readings; so too the hermeneutics of secularism and human philosophy and imposing on the text values of un-evangelised cultures (traditional, modern and postmodern) where God is either co-opted into human systems or regarded as irrelevant to our lives. The dark passages of scripture are not to be ignored but carefully studied to discern between the human word and God’s word for us in them. All Scripture is for our instruction either by telling us what not to do, or warning us against making God speak our human language and endorse our unredeemed cultural values instead of our aligning ourselves with God’s language and gospel culture.

Areas of ongoing research mentioned include a deeper study of the processes of inspiration and the relationship between inspiration and truth; ecumenical studies of the Bible with attention to areas of similarities and differences; how to deepen the people’s relationship with the word of God; exploration of the relationship between exegesis and theology and exegesis and the spiritual life; the relationship between *Mariology and the theology of the word* (27); interpretation of the “dark” passages of the Bible (42). In this enterprise, a certain method of scholarly research that would consider itself neutral with regard to Scripture should not be encouraged. To

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<sup>27</sup>VD 34, “a directive to be appropriated”; citing Proposition 26 of the Synod.

conduct these studies effectively, specific study centres supported by Catholic groups are to be set up to offer a distinct contribution to the promotion of culture and education. The significance for our context of this issue is woven into the concluding remarks which now follow.

### **Concluding Contextual Remarks**

We conclude by urging the reader again to make a “personal encounter” (using the Pope’s own words once more) with *VD* and drink directly from its rich source. To assimilate its rich fruits for personal life and make it the soul of Christian life and spirituality, liturgy and all the church’s activities; like Ezekiel to eat and digest this word; like Mary to conceive and give birth to Christ in life; like the early Christian community, to share with others both in word and in all things; like Paul, to let God’s word transform life and serve as yardstick for evangelising our cultures. Paul did this in imitation of Jesus himself who used the gospel to challenge the torah traditions of his people distorted (cf. Matt 23:13-39).

In the Nigerian context, we need to pay special attention in our seminaries and church institutions to the need to make **Scripture “the soul” of all theological and other ecclesiastical studies**”. It is regrettable that some, if not many, of our seminaries currently do not have a full time lecturer in Scripture. Is a Catholic institution that ignores Scripture or treats it as appendage or at a par with other disciplines and educational activities true to its identity and mission?

The *call for a true hermeneutic* that guards against selective or one sided hermeneutic of Scripture is also very pertinent in our Nigerian context. In history this type of hermeneutic was operative in the Qumran community. The hermeneutic claims all biblical blessings for oneself and members of one’s community or group, and assigns all curses to real or perceived enemies. The destruction of the Qumran community by their very archenemies, the Romans (whom they were religiously bound to curse three times a day) is a sober reminder that God does not subscribe to such hermeneutic. For quite a number of people today, the Bible has become nothing more than a book of divine blessing (a Code of Prosperity Gospel) preached by people who see preaching the word of God is an easy, cost-free and lucrative business. Others see it as an effective God-given resource for

cursing enemies, Christ's injunction to love one's enemies notwithstanding. The Church has a sacred duty firstly not to pitch into this deceitfully alluring, lucrative trade; whether for personal gains or for raising funds for projects, at the expense of the gospel and to the ruin of God's people. Secondly the Church needs to actively discourage the people from using the Bible as a Great Code of Curses. The sure alternative in this growing and escalating trend is to return to the gospel, to start life afresh with Christ as John Paul II urged.

On the issue of **methodology**, we need to be aware that most of us have been formed in western methods of exegesis. We therefore need to take seriously the call not to separate "scientific" biblical exegesis from the hermeneutic of life and of faith; or think that our work is finished when we have identified forms, detected sources and unveiled redactional layers in a text, without also exploring the theological and spiritual import of the biblical word where the ultimate meaning lies. In the year *Verbum Domini* appeared, a major study in historical criticism revealed that the historical critical method which has dominated biblical scholarship since the sixteenth century came to birth in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Though it aimed at reinstating the Bible after the churches had lost authority and credibility over it because of their quarrels, it in effect succeeded to convert the study of Scripture (the book of the Church) into biblical studies (where the Bible became the book of the academia to be studied and analysed like any other ancient literature).<sup>28</sup> If we listen to patristic exegetes, and before them NT ones, we will never consider it unworthy of our scientific expertise to engage in theological and spiritual meaning in our study of the Bible. Rather we will order all scientific research methodologies towards discerning the meaning of God's word, God's message, for today's readers, ourselves included.

The **call to pay attention to culture** is also crucial. Often we think attention to culture is only for Africans, not for the universal church. Scripture itself is steeped in culture ("a great code for culture"). Attention to culture in the Bible will not only remind us that certain things in the Bible are culturally conditioned, therefore, not universally normative (VD 15). It

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<sup>28</sup>Michael C Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*; Oxford Studies in Historical Criticism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).



will obligate us to pay attention to the obsolete practices and beliefs in Scripture and equally stay alert to ways in which our own cultural world view, mindset and accepted practices can blind or lead us to distort the gospel message. The Gospel, which is essentially above culture, gives true meaning and redemption worth to culture. Cherished practices in our culture have their lasting worth if they are also our gospel, God's gospel for us.

In Scripture we encounter God's abiding relationship with us. We hear it call us to a deeper and truer relationship with God and with one another. If encounter marks the relationship between God and us, it should also mark the relationship between us and other human beings. If intimate communication and collaboration define the interpersonal relationship between the three persons of the Trinity (such that the Son and the Spirit can be described as "the two hands of the Father"), these virtues should equally define and characterise our relationships with each other at all levels. We pray for the grace to cultivate this faith-based relationship with God, with Scripture and with all human beings by committing ourselves to a hermeneutic of love, of life and of faith in union with the universal Church, as *VD* counsels.

### **Final Word of Encouragement from Benedict XVI**

We end this presentation of *VD* with the concluding words of encouragement addressed to all by Benedict XVI. "I wish once more to encourage all the People of God, pastors, consecrated persons and the laity, to become increasingly familiar with the sacred Scriptures". Since the Synod itself testified before the Church and the world "to the immense beauty of encountering the word of God in the communion of the Church", "I encourage all the faithful to renew their personal and communal encounter with Christ, the word of life made visible, and to become his heralds, so that the gift of divine life - communion - can spread ever more fully throughout the world" (121).