

## **The Sacrament of the Word of God**

Unique within the Catholic tradition, the Polish National Catholic Church recognizes the preaching and hearing of the Word of God as a Sacrament. Our Church combines Baptism and Confirmation as the first sacrament, as Confirmation is the completion of Baptism, and adds The Preaching and Hearing of the Word of God as the second Sacrament.

This understanding of preaching as a sacramental action came about at the Second General Synod of the Polish National Catholic Church held in Scranton, Pennsylvania on September 28 and 29, 1909. A report of the Synod, printed in the Church's official organ in 1913, gives the official report of the Synod:

"Hearing of the Word of God preached according to the teachings of Christ the Lord and the Apostles, has sacramental force, that is, it causes in us the same effects as does the receiving of the other sacraments."

### **God Speaks to His People**

As a foundation of preaching as a sacramental action, we note that God has always had an intimate relationship with humanity, the summit of His creation. We see early in the scriptures that God spoke directly to Adam and called directly to Abraham.

Over time this close relationship of God to humanity was diminished, primarily due to sin, the turning away of humanity from God. But God never broke off His communication with His people, despite their sin. Much of the Old Testament Scriptures are a testimony to this fact.

Beginning with Moses, God used certain individuals, especially called by Him, to speak to His chosen people. In each age He called prophets to give His word to the people whom He led. Many of the Old Testament books are the writings and sayings of these prophets, who were called by God throughout Jewish history. The people of Israel held these prophets in high esteem as those who

were close to God, although they did not always listen to them. There were always prophets as God was always in communication with His people, right up until the time of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

## **Jesus, the "Word of God"**

Jesus Christ is the ultimate revealing of God's message to His people. As St. John confesses in the prologue of his gospel:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and without Him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in Him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ... He was in the world, and the world came into being through Him; yet the world did not know Him. He came to what was His own, and His own people did not accept Him. But to all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (*John 1: 1-5, 10-14*)

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of the message of God for humanity. His entire life, His birth, His ministry, His teachings, His passion, His death upon the cross, His resurrection and His glorious ascension are the true message that God wants to communicate to people of every age. This message reveals that God loves us, forgives our sins by the death of His Son, and desires to be united with us.

Jesus told His disciples that this relationship and communication with God was to be their sustenance. Once while Jesus was teaching, a woman called out from the crowd that His mother was blessed; He responded, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" (*Luke 11:28*)

In the parable of the sower (*Luke 8: 4-8*) and its explanation (*Luke 8: 11-15*) the seed that was sown is the Word of God. There is the unmentioned aspect of the parable that there must be one who will spread the seed, the Word of God. It was our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Who spread the Word of God during His time on earth, but others would be called and sent to spread it as well.

## **Jesus Commands that the Word be Spread**

As our Lord Jesus Christ was about to ascend to heaven, He commissioned the Apostles, those men He had chosen to lead His holy Church, to continue His work upon the earth. He said to them:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."  
(*Matthew 28: 18-20*)

This work of preaching the message of Jesus Christ, this "teaching" that He had commanded them to do, was the work of the Apostles whom Jesus had chosen. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles tells the story of their ministry.

In time, others were needed to carry on this work. The Apostles chose successors to their ministry and also appointed others to carry on the work of preaching and teaching the message that they had received. Those successors later handed it down to others. St. Paul tells us that this ministry is essential to the life of the Church and our belief in Christ when He says: "...Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' But how are they to call on One in Whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in One of Whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim Him? And how are they to proclaim His unless they are sent?" (*Romans 10: 13-15*)

This continued ministry of people sent to preach can be seen in the writings of

Saint Paul when he writes to Timothy:

"In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, Who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of His appearing and His kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching."  
*(2 Timothy 4: 1-2)*

In the Apostolic Succession of the Catholic Church, this ministry of teaching and preaching has come down from the time of the Apostles to our present day. It resides in the bishops of the Church, as well as the priests and deacons that are united with them. It is for this reason that the Sacrament of the Word of God is found when the bishop, priest or deacon, acting in the name of the Church, teaches the faith passed down from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

## **The Sacrament of the Word of God**

The Polish National Catholic Church, over a period of time, came to a better and better understanding of this sacrament and its importance for the people of the Church. The Polish National Catholic Church first announced the recognition of the Sacrament of the Preaching and Hearing of the Word of God during the 1909 Synod. In 1913, Bishop Francis Hodur included The Sacrament of the Word of God in the newly written Confession of Faith for the Polish National Catholic Church. This Confession, which is meant to supplement the ancient creeds of the Church states, in Article 7:

"I Believe that every true Christian should actively participate in the spiritual life of his church. I believe that this requires listening to and understanding the Word of God, receiving the holy sacraments, and faithfully obeying all those laws which were originally given to us by Jesus and the Apostles and which are now repeated for us by our holy Church." *(Confession of Faith of the P.N.C.C., Article 7)*

In the publication "Our Way of Life," Bishop Hodur goes on to explain further:

"The Polish National Catholic Church recognizes the same sacraments as the Roman Catholic, Eastern and Old Catholic Churches. These are: baptism, confirmation, the sacrament of the altar, penance, holy unction, holy orders and matrimony. In addition, it has added the notable sacrament of listening to the Word of God."

"Because, no matter how we regard the sacraments, whether from the point of view of Thomas Aquinas, or from a simpler interpretation, more compatible with Christ's real meaning, namely that the sacrament is the external manifestation of man's union with God and the spiritual communion of man with God, the listening to the Word of God is a sacrament in every respect. Jesus assured us of this when, replying to the blessing of the woman, He said, 'Blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it.' (*Luke 11:28*) At another time, addressing Himself to a multitude of His followers and to the Apostles, He said, 'Verily, I say unto you, he that hears My word and believes in Him that sent Me, has everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.' (*John 5:24*) And, on still another occasion, He said, 'He that is of God, hears God's words.' (*John 8:47*)."

## **Preaching in the Church**

Because of the importance that our Lord Jesus Christ placed upon the preaching of the Word of God and the teaching of God's people, this task of preaching is not something that the bishops, priests and deacons of the church may take lightly.

Likewise, the hearers of the Sacrament of the Word of God must also take seriously the admonition to prepare themselves to hear and receive God's Word when they attend church services. It is for this reason that the Church encourages a hymn to the Holy Spirit to prepare the hearts and minds of the preacher and listeners to receive God's Word.

The ritual of the P.N.C.C. from 1937 reminds its clergy:

"For this sacrament, the priest must have the intention of preaching the Word of

God in conformity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the listeners must have the intention of receiving the Word as food for eternal life."

"The priest who is preaching has to remember that he is taking the place of Christ and the Apostles. Therefore, he should prepare himself for the sermon and proclaim it with dignity and in a proper form. Before the sermon it would be desirable that the people and the choir sing a hymn to the Holy Spirit.

While preaching, the priest should remember that during the sermon he cannot insult anybody, he must avoid rude language, and he cannot mix the Holy Gospel with subjects that are too worldly.

The priest must remember that the purpose of the sermon is: 1) to offer the evangelical principles as much as is possible to the faithful, 2) to move their hearts and gain them for noble ideals, and, 3) to capture them for Jesus Christ and His Kingdom." *(1937 P.N.C.C. Ritual)*

As members of the Polish National Catholic Church we share in the Sacrament of the Word of God a great truth. God, throughout all ages, has desired to communicate with His people, and He still reaches out to all of the faithful each and every time we hear His Word proclaimed.

*Scripture citations from New Revised Standard Version Bible (1989)*