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Word and Sacrament

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I begin with a series of biblical texts on three topics: 1. Word of God as active and effective. 2. The mystery of Christ, or in the language of the Latin Bible, the “sacrament of Christ”. 3. Word in relation to sacrament. In addition I include two passages from St. Augustine on word and sacrament.

1. Word of God

a. Old Testament

“Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said; ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient’ (Ex 24:7-8).

“The Word of the Lord that came to Hosea the son of Beerī” (Hosea 1:1).

“The Word of the Lord that came to Joel, son of Pethuel” (Joel 1:1).

“ For the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa 55:10-11).

“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. . . . For he spoke , and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood forth” (Ps 33:6, 9).

The God of Israel is a God who speaks, and in this way differs from idols “who have mouths but do not speak” (Ps 115:5).

b. New Testament

“In the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness” (Luke 3:2)

“While the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret” (Luke 5:1).

“My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21).

“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is the word of faith which we preach); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:8-9).

“And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17).

“I became a minister [of the church] according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:25-27).

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Heb 4:12-23).

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 12:7-8)

“You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord abides forever’ (1 Pet 1 23-25)

“It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2-4).

“When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne . . .” (Rev 6:9).

2. Mystery or sacrament of Christ

“When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery (sacrament) of Christ, which was made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has no been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph 3:4)

“For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery (sacrament) of his will according to the purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:9)

“This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. . . .” (Eph 5:32)

“Stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1).

“Great indeed is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, justified in spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed in the world, taken up in glory (1 Tim 3:16)”.

3. Word in relation to sacrament

“You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you” (John 15:3).

“Cleansed their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9)

“Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Christ” (1 Pet 3:21).

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (Eph 5:25-26).

“For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb 6:4-5).

4. Two texts from St. Augustine:

“Let the servants of Christ, the ministers of his word and sacrament (*ministri verbi et sacramenti eius*) therefore, do what he commanded or permitted.”¹

“Take away the word and the water [in Baptism] is no more nor less than water. The word is added to the element and becomes the sacrament as though it were itself a kind of visible word” (*Accedit verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum etiam ipsum tanquam visibile verbum*).²

The selection of texts from the Old and New Testaments supply the biblical foundation for the classical Catholic understanding of the relation of word and sacrament. The first group shows that already in the Old Testament the word of God is not primarily a matter of instruction, of communicating information or expressing ideas; God’s word does something. It is the biblical way of expressing God’s effective action: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made. . . .” (Ps 36:6). Accordingly the word of God is closely identified with God’s will: “It [the word of God] shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa 55:10-11).

The word of God is unlike a lecture or address, and more like a wedding vow, a verdict of a court or an oath of office. In modern terminology, it is performative; the speaking of the words brings something about.

¹ Augustine, ep. 228.2. Also ep. 21.3: “*qui populo ministrat sacramentum et verbum Dei*”; ep. 259.2: “*minister verbi sacramentique divini*”; c. litt. Pet. 3.67: “*minister ergo, id est, dispensator verbi et sacramenti evangelici*”.

² Tractatus. in Joannis Evangelium 80.3 (PL 35:1840).

This sense of “word of God” is carried over in the New Testament in texts such as the following: “By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear” (Heb 11:3). And in 1 Peter: “You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord abides forever.’” (1 Pet 1:23-25) Note the conjunction between being “born anew” and the word of God.

In some cases Word of God is equivalent to God himself, by metonymy. “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do”(Heb 4:12-23).

Although the word of God is potent and effective, it calls for a response by those who hear it. It is not spoken in a void. Although with God all things are possible, in spiritual matters, God’s power is not coercive. For God’s word to do its work it must find fertile soil in which to take root, i.e.recipients of the word, whether the community of Israel or the Church, and of faith. Paul makes clear the close connection between word and faith in Romans 10. “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is the word of faith which we preach); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your hear that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”(Rom 10:8-9). Here “word” and “faith” are complementary and in his discussion of the word in the sacraments Augustine will draw on this passage.

What sets the New Testament apart from the revelation to ancient Israel, of course, is that the Word of God has become flesh. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth”(John 1:18). Which is to say that the word spoken “in these last days”, the word that is active and effective and accomplishes the will of God, is now an event that happens in time and space and can be seen. “We have beheld his glory.” And: “No one has ever seen God; the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known”(Jo 1:18). In the new covenant the Word that is spoken comes in the form of a person: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but now in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb 1:1-2).

Because God’s Word is now made known in a person, the Word become flesh is the central “mystery” of the New Testament. So St. Paul can write: “For he [God] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth”(Eph 1:9-10). The term “mystery” signifies God’s hidden purpose as revealed in Christ. In Colossians the word of God and mystery are two ways of speaking about one reality, Christ. “I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:24-27).

In the Latin Bible used by writers such as Ambrose and Augustine the Greek term mysterion was translated by the Latin sacramentum. This usage goes back to the earliest Latin translations and seems to be a conscious effort on the part of Christian translators to avoid the term mysterium in Latin. For mysterium in its plural form, mysteria, could too easily be associated with the Greek mystery religions. Latin speaking Christians shunned not only mysteria, but also sacra, arcana, and initia, terms that had pagan overtones.³ In its initial usage then sacramentum had a general or abstract meaning (evident in the suffix mentum added to sacer) and it is in this sense that it is used in Ephesians 1:9-10.⁴

An example of this use of the term sacramentum can be found in Augustine's discussion of the "mission" of Christ in his treatise The Trinity: "But when the fullness of time came she [Wisdom] was sent, not to fill angels nor even to be an angel. . . nor to be with men or in men, since she had already been like this in the patriarchs and prophets; no, it was in order that the Word might become flesh, that is, become man. In this sacrament that was prophesied for the future (in quo futuro revelato sacramento) lay the salvation of those wise and holy men also who were born of women before he was born of the virgin; and in this sacrament now proclaimed as achieved lies the salvation of all who believe, hope, and love. For this is 'great sacrament of piety, which was manifested

³ See Tertullian, de praescriptione haereticorum 40.

⁴ The translators were, however, not consistent. In Col. 1:26-17, the first mysterion is translated as mysterium quod absconditum fuit a saeculis but the second as sacramentum: quibus voluit Deus notas facere divitias gloriae sacramenti huius in gentibus, quod est Christus, in vobis spes gloriae. The reason seems to be that the first was understood as mystery in the general sense, the revelation in Christ, whereas the second, mystery as Christ in you, implies being united to Christ (by a ritual act), and hence is translated sacramentum. On the early history of the term sacramentum in Latin Christian writings see Christine Mohrmann, "Sacramentum dans les plus anciens textes Chrétiens", Études sur le latin de Chrétiens 1 (Rome:1961), 233-244.

in flesh, justified in spirit, was seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed in the world, taken up in glory” (1 Tim 3:16).⁵

So the first thing to note in considering the relation of Word and Sacrament is that in Christian language “sacrament” does not at first refer to specific ritual actions but to God’s saving plan revealed in Christ. Word and “sacrament” are not two distinct realities, but two ways of referring to the same reality. Significantly sacramentum could also be used for the celebration of the Pasch. In an illuminating observation in one of his letters Augustine says that the celebration of Christmas is not a “sacrament”, because that celebration simply marks the day (and for this reason is a fixed day in the calendar). But in the Paschal celebration we make the passion and resurrection of Christ our own and pass from death to life as St. Paul writes: “He died on account of our sins, and he rose on account of our justification.”⁶ The Pasch is a sacrament because it makes the saving death and Resurrection of Christ a present reality. In its proper sense, then, the sacrament is Christ. In the words of St. Ambrose: “Christ is that sacrament because it is the body of Christ.”⁷

But the term sacramentum acquired a more concrete meaning. In secular Latin it referred to that which binds or obligates a person, e.g. a pledge in a financial transaction or an oath taken by a soldier on taking up military service. In time it acquired the meaning of a ritual act of initiation and in this sense it was adopted by Christians to refer to the Christian ritual actions of Baptism and Eucharist as well as other rituals, e.g. anointing. Sacraments then are the rituals by which one participates in the great

⁵ De Trinitate 4.20.28; PL 42:907. On this text see Basil Studer, “Sacramentum et Exemplum chez Saint Augustin,” Recherches Augustiniennes 10 (1975), 87-141.

⁶ Ep 55.2.

⁷ De mysteriis 9.58.

“sacrament” of Christ’s saving work. As it became customary, following the usage of the Latin New Testament, to call the Word become flesh a “sacrament”, so in time the Word of God become ritual was also called a “sacrament”. Each in its own way is a “visible word”.

But the Word also remained a word, and from the beginning Christian worship was divided into two distinct parts, one centered on a reading desk, the other on an altar. The classical text is of course the famous passage in Justin’s 1 Apology:

“And on the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president in a discourse (logos) urges and invites us to imitate these noble things. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And, as said before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president sends up prayers and thanksgiving to the best of his ability, and the congregation assents, saying the Amen; the distribution and reception of the consecrated elements by each one, takes place and they are sent to the absent by the deacons. . . .”⁸

Justin calls the exposition of the readings, the sermon or homily, a logos. That is he uses the same term for the sermon that the Scriptures use for the “word of God” (Hos 1:1, Ps 33:6; Acts 6:2; Heb 4:12). Note, also, that the “word” spoken in the liturgy is not primarily a matter of instruction, but of admonition and exhortation (nouthesia), a word of invitation and encouragement (proklesis). It is an active and effective word.

Just as the Word of God came near in the person of Christ, so in the words of the preacher, Christ comes near to the hearers. Origen explains how this can be in a passage

⁸ 1 Apology 67.

in the introduction to his Commentary on John where he explains the meaning of the term “gospel.” The task of the evangelist, he says, was not simply to narrate the events in Christ’s life, e.g. healing a man blind from birth, but to present these events in a way that they bring joy to the hearer. “The gospel,” he writes, “is a discourse (logos) containing a report of things which, because of the good they bring, make the hearer glad when he embraces what is reported.” More precisely the gospel is a “word” that brings “the presence (parousia) of a good to the believer” or “promises that a good that is expected is present.”⁹ The word of the Gospel is not simply an account of what happened in the past, it is a living and active word, a word that brings about something.

At one place Augustine called his sermon “a word about the Word”.¹⁰ But he realized that he did not simply speak a human word. His word received its power from the Word of God that he identified with the Scriptures. The reading of the Scripture in the liturgy is “the readings of God’s Word”.¹¹ So in sermon on the passage from James, “be ye doers of the word and not hearer only, deceiving yourselves” (Jas 1:22) he says: “The blessed apostle James is summoning us to be earnest hearers of the word of God, when he says, ‘But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves’ On the strength of this utterance flowing from the wellspring of truth, through the absolutely truthful mouth of the apostle, I too make bold to add my own exhortation to you; and while I am exhorting you I also take a look at myself. After all it is a futile preacher who only speaks God’s word outwardly and does not listen inwardly.”¹²

⁹ Commentary on John 1.27; ed. C. Blanc in Sources Chrétiennes 120 (Paris: 1966), p. 74.

¹⁰ Sermon 120.3

¹¹ Sermon 176.1

¹² Sermon 179.1. This passage is cited in the decree *Dei Verbum* at Vatican Council II. “[I]t is essential that all the clergy, especially priests of Christ and others who as deacons or catechists are officially engaged in the ministry of the word, should stick at their spiritual reading and at serious bible study. It must not happen

The word of God lives in the preaching of the Church where it has been handed on since the time of the apostles. That is to say it comes to us in the words of human beings who are charged with the ministry of proclaiming this word. But the word they speak is not their word but the Word of God.¹³ This word is one of the means by which God's saving work is present in the Church. In the words of Karl Rahner: "It is a true, creative action of God in grace, which renews man interiorly by making him participate in the divine nature. . . ."¹⁴

So there are two words, the word that is present through a ritual act, and the word that is present through a spoken word. These two "words" are complementary. The key text here is Augustine's exposition of the passage from the Gospel of John: "You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me and I in you" (John 15:3-4).¹⁵

Augustine asks: "Why does [Jesus] not say, you are clean through the Baptism in which you were washed,' but 'through the word which I have spoken to you'?" His answer is that it is not the water but the word that cleanses. "If you take away the word, what is the water except merely water. The Word is added to the element and the result is the sacrament, as a kind of visible word." Augustine assumes that the phrase "made clean" refers to Baptism. Hence he argues that in Baptism water has power to cleanse the soul only by the working of the Word. But for the word to be effective it must not only be spoken but also "believed." "The sound of the words passes quickly, but the power

that any of them becomes 'an empty preacher of the word of God outwardly, who is not a listener inwardly' (Dei Verbum 25).

¹³ See Augustine, Tr. on John 109.5, citing 1 Thess 2:13: "[W]hen you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God."

¹⁴ Karl Rahner, "The Word and the Eucharist," *Theological Investigations* 4 (London: 1966), p. 258.

¹⁵ For a careful exegesis of this passage from Augustine's commentary on the Gospel of John see Marie-Francois Berrouard, "Le Tractatus 80,3 in Johannis Evangelium de Saint Augustin: La parole, le sacrament et la foi," in *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 33 (1987), 235-254.

remains, as the apostle says: ‘This is the word of faith which we preach that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved.’ (Rom 10:9-10)” As further confirmation he cites Acts: “Purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9) and 1 Peter: “Baptism saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but the response (interrogatio) of a good conscience.” (1 Pet 3:21) Finally he cites Paul’s words in Ephesians. Paul, says Augustine, wrote that “Christ loved the church and gave himself for it”, then added, “that he might sanctify it, cleansing it with the washing of water by the word” (Eph 5:25-26).

This passage is significant for several reasons. Here Augustine sets down a maxim, that the Word “effects” the sacrament, a theological principle that will be repeated again and again in later Christian tradition and become the normative statement on the relation between Word and Sacrament in the western tradition.¹⁶ For example St. Thomas cites the sentence in ST q.60, a.6, sed contra, in answer to the question whether “words are required for the signification of the sacraments?” along with Eph. 5:26. Clearly he has the passage from the Tractates on John of Augustine before him. Then he explains that the sacraments have a “certain conformity to the Word incarnate” in that “the word is joined to a sensible sign, just as in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word of God is united to sensible flesh.” Here Thomas echoes Augustine’s statement that the “sacrament” is the Word become flesh.

Second, in this passage Augustine provides a biblical foundation for the understanding of the relation between word and sacrament. He not only draws on the

¹⁶ The sentence is quoted, for example, in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, to establish that it is the Word of God that produces life in Baptism. (1228).

words of Jesus in John 15, but also on texts from Acts, Ephesians and 1 Peter. Finally Augustine makes clear that the word in the sacrament presupposes faith.

Although this paradigmatic text occurs in the context of a discussion of Baptism, not the Eucharist, Augustine makes clear in several places that the same principle applies to the Eucharist. In an Easter sermon he said: “Remember, dearly beloved, how the Lord Jesus wished himself to be recognized in the breaking of bread, by those whose eyes had been kept till then from recognizing him. The faithful know what I’m talking about; they know Christ in the breaking of bread. It isn’t every loaf of bread, you see, but the one receiving Christ’s blessing.”¹⁷ And in another sermon, he comments on the sequence of actions and words in the Liturgy. After the preface, “Lift up the heart,” to which you respond, “We have lifted it up to the Lord,” you will hear the “holy prayers” so that with the “application of the word we may have the body and blood of Christ. Take away the word and it’s just bread and wine; add the word, and it is now something else. And what is that something else? The body of Christ, and the blood of Christ. So take away the word, it’s bread and wine; add the word and it will become the sacrament.”¹⁸

It might be observed at this point that the Eucharistic teaching of the early Church was unequivocally realistic. After the consecration the bread and wine were taken to be, and were treated, as the body and blood of Christ. St. Athanasius writes: “You will see Levites bringing loaves and a cup of wine, and placing them on the table. So long as the prayers and invocations have not yet been made, it is mere bread and a mere cup. But when the great and wondrous prayers have been recited, then the bread becomes the body and the cup the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . When the great prayers and holy

¹⁷ Sermon 234.2; PL 38:1116.

¹⁸ Sermon 229.3 (Denis 6.3).

supplications are sent up, the Word descends on the bread and the cup, and it becomes his body.”¹⁹

What Augustine says about the effective power of the Word in the Eucharist is echoed in other writers, east and west. For example, St. Ambrose said that all the words that the priest says in the prayer of consecration take the form of “praise of God, prayer, petitions for the people, for kings, for others. But when he comes to “bring about (conficiatur) the venerable sacrament, he does not use his own words, but the words of Christ.” What is the word of Christ. It is the word by which all things were made. The Lord commanded and the earth was made, the sea was made, all creatures came to be. The word of Christ is “efficacious” (operatorius). If his word can bring things into being, how much more is it capable of changing things which were into something else” (quae erant et in aliud commutentur.)” So I say, “it was not the body of Christ before the consecration, but after the consecration I say to you that now it is the body of Christ.”²⁰

And John Chrysostom: “It is not man that makes the things offered to become the body and blood of Christ, but the one who was crucified for us, Christ himself. The priest, fulfilling the role of Christ, pronounces these words, but their power and grace are God’s. ‘This is my body’, he says. This word transforms the things offered.”²¹

Significantly Thomas Aquinas quotes the passage from St. Ambrose in q. 78 on the “form of this sacrament” in the *tertia pars* of the *Summa*. By “form” Thomas means what is permanently constitutive of the sacrament. The question is whether the words “This is my body” and “This is the cup of my blood” are the “form of this sacrament.”

¹⁹ Athanasius, *Sermo ad baptizantes*, PG 26: 1325). See also Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 19.7; PG 33:1071.

²⁰ De sacramentis 4.14-16

²¹ On the Betrayal of Judas 6; PG 49:380.

The first objection is that in the account of the last supper Christ first “blessed” the bread and then said “Take and eat: this is my body.” Therefore it is not the words but the “whole” action that is the form of the sacrament. But Thomas responds. “On the contrary, Ambrose says: “The consecration is accomplished by the words and expressions of the Lord Jesus” and goes on to cite the entire passage from Ambrose. This leads him to conclude that “the consecration of the matter consists in the miraculous change of the substance, which can only be done by God; hence the minister in performing this sacrament has no other act save the pronouncing of the words.”²²

The tradition on this point is strong and unanimous. At the Council of Florence similar language is used: *forma huius sacramenti sunt verba salvatoris, quibus hoc fecit sacramentum* (“the form of this sacrament are the words of the Savior by which he makes the sacrament”).²³ The words are not simply an instrument, a means to bring about the sacramental action; they are an integral part of the sacrament itself. At the council of Trent, for example, it was said that Christ is present in the Eucharist by virtue of the panis vinique benedictio, or vi verborum.²⁴ Christian Pesch, the 19th century dogmatic theologian, puts it this way: “The matter of the Eucharist does not signify what it contains, i.e. Christ, by itself, unless this signification is determined through words. For we do not understand these species to be consecrated and to signify Christ, unless in so far as these things the words are made known concerning these things. So the species contain the relation of sign, in so far as they are determined by the words. So it is enough to say that the words which have the nature of a sign constitute this sacrament.”²⁵ Finally

²² ST tertia pars, q. 78, art. 1, sed contra

²³ Denziger #1321.

²⁴ Denziger #874 and #876.

²⁵ Praelectiones 6.785.

the same theological principle can be found in the discussion of the Eucharist in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. “At the heart of the Eucharistic celebration are the bread and wine that, by the words of Christ and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become Christ’s Body and Blood.”²⁶

If the words are constitutive, then they are a permanent part of the sacrament, even though as sounds they are short-lived. This can be understood on the analogy of human speech. A word of love, or of promise, or threat does not lose its force after it has been uttered. It lives on in the mind and heart of the one who heard it. Karl Rahner puts it this way: “[T]he Eucharist, even as a permanent sacrament which is ‘reserved’ in its special place, is constituted by the explanatory words of the Lord on the lips of the Church. The Eucharist is and remains the presence of the Lord through and under the efficacious word, which has two components: the purely material one, indeterminate in itself and needing to be determined, of the physical species of bread and wine, and the more spiritual one, formal, determinative, clear, clarifying and declaratory, that of the explanatory words of the Lord. And both are needed – both having the character of a sign and hence of a word – to form the one sign in this sacrament, through which he that is signified is present.”²⁷

Because there is no “sacrament” without the Word, Augustine called the sacraments “visible words.” “Bodily sacraments are but certain visible words – sacred of course, but still changeable and temporal. For God is eternal, and yet the water and all that bodily action which is carried out when we baptize, and which takes place and passes, is not eternal. There again, unless those quickly sounded and passing syllables are

²⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church #1333.

²⁷ “The Word and the Eucharist,” Theological Investigations 4 (Baltimore:1966), p. 285.

spoken when we say ‘God’ (De-us), there is no consecration. All these take place and pass away; they sound and pass away. Yet the power that works through them remains constant, and the spiritual gift that is signified by them is eternal.”²⁸

Finally, note the importance Augustine gives to faith in explaining the centrality of the word in the sacraments. One reason for this is that he wants to distinguish the sacraments from magical rites. It is, he says, not because the word is “uttered” but because it is “believed” that water has such efficacy. For the “passing sound” is one thing, its “abiding power” another.²⁹

The question then is what does he mean by “believed.” Augustine addresses this matter briefly in the final section of his exposition of John 15:1-3. He writes: “This word of faith has such force in the Church of God that through believing, blessing, and washing it purifies even a tiny infant although he is not yet able ‘to believe in his heart for righteousness or confess with his mouth for salvation’ (Rom 10:10) All this happens through the word which the Savior spoke: ‘Already you are pure because of the word which I spoke to you’ (Jo 15:3)”.

As this passage suggests there is a reciprocal relation between the word that consecrates and the community that believes. The Church hears and believes the word that is spoken in the sacrament and it is the word’s reception in faith, the “word of faith”, that makes the sacrament. Augustine is not saying that the efficacy of the word in the sacrament is dependent on the faith of the individual believer. This view, sometimes called receptionism, is quite inimical to the Catholic understanding of the sacraments.

²⁸ *Contra Faustum* 19.6.

²⁹ *Tract. Joh.* 80.3.

The role of faith in the sacraments arose in relation to the baptism of infants: how can an infant be said to believe even though he does not consciously and knowingly believe? What is the role of the parents or sponsors? Augustine answers that the belief of the infant in Baptism does not derive from the belief of the persons who brought him to the sacrament, but from the Church, “ab universa societa sanctorum et fidelium (the worldwide community of the saints and believers).” For the community that presents the child has been gathered by the Holy Spirit and the “whole Church, our mother, gives birth to each and every one.”³⁰

It is proper then to call Baptism the “sacrament of faith” because in the sacrament the faith of the Church is confessed (in the creed). So when it is said that the “little one believes though he does not have the disposition of faith,” this means that “he has faith on account of the sacrament of the faith.” Though he does not believe with his mind, he is called a “believer” because “he receives the sacrament of that reality.”³¹ The word in the sacrament purifies the infant by the mediation of the Church, but it is the Word that nourishes faith. In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “The people of God is formed into one in the first place by the Word of the living God. . . . The preaching of the Word is required for the sacramental ministry itself, since the sacraments are sacraments of faith, drawing their origin and nourishment from the Word.”³²

Finally a word on the expression “word and sacrament.” This seems to be a locution found first in Augustine. The phrase occurs very early in Augustine’s ministry in a letter to his bishop Valerius a few weeks after his ordination in the spring of 391.

Augustine reminds Valerius that the priesthood was thrust upon him and that he did know

³⁰ Ep. 98.5.

³¹ Ep. 98.5,9-10.

³² Catechism of the Catholic Church #1122, citing *Presbyterorum ordinis* 4.1-2.

what he lacked to carry out the task that “torments and crushes me.” It was only through experience, he adds, that he would learn “what a man needs who ministers to the people the sacrament and word of God.”³³

Two observations. Although the conjunction of word and sacrament seems original to Augustine, its off hand use in an early letter suggests that the expression may have been current in Latin speaking Christianity in North Africa. Clearly Valerius knew what Augustine was talking about. That would imply that the phrase had become commonplace by Augustine’s day. The second is that here, as well as the many other places, the term sacramentum in the phrase is found in the singular. It is possible that Augustine is referring specifically to the Eucharist, but the formula is so frequent in Augustine’s writings, and used to refer to the work of the minister in general, that here the term is probably a collective. That is, “sacrament” also includes Baptism and other rituals, such as anointing the sick.

Much later in life, a year before he died, Augustine wrote, as bishop, a letter to a fellow bishop in Numidia (present day Algeria), on how the clergy should deal with the imminent invasion of the Vandals. Here Augustine is concerned that the clergy not abandon their ministry to the people. Some had quoted the words of Jesus, “when they persecute you in this city, flee to another” (Matt 10:23). But Augustine believed this strategy was not appropriate at this time. His reasoning is that when Christ said “flee” he had “not yet gathered the churches”. The present situation is quite different. Now it is a matter of preserving the churches that are being threatened by the flight of the clergy. Hence he urges Honoratus to continue to minister to the faithful: “Let the servants of

³³ Ep. 21.3.

Christ, the ministers of his word and sacrament, therefore do what he commanded or permitted.”³⁴

Because of the conjunction of word and sacrament with “minister” or “ministry” it is evident that preaching and administering the sacraments are the responsibility of the ordained clergy. Already in the first century certain tasks, notably preaching the Word of God, were reserved for the apostles. “It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2-4).³⁵ Although this passage says nothing about the sacraments, we know that from the early second century the bishop as successor to the apostles presided at the “offering” of the Eucharist and at Baptism. And in the passage Justin on Eucharist the “one who presides” at the Sunday worship and preached was the bishop.

A distinctive feature of the historic Christian ministry is that the different tasks or functions were united in one office. The bishop administered the affairs of the community (hence the term episcopos or overseer), presided at the Church’s principal ritual acts (Eucharist and Baptism), and was the teacher, i.e. expounded the Scriptures in the liturgy. So it is understandable that “word and sacrament” became defining marks of the classical Catholic understanding of ministry. By a purely rational calculation it might have been possible to assign the task of teaching to one person and liturgical leadership to another, but that is not what happened. The two functions were located in one office that included

³⁴ Ep. 228.2.

³⁵ Augustine cites the passage from Acts to show that the apostles provided for the ordination of deaconw “so that they might not be distracted from the duty of preaching the word” (Tr. in Joh. 109.5).

oversight. By combining different tasks in one office each enhanced the authority of the other.

Any discussion then of “word and sacrament”, then, must be complemented with a discussion of the office of bishop and priest. For it is the bishop (and with him the presbyters) who is charged with administering the sacraments and preaching the word. In the decree *Dei Verbum* at Vatican II it was said: “In order that the gospel should be preserved in the church for ever living and integral, the apostles left as their successors the bishops. . . .”³⁶ The bishop, as successor to the apostles, carries on the work of the apostles who were sent to preach the word and administer the sacraments: “Just as Christ was sent by the Father, he himself sent apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, and for the same purpose: that they should preach the good news to every creature. . . . Not only this, however; they were also to enact what they were announcing through sacrifice and sacraments, the things around which the whole liturgical life revolves.”³⁷

In the Catholic understanding there can be no ministry of word and sacrament without the bishop. Which is to say that any discussion of word and sacrament leads inevitably to consider the Catholic understanding of the apostolic ministry in the Church.

³⁶ *Dei verbum* 7.

³⁷ *Sacrosanctum concilium* 6.