

On the Sacred Word and Sacred Music

There is a sense in which spoken words are alive and written words are dead. There is a sense in which written words do not do justice to the word, Word.

In the written word – be it on paper or parchment or papyrus or on a text message in a digital device – the bodily vitality of the ringing word is absent. When a word is trapped or entangled in a lifeless page or in a device, it is incomplete – like a body that lacks the soul for which it was made or the material counterpart of a sacrament that lacks its spiritual component. Water without the power to wash is not water just like bread that lacks the power to stave off hunger is not bread. An artist may paint a glass of water so real you are tempted to drink from it and the latest A.I. model may design a hologram of bread so real you are tempted to eat it ... still, no matter how close these imitations come to the real deal, they remain artificial.

Only words formed by the human voice, i.e. speech, have the delicacy and power that is necessary to stir the depths of the emotions, and of the spirit that underlies these emotions. Only words formed by the human voice are strictly speaking, Words.

Fundamentally, The Word is not the Bible – a long text message from God to us – as the Protestants would have it. The Word is a living reality that soars through space and time between a speaker and a listener. The Word feels most at home, not on a lifeless page of a book but in the living heart of a living being – in the Bosom of the Father and in the Womb of the Mother. Moreover, for Catholic Christians, the Word is not mere speech; it is a Person – the 2nd person of the most Blessed Trinity who freely chose to take flesh in order to dwell among us... in order to fill the world with His Word. We are NOT people of The Book, as the Muslims used to call us in medieval times. We are people of The Word – a living and saving Word that is so subtle, it can pierce between joints and marrow; between soul and spirit (Cf. Heb. 4:12).

When the Word became flesh, He reconfigured space and time. He became the new locus of history. Strictly speaking, the foundational Sacrament is not baptism – it is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. All the sacraments get their efficacy from the Word made flesh, which like them is “spiritual-corporeal”.

The saving God who came to us was the eternal Word. But that Word did not come in a blaze of spiritual illumination or as something suddenly appearing in a book. He was made flesh (John 1.14), flesh that could be seen, heard, grasped with hands, as St. John so graphically insists in the opening lines of his first letter.

Romano Guardini, *The Word and Hearing, Meditations before Mass*

Something about the African's preference for oral tradition over written tradition renders him more amenable to the workings of The Word. People steeped in oral traditions associate words with *The Word* more readily than literate cultures. They intuitively understand that words are, first and foremost meant to be spoken, not written; that language is much more than literature. This might actually be one of the few instances where we as Africans can boast of our illiteracy.

When *The Word* penetrates a culture deeply, i.e. when the *Logos* (Greek for Word) engages a people in meaningful *dia-logos*; He sheds light on the historical path of that people (Cf. Psalm 119 [118]). Without this encounter, a people remains in existential darkness.

The spread of the Word (the *Eu-angelion*/the Good News) in the African continent took place in different phases:

The first centuries of Christianity saw the evangelization of Egypt and North Africa. A second phase, involving the parts of the Continent south of the Sahara, took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. A third phase, marked by an extraordinary missionary effort, began in the nineteenth century.

Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*

In 1491, Portuguese explorers entered the mouth of the Zaire River at a place called Pinda. The then king of Congo, Nzinga-a-Nkuwu – no doubt moved by the Spirit – asked for missionaries to proclaim the Gospel in his lands.

A certain number of episcopal sees were erected during this period, and one of the first fruits of that missionary endeavour was the consecration in Rome, by Leo X in 1518, of Don Henrique, the son of Don Alfonso I, King of Congo. Don Henrique thus became the first native Bishop of Black Africa.

Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*

Even though the missions established by the Portuguese came to an end in the eighteenth century owing to various difficulties, the seed of The Word had already been planted in the psyche of the people. The *dia-logos* had begun.

Among the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa, the Congolese are our elder brothers in the Faith. Anyone who has had the fortune of listening to the Missa Luba can sense something of the religious spirit of this people. Created by the Baluba of the Kasai and Katanga, the Missa Luba is a striking proof of the richness and beauty of Congolese language and music – a magnificent testimony of the encounter between the Word of God and the words of a people. Whenever *dia-logue* with God

transcends the boundaries of human speech, it calls on music, both vocal and instrumental, for help.

In every Mass, the Eternal Word enters our history, becoming flesh in the Incarnation (characterized by an earth-ward movement and The Proclamation – aka Liturgy of the Word); and then in the Paschal Mystery, The Word made flesh suffers, dies, rises, and ascends into Heaven, to draw all people to Himself (characterized by a heaven-ward movement and The Transubstantiation – aka Liturgy of the Eucharist). This double movement (read ‘dia-logue’) is altogether the Work of Christ and can be found crystallized in the great liturgical texts; (the *Kyrie*, “Lord, have mercy”), *Gloria* (“Glory to God in the highest”), *Credo* (“I believe in one God”), *Sanctus* (“Holy, holy, holy Lord”), and *Agnus Dei* (“Lamb of God”)).

Liturgical music is a result of the claim and the dynamics of the Word’s incarnation . .
. Faith becoming music is a part of the process of the Word becoming flesh.

Pope Benedict XVI, *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today*.

In East Africa (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania), we had to wait until the so-called third phase of evangelization (the 19th century), for the arrival of The Word – and even then, it arrived courtesy of the Anglican Church which by then had lost much of the fullness of the Faith that subsists in the Catholic Church. This notwithstanding, part of the uniqueness of our encounter with The Word can be gleaned from the melodies and harmonies of our great liturgical texts. Our Missa Taita is a collection of Taita folk melodies compiled by various Taita musicians. Missa Fadhili is a Tanzanian Mass. Both Missa Taita and Fadhili were composed for the Eucharistic Congress of 1987 convened by Pope John Paul II himself. The common denominator between Missa Taita and Fadhili is the Swahili language. Here too, the rhythms of the words of men mingle with the Rhythm of the *The Word* of God; and the beat goes on ...