

## Faith Comes by Hearing: A Pauline Motif in Theological Tradition

Adam G. Cooper

adamcooper@jp2institute.org

John Paul II Institute, Melbourne

If you were to ask a room full of theologians what the organ of faith is, you could well receive a number of different answers. Some, drawing explicitly on the biblical texts, might identify the ‘heart’ as the organ of faith. As Saint Paul says, ‘It is with your heart that you believe and are justified’ (Rom 10:10). Others, perhaps more philosophically inclined, might identify the mind or intellect as the organ of faith. ‘To believe’, says Saint Thomas Aquinas, ‘is an act of the intellect’ (ST II-II, 4, 2). Still others, seeking to be more authentically Thomistic, might highlight the role of the will in the act of faith. For while Thomas does indeed define faith as an act of the intellect, he goes on to say, citing Saint Augustine, that the intellect believes only insofar as the will moves it to assent. For ‘no one believes unless he wants to.’

All of these answers are true in their own way; and none necessarily contradicts the others. But in as much as they tend to associate the act of faith with some single part or dimension, as though the act of faith did not involve the whole person, they are liable to mislead. Experience tells us that faith is an all-encompassing act, not least because it involves a meeting of two persons. As one theologian has described it, ‘in the case of living faith, the whole spiritual being throws itself open to the God who calls it.’<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Jean Mouroux, *I Believe: The Personal Structure of Faith*, tr. Michael Turner (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1959), 43.

This description of faith as an all-encompassing surrender or personal encounter, must at the same time take note of the fact that we are physical beings, and so if we are to throw our whole spiritual being open to God, we must somehow also encounter him physically, by physical means. Thus while there is some validity in speaking of the heart or the mind or the will as crucial to the act of faith, to understand how faith in God actually arises in us we must also attend to the more physical aspects of our being – to our body and its senses, and to our essentially relational and social constitution.

It is with these concerns in mind that I would like to reflect on a famous passage from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, in which he says: 'Faith comes by hearing' (Rom 10:17). According to this statement, the organ by which faith first comes into being, is not the intellect, nor the will, nor even the heart, but the ear. Yes, that floppy bit of cartilage, or more precisely, the physical sense with which it is connected, is proposed by Saint Paul and, as we shall see, by theological tradition, as the normal and indispensable means of creating and awakening justifying, saving faith. Over the centuries, reflection upon this Pauline motif yielded a number of penetrating and fruitful insights about the Christian spiritual life. My plan is to discuss three in particular. The first is the connection between faith and the sense of hearing, a connection that might seem somewhat passé, until we realise the striking novelty in the epistemological elevation of hearing over sight, the latter normally considered by the ancients to be the summit of the senses. The second relates to a particular tradition of biblical exegesis on the Annunciation. Sometimes referred to as the *conceptio per aurem*, this tradition understands the conception of Christ to have taken place via very physical means, that is, by means of the divine word entering Mary's ear. The third and final insight I wish to discuss concerns the primacy given in the spiritual life to the oral and aural

proclamation of holy Scripture, which presumes some kind of communal context and interpersonal interaction, over against the private and solitary reading of Scripture.

### **Romans 10:17 in Context**

To begin our treatment of this fascinating and very bodily theological motif, I'd like to start by attending more closely to the context and meaning of this statement as it first appears in Romans 10. Romans is in many respects a complex and difficult book to interpret, and the tenth chapter is no exception. It belongs to a wider section of three chapters in which the Apostle deals with the problem raised by the apparent rejection of the people of Israel by God in the light of their refusal to believe the Gospel revealed in Christ. While the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained it through faith, the Israelites, who have pursued righteousness with undeniable zeal, have failed to attain it. Why? Because, says Paul, 'they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works' (Rom 9:32). The whole idea of having to receive their righteousness as a gift by trusting in Christ, a man, is a stumbling block to them. But it is not as if they are simply ignorant. The Old Testament Scriptures have made it clear that all who trust in God's Messiah, whether Jew or Gentile, will receive God's promised salvation. All who call on the name of God's appointed Saviour will be saved (Rom 10:1-13).

At this point a whole chain of questions arises: how can they call on this name, if they haven't believed in him? And how can they believe in him, if they haven't heard about him? And how can they hear about him, if no one preaches to them? And how can someone preach to them, if no one sends someone to preach?

But the fact is, Paul responds, there have been preachers, and there has been preaching, and a message, and a hearing of the message. And faith comes by hearing.

Yet precisely here lies the dilemma: The message has been proclaimed. But not all have believed. If faith comes by hearing, then clearly there's been a breakdown at the level of hearing. So what does 'hearing' really mean?

The Greek word *akoê* had a wide and common usage in the ancient world, with meanings ranging from 'ear' or 'hearing' to 'message' or 'report.' In some ancient temples *akoai* referred to sculpted ears 'fixed on the walls of sanctuaries or on altars' to symbolise the hearing deity.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the term 'denoted places in the temple where mysterious voices might be heard....'<sup>3</sup> The New Testament usage of the term similarly implies a very concrete meaning. While some commentators take the word *akoê* which Paul uses here to mean 'that which is heard' or the content of the message, a brief comparison with its uses elsewhere in the New Testament (1 Cor 12: 17; 2 Tim 4:3-4) suggests that it is more likely that the word refers to the act, the sense, the faculty, or even the organ of hearing itself.<sup>4</sup> But this act or sense of hearing, in biblical theology, often carries a double meaning. People can possess perfectly normal sense of hearing, but remain completely deaf to what God is saying to them. They can listen on the outside, as it were, but not hear, grasp, perceive, understand on the inside. Thus, while the sound of the message must strike the ear drums and be linguistically intelligible, something else, something more profound needs to take place in the person for the message to bring about the act we call faith. This is what St Paul seems to mean in

---

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Kittel, 'akouô', in *idem* (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 221; see also the discussion on 'memorial stones' by Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, tr. Timothy J. Hallett (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 192-3.

<sup>3</sup> Kittel, *op. cit.*, 222.

<sup>4</sup> The latter reading is preferred by Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 665-6, n.27; Brendan Byrne, *Romans* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 325, 327; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 598. Luther (LW 25, 418) notes that although the Vulgate uses *auditus* (= what is heard), it is here used in the sense of *auditio* (= hearing), 'that is, the perception of the word which has been heard.'

Galatians 3:1-3 where the Galatians are said to have received the Holy Spirit ‘through the hearing [*akoê*] of faith.’ This very Semitic turn of phrase basically means ‘by believing what you heard’, an action exemplified by Abraham who took God’s promise as reliable on God’s own say-so, and as such seems to parallel the related Pauline phrase, ‘the obedience [*hypakoê*] of faith’ (Rom 1:5; 16:25).

It was on the basis of the possibility of ‘hearing’ on the outside without hearing or believing on the inside that traditional commentators proposed the need for a double kind of hearing, corresponding to the twofold (inner/outer) composition of the human person.<sup>5</sup> The first kind of hearing involves an external, physical and sensible encounter with the spoken word of God. The second kind of hearing involves an internal, Spirit-inspired mental and affective grasping of the meaning and content of this proclaimed word. It goes without saying that only the second of these two dimensions constitutes saving Christian faith. Yet the second presupposes the first: no one can believe unless he hears, and no one hears unless someone preaches to him (Rom 10:14-15).<sup>6</sup> The inner hearing of faith, from which all the fruits of spiritual life flow, implies some kind of external bodily encounter with the word of God. In this sense, we could say that faith is born in the body.

### **Faith is a kind of hearing**

---

<sup>5</sup> Aquinas, for example, distinguishes between the inclination to believe, given by means of the inward action of grace, and the content of belief, given by means of the outward action of hearing (Lecture 2 on Romans 10:17).

<sup>6</sup> Thus according to St Thomas, when St Paul says ‘faith comes by hearing’, he means to show ‘that the word of the person who speaks outwardly is not the sufficient reason for faith, if man’s heart is not drawn inwardly by the power of God speaking to him....’ (Lecture 2 on Romans 10:16) ‘Two things, therefore, are required for faith: the first is the heart’s inclination to believe, and this comes, not from hearing, but from the gift of grace; the other is the determination of the content of belief, and this is from hearing’ (ibid.).

This brings us to the first of the three insights to which this theological motif gave rise. If faith comes from hearing, a decidedly physical experience, if faith is more like hearing than seeing, it follows that the Christian always remains fundamentally and perpetually dependent upon that word of God which gave him birth, not just some general ‘word’, but those particular, concrete, words and promises of God as they are audibly spoken, heard, prayed, and sung. Whatever happens in the heart of the believer is somehow preceded by what happens in the ear of the believer. Our spiritual vitality depends very much on what in particular we are hearing and on whom in particular we are listening to.

This, at least, was the understanding of many of the great minds in theological tradition. ‘Although the Apostles learnt many things by seeing Christ,’ says St Bonaventure, ‘they learnt much more through hearing him, who spoke to them exteriorly....’<sup>7</sup> ‘Faith has a knowledge that is more like hearing than vision,’ says St Thomas.<sup>8</sup> Normally speaking, Aquinas acknowledges, ‘sight is more certain than hearing.’ (You hear an unrecognisable sound in the night, but only after turning on the light do you see and realise it is only the cat.) But since the objects of Christian faith are proposed by divine authority, ‘much more is a man certain about what he hears from God, who cannot be deceived, than about what he sees with his own reason, which can be mistaken.’<sup>9</sup> Since the objects of faith are invisible and otherwise unknowable, they need to be believed on God’s say-so.<sup>10</sup> Even in the Eucharist, that most visible and tangible representation of divine realities, ‘hearing alone’ is infallible, as Saint Thomas expresses in his famous hymn:

---

<sup>7</sup> 3 Sent. d. 24, dub. 2.

<sup>8</sup> SCG III, 40, 4.

<sup>9</sup> ST II-II, 4, 8 ad 2.

<sup>10</sup> ST II-II, 1, 4 ad 2.

*Visus, tactus, gustus, in te fallitur,*

*Sed auditu solo tuto creditur:*

*Credo quidquid dixit Dei filius*

*Nihil veritatis verbo verius.*

Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived;

How says trusty hearing? That shall be believed;

What God's Son has told me, take for truth I do;

Truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing true.<sup>11</sup>

None of this is to deny that faith is of course a kind of seeing: 'the light of faith makes us see what we believe.'<sup>12</sup> Yet, as the biblical emphasis upon verbal theophany suggests, it is a vision that arises from hearing.<sup>13</sup> The patristic and medieval doctrine of the five spiritual senses accords to each sense its own order and dignity. But the ascent to ecstatic union with God - a state characterised either by the sense of sight, or, as in Saint Bonaventure, with taste and touch<sup>14</sup> - is nearly always said to begin with the

---

<sup>11</sup> From the famous eucharistic hymn ascribed to Aquinas, here rendered by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

<sup>12</sup> ST II-II, 1, 4, ad 3.

<sup>13</sup> The question of the relationship between sight and hearing is one that has fascinated theologians and philosophers from ancient times. See the discussion by Hans Jonas in *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 135-51, 236-40.

<sup>14</sup> *Itinerarium mentis ad Deum* 4.3. This observation should be qualified by noting that the sources do not allow us fully to schematise the ordering of the spiritual senses. See Karl Rahner, 'The Spiritual Senses according to Origen' and 'The Doctrine of the Spiritual Senses in the Middle Ages', in id., *Theological Investigations, vol. 16: Experience of the Spirit, Source of Theology*, tr. David Morland (London: DLT, 1979), 81-134.

recovery, and depend on the ongoing health, of spiritual hearing, for in this way alone can the life-giving word of Christ penetrate deeply into the heart.

Some, hearing this exposition, may wonder along with T. S. Eliot about the danger of becoming so tied up with listening to words that we forget him who is the Word. Is there not a danger here of a kind of fundamentalism, an unhealthy preoccupation with minute and ultimately contingent particulars in the teaching of Jesus or the Apostles? Isn't it the case, as Saint Augustine taught, that you can believe in *something* and remain in a state of detachment, whereas believing in *someone* calls for loving surrender?<sup>15</sup>

There is of course a certain legitimacy in such concerns. Saint Thomas himself held that it is whom we trust that is more important than what we trust. On the one hand, faith is always related to words, to a message. On the other hand, words and messages always have their origin in persons, in this case, the person of Christ. Thus, Thomas concludes, 'it would seem that it is the person to whose words the assent is given who is of principal importance... while the individual truths through which one assents to that person are secondary.'<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, we must also realise that it is not possible to separate Christ from his words and teachings. Since faith is by hearing, we can only encounter the Word through his words. You can't play one off against the other. As Joseph Ratzinger argued in his *Introduction to Christianity*, 'Christ has put himself into his word.' 'The person of Jesus *is* his teaching, and his teaching is he himself.'<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Sermon 130a, in Edmund Hill (tr.), *Sermons III/11: Newly Discovered Sermons* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 121.

<sup>16</sup> ST II-II, 11, 1.

### *Conceptio per aurem*

We move now to consider the second insight that arose in tradition through reflection upon the Pauline statement that faith comes by hearing. It was developed in connection with another ancient exegetical *topos*, namely, the typological parallel between Eve and Mary. As the Fathers reflected upon this typology, and particularly on the parallel between Eve's deception following the word of the serpent and Mary's conception following the word of the angel, they proposed an interpretation of the Incarnation that came to be known by the Latin tag *conceptio per aurem*, conception through the ear.<sup>18</sup> The phrase referred to the understanding that Christ's conception in Mary's womb took place when the seed of the word of God, spoken by the heavenly herald, verbally and audibly entered Mary's ear. Further reflection on this interpretation, stimulated by St Paul's 'faith comes by hearing' motif, allowed the Fathers to extend this understanding of what happened to the mother of God to every believer, so that in some way, the *conceptio per aurem* is paradigmatic for all: God the eternal Word fruitfully enters not just the Virgin, but every believer, by sensible, auricular means.

Initially, this *conceptio per aurem* motif was in evidence in both East and West. The fourth century Syriac father, Ephraim of Syrus, was representative of those who contrasted Mary's fruitful conception through the ear to the death-dealing experience of Eve:

By means of the serpent the Evil one

---

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 203, 205; see also 190.

<sup>18</sup> See Nicholas P. Constatas, 'The *Conceptio per aurem* in Late Antiquity: Observations on Eve, the Serpent, and Mary', unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the North American Patristics Society (May, 1996); also Leo Steinberg, "'How shall this be?'" Reflections on Filippo Lippi's "Annunciation" in London, Part I,' *Artibus et Historiae* 8/16 (1987), 25-44.

Poured out his poison in the ear of Eve;  
The Good one brought low His mercy,  
And entered through Mary's ear:  
Through the gate by which death entered,  
Life also entered, putting death to death.<sup>19</sup>

After the fourth century, we find the motif gradually detached from its original Eve/Mary typological context and developing a life all its own. This development was largely confined to the Latin West, and even became an object of ridicule in the anti-Western polemic of Photius, ninth century bishop of Constantinople. The reasons why the Greek speaking church did not run with this very physical notion of the divine Word entering the ear are not altogether clear. But perhaps it was because the Greek word *logos* - unlike the Latin *verbum* - did not easily suggest a sensible, audible object, something 'to be scooped by an ear.'<sup>20</sup>

In any case, by the early fifth century Saint Augustine knew the motif well and made regular use of it in his Christmastide sermons especially. 'God spoke through the angel, and impregnated the Virgin through the ear.'<sup>21</sup> He liked to play upon the verbal parallel between the conception of Christ *in vente* and the conception of faith *in mente*: 'The angel makes the announcement, the Virgin hears, believes and conceives; faith in the mind, Christ in the womb.'<sup>22</sup> The opportunity afforded by the image for pastoral exhortation was too great for the African bishop to resist: 'The Virgin was big with the

---

<sup>19</sup> *Homily on the Nativity* lines 161-166, in *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem*, tr. Sebastian Brock (Studies Supplementary to Sobornost 4, Oxford: Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, 1983), 66.

<sup>20</sup> This at least is Steinberg's conjecture, 'How Shall This Be?', 31.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Steinberg, 'How Shall This Be?', 27.

incarnation of Christ; let our bosoms grow big with faith in Christ.<sup>23</sup> ‘What you marvel at in the flesh of Mary, perform in the depths of your souls.’<sup>24</sup>

Later tradition saw the motif both nuptialised and popularised. As an example of its nuptialisation, we have the 6<sup>th</sup> century Saint Eleutherius of Tournai praising the unique circumstances of the Virgin’s motherhood: ‘For here the ear was the wife, and the angelic word the husband.’<sup>25</sup> And as an example of its popularisation, we have a 14<sup>th</sup> century German hymn: ‘The message entered through her ear, and the Holy Ghost flew in with it, and so worked in her body that Christ became God and man.’<sup>26</sup> It featured in popular homilies from the early Middle Ages to the late Renaissance, from Bernard to Bossuet. Not everyone ran with all the details of this mysticism however. Art scholar Leo Steinberg has shown how certain pictorial representations of the Annunciation imaged Mary’s impregnation in terms of a visible penetration by light in preference to what Steinberg irreverently decries as ‘verbal fancies of fertile utterance or fecund breath.’<sup>27</sup>

### **Primacy of hearing in spiritual praxis**

We come now at last to our third and final insight developed within theological tradition in connection with the Pauline ‘faith comes by hearing.’ It consists in the primacy accorded to the public and aural encounter with God’s word, over the private and visual encounter. The implications for spiritual praxis are immediately obvious, for in the

---

<sup>22</sup> Sermon 196, in Edmund Hill (tr.), *Sermons III/6 (184-229z) on the Liturgical Seasons* (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), 61.

<sup>23</sup> Sermon 189, op. cit., 35.

<sup>24</sup> Sermon 191, op. cit., 44.

<sup>25</sup> Steinberg, ‘How Shall This Be?’, 28.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Diu botschaft gie zeir oran in der hailig haist flos damit in der wohnt in ir libe daz das cristus got and mensehe waz.’ Quoted in Steinberg, ‘How Shall This Be?’, 31, and 43 fn 25.

<sup>27</sup> Steinberg, ‘How Shall This Be?’, 39.

main, the hearing of God's word properly takes place in a liturgical and communal setting. Romano Guardini was one of many in our own day who have emphasised this priority of hearing over reading the Scriptures.

The sacred word must be *heard*, not read. It should reach us through the ear, not through the eye.... The word that is written and read silently is different from the fresh, full word of sound.... [T]he word of mouth is always more powerful than the word of ink.<sup>28</sup>

In short, reading words on a page, I can avoid personal encounter. Listening to someone address me, I cannot.<sup>29</sup> Guardini's comments echo the sentiments of figures as diverse as Martin Luther and Meister Eckhart. Hearing places the listening subject in a more passive situation vis-a-vis the word, for seeing – at least according to ancient theories of visual mechanics – involves an active projection or emission of light from the eye of the seer. You have to do something to see. For Eckhart, as later for Luther, it was precisely the receptivity of hearing that was thought more properly to embody the actual situation of the Christian before God:

Hearing brings more into a man, but seeing he gives out more, even in the very act of looking. And therefore we shall all be blessed more in eternal life by our

---

<sup>28</sup> Romano Guardini, *Preparing Yourself for Mass* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1993 [orig. 1939]), 75-7.

<sup>29</sup> 'Listening is an interpersonal act; it involves two or more people in fairly close proximity. Reading involves one person with a book written by someone who can be miles away or centuries dead, or both. The listener is required to be attentive to the speaker and is more or less at the speaker's mercy. For the reader it is quite different, since the book is at the reader's mercy.... I can read by myself; I cannot listen by myself. In listening the speaker is in charge; in

power to hear than by our power to see.... [F]or hearing I am passive, and seeing I am active. Our blessedness does not depend on the deeds we do but rather in our passiveness to God.... God has set our blessedness [beatitude] in passivity.<sup>30</sup>

Luther, for his part, depicted the pilgrimage of faith as a journey with ears open, eyes shut.<sup>31</sup> He rated the oral, aural, and public character of the divine word, that is, its mode as physical divine enactment, more highly than its written, visual, or 'mental' form. It is possible of course for this emphasis to incline towards iconoclasm: the formal and practical rejection of visual and aesthetically appealing forms of revelatory media. Yet Luther never followed the more radical Protestant wing in this conclusion. Even if he downplayed and even relativised the role of visual media, he accepted the tradition which knew the sacraments to be 'visible words' of God. For him, it was through the human interpersonal communication that takes place physically in the enacted liturgy - with its verbal *and* tactile proclamation of the gospel - that God enters the senses and engages the human heart.<sup>32</sup> Nor did this conviction override Luther's commitment to the personal practice of reading the Bible. But it does raise questions for us about the nature of *lectio divina*. If hearing comes before seeing, if the oral comes before the visual, if the public comes before the private, what place is there for the personal discipline of reading the Scriptures?

---

reading the reader is in charge.' Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 62.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted by Margaret Miles, "'The Rope Breaks When it is Tightest': Luther on the Body, Consciousness, and the Word', *Harvard Theological Review* 77/3-4 (1984), 239-58, at 248 fn 28.

<sup>31</sup> See Miles, 'The Rope Breaks', 244-51.

<sup>32</sup> See Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 47-49; Adam G. Cooper, *Life in the Flesh: An Anti-Gnostic Spiritual Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 108-30.

A careful study of the ancient tradition of *lectio divina* demonstrates that any attempt to oppose the private reading to the public hearing of Scripture is misguided. For the ancient monks of the Egyptian desert, for whom personal reading occupied an essential and prominent place in daily asceticism, the Bible was never just a dead or silent text but constituted ‘a speaking book.’<sup>33</sup> Spiritual assimilation to the Word who is Christ cannot be had without a certain physical assimilation to the written text of Scripture too, for ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ. But of course, it is one thing merely to read the Scriptures; it is another to meditate on them, understand them, absorb them. The Hebrew verb ‘to meditate’ (*hgh*) means to ruminate on God’s word, to chew it over, to murmur it out aloud again and again, like a lion growling over its prey (Ps 1:2; 143:5; cf. Is 31:4). In keeping with this meaning, studies on the primitive church’s practice of prayer disclose the overt physicality of the discipline.<sup>34</sup> The monks ‘would softly whisper the sacred words on their lips in order to imprint them not only on their mind but also on their body.’<sup>35</sup> ‘Like a bee, [the monk] rummaged through the psalms incessantly, whispering to himself.’<sup>36</sup> It was not only hermits in the desert or monks in the monasteries who read in this way. Augustine was surprised to find, on his arrival in Milan, that Ambrose read the Scriptures in silence, an implicit witness to the fact that

---

<sup>33</sup> William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 154.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Men in biblical times... not only *read* in an undertone (*sotto voce*), that is, they actually read aloud to themselves, but they also *meditated* and even *prayed* as a rule in an audible voice as well.’ Gabriel Bunge, *Earthen Vessels: The Practice of Personal Prayer according to the Patristic Tradition*, tr. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2002), 123. See also, with reference to the early Christian period, Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 117-54; Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Mariano Margrassi, *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*, tr. Edward Hagman (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Margrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 66.

<sup>36</sup> Margrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 67.

reading in an audible voice was the norm.<sup>37</sup> Reading aloud in this way was not a mere matter of indifference, but served a vital purpose. First of all, it created a community of dialogue between the sacred authors of Scripture and the reader, who lent his own voice to his divinely inspired interlocutors. Secondly, it multiplied the sensible modalities by which to encounter Christ: not just through the eye, but through the ear and mouth as well. It thereby led to ‘a special kind of memorization’,<sup>38</sup> a recollection akin to *anamnesis* in which the reader imaginatively entered into the very world of the Scriptures, inserting himself into every detail of its dramatic, redemptive events. The Scriptures were thus able to penetrate more deeply into the reader’s psychophysical universe, so that the central content of the Scriptures, Christ and his paschal mystery, increasingly determined his overall moral and spiritual vision.

A second implication for spiritual praxis that arises from the priority of hearing over reading relates to the nature of the liturgy itself. Although we speak of it with easy familiarity, there is something mysterious about this notion of listening to God speak. What does it mean to say: ‘God speaks’?<sup>39</sup> If faith is born in the body, if it really ‘comes by hearing’, then God’s way of speaking to us must be neither mechanical nor miraculous, but thoroughly human, and therefore relationally and socially constituted. This is a lesson taught to us by the divine liturgy, which is saturated with God’s word. All the prayers, the readings, the acclamations, the hymns, the homily, the creed, the

---

<sup>37</sup> ‘Perhaps he was afraid that, if he read aloud, some obscure passages in the author he was reading might raise a question in the mind of an attentive listener, and he would then have to explain the meaning or even discuss some of the more difficult points. If he spent his time in this way, he would not manage to read as much as he wished. Perhaps a more likely reason why he read to himself was that he needed to spare his voice, which quite easily became hoarse. But whatever his reason, we may be sure it was a good one.’ *Confessions* VI, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Margrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 92 n. 106.

<sup>39</sup> See the essay by Josef Pieper, ‘What Does it mean to Say “God Speaks?”’, in id., *Problems of Modern Faith: Essays and Addresses*, tr. Jan van Heurck (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1985), 117-48.

greetings and dialogues, are deeply rooted in the Church's apostolic and prophetic Scriptures, always echoing and alluding to them, if not always explicitly quoting them. In them we hear God speaking. From them the physical actions and sacramental signs derive their meaning. God acts by speaking, and so the liturgy is a divine drama.

Yet the liturgy, as 'the work of the people' (*leitourgia*), is simultaneously constituted by human acts and human speech, conditioned by culture and history and all the exigencies of physical circumscription. 'God speaks...' - how? - '... by man', answers von Balthasar.<sup>40</sup> Or to quote Mouroux again, 'God's word is a human word.'<sup>41</sup> Here once more Luther has much to contribute. It was with this incarnational, human and divine character of the liturgy in mind that Luther coined the phrase 'the bodily word of the Gospel' (*das Leiblich Wort des Evangelii*).<sup>42</sup> By it Luther meant to indicate the whole verbal, ritual, and sacramental dynamic of the divine liturgy, in and through which the man Jesus Christ, God incarnate, personally communicates himself. The liturgy, in as much as it is a faithful and authentic proclamation of God's word, constitutes the tangible human clothing in which Christ the Lord is to be encountered. It is noteworthy that the Reformer developed the use of this term 'bodily' as a synonym of the term 'external' in his polemical contests with the gnosticising, anti-sacramental spiritualists from the mid-1520s on. In contrast to the Luther of the earlier tracts of 1520, we find here a thorough-going sacramentalist who grasps the constitutively physical character of divine-human union, one who would readily have affirmed the

---

<sup>40</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'God has Spoken in Human Language', in idem., *The Liturgy and the Word of God*, 33-52, at 46.

<sup>41</sup> Mouroux, *I Believe*, 23.

<sup>42</sup> This phrase was later taken up by Philip Melanchthon for inclusion in Article 5 of the German text of the *Augsburg Confession* (1530).

assertion of contemporary liturgical scholar, Patrick Prétot, that it is ‘by means of his body that man submits to the truth of his being “before God”’.<sup>43</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As we have now seen, the Pauline motif ‘faith comes by hearing’ has given rise to a long and rich tradition of theological reflection, from which we have gleaned three main insights. First we discussed the insight that faith is more like hearing than seeing, a fact that places us in an essentially receptive and dependent position vis-a-vis the divine word, and subordinates seeing to hearing at least until faith gives way to the full knowledge of God in glory. We next considered the *conceptio per aurem* tradition, the insight that just as the Virgin became fecund through her reception of God’s word through the ear, so too the spiritual fecundity of every human being rests on his or her receptivity to the same Word who continues to be conceived and made flesh in the world. And thirdly, we explored the implications of the fact that faith is born in the body, understanding ‘body’ in both its personal and ecclesial aspects. This final aspect seems to provide a critical and necessary qualification of the ‘faith comes by hearing’ motif to guard it from sliding toward any kind of iconoclastic, anti-affective rationalism. The divine word is addressed not to the intellect or will alone, but to the whole person, who is always a bodily person in a bodily and historical communion of persons.

---

<sup>43</sup> Patrick Prétot, ‘La Liturgie, Une Expérience Corporelle’, *La Maison-Dieu* 247 (2006), 7-36,

---

at 19.