

## Word for the World: Four Characteristics of a Faithful Sharing of the Word

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As we approach the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Dei Verbum* in 2015, we are presented with a valuable opportunity to reflect on our response to the scriptural renewal it both noted and encouraged within the life and mission of the Church. The impact of increased scriptural engagement in the life of the faithful over the intervening years has widely been caricatured as a swing to liturgical liberality, followed by a traditionalist reaction. Whilst the analysis is somewhat crude and misleading, it is interesting to note that popular comment has primarily concerned itself with assessing the use and interpretation of the Bible *ad intra*.

The occasion of the 2008 Synod of Bishops exploring the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, and its corresponding exhortation, *Verbum Domini* was striking, in part, because of its explicit concern with the missionary dimension that is proper to an authentic engagement with the word. Throughout the synod itself, the faith stories of many individuals from around the world served to highlight the increased biblical apostolate, and both the challenges and joys of sharing scripture. The testimonies of these individuals helped to inform the Synod Bishops, and the final text of *Verbum Domini*.

It is certainly beyond the scope of the Synod Document and this essay to engage in a critical evaluation of the multitudinous initiatives and ministries that have arisen to help share the word of God *ad extra*. However, it is my aim to highlight and illustrate four qualities which should characterise a faithful sharing of the word in a missional context.<sup>1</sup> These hallmarks have been drawn out with particular regard to the third section of *Verbum Domini – Verbum Mundo*, although they are neither explicitly referred to in this way, nor restricted to this section of the Exhortation.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout, I will refer to 'sharing the word' in the sense of sharing the good news we find in the Scriptures with others. *Verbum Domini* is clear that the 'word of the Lord' is not confined to the written Scriptures, but also includes other sources of God's self-revelation. Where referring to Christ, I will follow the convention of using the capitalized 'Word' as a title.

## Characteristic 1: A Response to the Living Word

The 1989 BAFTA award winning film *Dead Poets Society* tells the story of English teacher John Keating who arrives at the stuffy Welton Academy to find a group of students under excruciating pressure from school and parental authority figures to succeed. Using unconventional teaching methods, Keating revolutionises the way in which the students engage with literature, at one point encouraging them to stand on their desks to look at the world in a different way.

One by one, the students are released from their fears and oppression, and are propelled into a new life of passionate hopes and dreams, explored in a clandestine society where they share their emotions openly. The conflict between this new-found freedom and the rigid structure of the academy inevitably reaches a crisis point, where the students are intimidated into falsely blaming Keating for initiating the ‘Dead Poets Society’, and he is fired from Welton.

The memorable last scene of the film shows Keating picking up his belongings during an English class. The truth is outed, and one by one, the boys pluck up the courage to give Keating a final salute standing on their desks, proclaiming ‘*O Captain! My Captain*’ from a Walt Whitman poem – much to the chagrin of the headmaster.

The storyline of *Dead Poets Society* provides an eloquent metaphor for the power of the Living Word to set us free – to release emotion, to call to action and to expand our dreams. The students are encountering the same written words of literature, but the ‘Captain’ brings the words to life, allowing them to inform, inspire and even incite. Without the encounter with their teacher, the words would remain letters on a page to the students.

Inasmuch as the students of the *Dead Poets Society* become heralds of literature through their encounter with the teacher, so the starting point proper to a sharing of the word is as a response to Christ the Living Word, suffused with grace and carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our baptismal duty to share the word with others stems from our identification with Christ, the “*exegete*” of the God whom “*no one has ever seen*”.<sup>2</sup> As a result of our encounter with Jesus the Word, we are engaged ‘*not only as hearers of divine revelation, but also its heralds*.’<sup>3</sup> Whilst we may foster an expectancy to being used by God through

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<sup>2</sup> *Verbum Domini* §90.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* §91.

practicing spiritual disciplines (such as silence, meditation, recitation),<sup>4</sup> these activities are vessels for grace to flow into our hearts and minds, and consequently animate our partaking in God's mission.<sup>5</sup>

Consider the account of Pentecost recorded in the book of Acts:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability (Acts 2:1-4).<sup>6</sup>

Earlier in the narrative, the Risen Jesus commands his followers to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit in power, which will consequently identify them as witnesses to God's sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> Their common prayer and gathering is seemingly unlikely to fulfil the commission of Christ to be his witnesses '*in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*'<sup>8</sup> Yet their experience of the Holy Spirit at the Pentecost event utterly transforms the scenario – manifestly demonstrated through the sign of inspired words.

It is the Spirit who gives the disciples the power to express the word in many tongues. The natural gift of each (speech) is augmented and perfected with a spiritual anointing of the Spirit (xenoglossy) in order to herald the divine revelation.<sup>9</sup> Peter's address (Acts 2:14-36) is no less inspired, with Luke associating the once-fisherman as prophet of the Risen Lord.<sup>10</sup> The hearers themselves, we are encouraged to appreciate, join the fledgling community in response to the proclamation of the word, and become equipped for mission by the same Holy Spirit.

If, as is clearly intended, we are to locate an epicentre of 'word-sharing' at Pentecost, Luke immediately reminds his audience of our dependence on the Holy Spirit to catalyze us in our mission.

However, a *personal* response to the Living Word must not be misunderstood as *private* or *individualistic*. The outworking of the encounter with the Holy Spirit

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<sup>4</sup> The international ecumenical movement *Renovare* has much practical advice to offer on incorporating spiritual disciplines into everyday life – see [www.renovarelife.org](http://www.renovarelife.org).

<sup>5</sup> cf *Evangelii Nuntiandi* §75.

<sup>6</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Acts 1:8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> See article by John T. Squires in J.D.G. Dunn (ed.), *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, 2003), p. 1218

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

at Pentecost is a necessarily public witness, as the narrative moves from the house where the followers were gathered into a wider social space. This is emphasised in *Verbum Domini*, section 91:

We cannot keep to ourselves the words of eternal life given to us in our encounter with Jesus Christ: they are meant for everyone, for every man and woman. Everyone today, whether he or she knows it or not, needs this message.

Neither the encounter with the Holy Spirit, nor the miraculous gift of many languages, nor even Peter's address are individualistic experiences.<sup>11</sup> Birthed within a later first-century setting, the Acts account simply cannot but locate this spiritual renewal within the life of the believing community of Christ-followers. The inspiration of the Living Word in our word-sharing is fundamentally communal. The Synod Document is careful to echo this connection between grace and the shared mission of all the People of God:

No believer in Christ can feel dispensed from this responsibility which comes from the fact of our sacramentally belonging to the Body of Christ. A consciousness of this must be revived in every family, parish, community, association and ecclesial movement. The Church, as a mystery of communion, is thus entirely missionary, and everyone, according to his or her proper state in life, is called to give an incisive contribution to the proclamation of Christ.<sup>12</sup>

## Characteristic 2: The Credibility of Our Witness

### Words

*Axes after whose stroke the wood rings,  
And the echoes!  
Echoes travelling  
Off from the centre like horses.*

....

*Years later I  
Encounter them on the road \_\_\_\_\_*

*Words dry and riderless,*

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<sup>11</sup> See 2:14: 'But Peter, standing with the eleven...'

<sup>12</sup> *Verbum Domini* §94

*The indefatigable hoof-taps.  
While  
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars  
Govern a life.*<sup>13</sup>

The second characteristic of a faithful sharing of the word is that it will be marked by a credible witness of life. Anybody reading this essay will easily be able to recall times in which their witness of life has failed to match the words that they have spoken. Indeed, the excitement of the Pentecost event and growth in the early community of believers is swiftly followed by a somewhat alarming account of the fraud of Ananias and Sapphira – both divinely punished by death for failing to give an honest account of their finances (Acts 5:1-11). It is fortunate that we don't seem to face the same consequences today – despite what we may think of the current economic villains.

Drawing on the insights of Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Verbum Domini* explicitly associates the word of God and Christian witness in the way that the believing community is to respond to the initial inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

The immense horizons of the Church's mission and the complexity of the today's situation call for new ways of effectively communicating the word of God. The Holy Spirit, the protagonist of all evangelization, will never fail to guide Christ's Church in this activity. Yet it is important that every form of proclamation keep in mind, first of all, the intrinsic relationship between the *communication of God's word* and *Christian witness*. The very credibility of our proclamation depends on this.<sup>14</sup>

The credible witness of today's Christian community must be as diverse and creative as the vast array of opportunities to share the word in our world. Whilst not limiting the scope of these acts of witness, the document highlights a variety of key areas for consideration. Our sharing of the word should be characterized by serving the poor, committing to justice, promoting reconciliation and peace, offering practical charity, demonstrating concern for young people, welcoming migrants, identifying with and alleviating suffering, and protecting the environment. If we seek to share the word of God *ad extra* whilst remaining obstinately unmoved by these challenges, we may appear '*like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.*'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> 'Words', taken from 'Ariel' by Sylvia Plath (London: *Faber & Faber*, 1968).

<sup>14</sup> *Verbum Domini* §97.

<sup>15</sup> James 1:23f.

This commitment in the world is – in a sense – both the preaching and manifestation of the Kingdom of God. Where Christ went, the Kingdom erupted through his words and his deeds.<sup>16</sup> Word and deed were symbiotic. We are given a striking perspective on the significance of words and actions in the Kingdom in Matthew chapter 21:

‘What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir”; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him (Mt 21:28-32).

This story is about sharing the word beyond words. It challenges the empty rhetoric of language which lacks the substance of a corresponding life of witness. The word impacts and shapes us because it is alive. It is a word that returns having ‘*accomplished a purpose*’.<sup>17</sup> Our transformation demonstrates the fullness of life in the word we have heard. It is a sharp contrast to the ‘*Words*’ described by Sylvia Plath days before her death – words which initially seem to echo with resonance, but which return empty and bearing no relevance to the true source of destiny.

A credible witness is both a straightforward enterprise and a challenging endeavour. At its most simple, the Christian community is encouraged to hear the word of the Lord and respond. In her *Little Way*, for instance, St Therese offers a practical and meaningful way of following God’s will. On the other hand, however, the complexities of contemporary ethical and social issues demand a thoughtful and considered approach. An example of this would be in the arena of political and social life, which the Synod Fathers noted as an area of special concern.<sup>18</sup> If laypeople are to be equipped to be directly involved in political and social life, a sound and well-balanced grasp of scriptural hermeneutics must surely be encouraged, as well as the ‘*suitable formation in the principles of the Church’s social teaching*’ noted in the Synod document.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See the very stimulating *Jesus: An Historical Approximation* by Jose A Pagola, trans Margaret Wilde (Miami: Convivium Press, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Isaiah 55:10f.

<sup>18</sup> *Verbum Domini* §100.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

### Characteristic 3: A Recapitulation of the Word

If our sharing of the word is to be characterised as a response to the Living Word, and accompanied by a credibility of witness, its third hallmark should be its fruitfulness in bearing a culturally-sensitive recapitulation of the word. With regard to the word and culture, *Verbum Domini* suggests that:

The authentic paradigm of inculturation is the incarnation of the Word: “‘Acculturation’ or ‘inculturation’ will truly be a reflection of the incarnation of the Word when a culture, transformed and regenerated by the Gospel, brings forth from its own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought”, serving as a leaven within the local culture, enhancing the *semina Verbi* and all those positive elements present within that culture, thus opening it to the values of the Gospel.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, distinct cultures are not restricted to (sometimes arbitrary) geographical, linguistic or ethnic groupings.<sup>21</sup> They make up of a local culture may have much more to do with the attitudes a group of people have towards decision-making, passing on knowledge, inspiring and communicating. Within this highly fluid context, a recapitulation of the word proper to cultures and subcultures becomes a vital characteristic of our endeavours to share the word *ad extra*: a ‘translation into culture’, if you like.

Take, for instance, a fleeting glance at the ‘local’ culture of young people in the UK.<sup>22</sup> When asking a series of questions about this youth culture, one might anecdotally discover that young people increasingly look to heroes and celebrities to help guide ethical decision-making. Knowledge is pooled (and validated by a system of voting) through *Youtube* and *Facebook*. Inspiration is drawn from the fables of young wizards, teenage vampires and irreverent pirates. Communication is fast-paced, multi-layered, saturated with images, sound and sensuality. Film, therefore, is a key facet of youth culture.<sup>23</sup> How, then, does an authentic sharing of the word through film bring forth an original expression of Christian life, celebration and thought?

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<sup>20</sup> *Verbum Domini* §114.

<sup>21</sup> Although Pope Benedict is at pains to highlight the lack of adequate Biblical translations for many language groups around the world – a challenge which should be tackled ‘as much as possible in cooperation with the different Bible Societies’: *Verbum Domini* §115.

<sup>22</sup> Of course, this is a hugely generalised grouping which would necessarily fragment into a multitude of local subcultures.

<sup>23</sup> Film is not just a motif of youth culture – it has been an enduring part of global entertainment throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and thus has resonance across age boundaries. It is intriguing to note that advertisers and studios are increasingly investing in game development, as opposed to cinema, as this market is already overtaking the film industry in terms of revenue and loyalty.

Movies have a capacity to guide, to teach, to inspire and to communicate.<sup>24</sup> Recognising this, both the faith community at large and faith-based youth workers have been using film for years as a way to evangelise, to catechise and to foster change. The *semina Verbi* of *Star Wars*, *The Matrix* and *Indiana Jones* are cross-referenced with scriptural analogies and practical lessons. Indeed, I have used *Dead Poets Society* at the beginning of this essay in the same manner.

Yet if our sharing of the word in youth culture is to be characterised by a recapitulation of our encounter with Christ, should we be looking towards the creation of original artistic expressions harnessing the medium of film? In this manner, might we be more authentically acting as a leaven within society?

Over the past four years, our culture team at Bible Society have been exploring this principle by developing an annual competition and award for filmmakers. *Enter the Pitch* challenges aspiring directors to create a storyline for a short film which has a biblical story or scripturally-inspired theme at its core. Participants are encouraged to delve into the narratives and to re-imagine the word in the language, imagery and plot-structure of contemporary film-based culture. Pitches are judged by both the general public, and a panel of expert judges, including actors, directors and film critics. The winning pitch is then made into a short film, to be screened in Hollywood to a series of industry gatekeepers before being entered into film festivals around the world. Previous winners include ‘*Derelect*’, a dystopian vision of Onesimus the runaway slave, and ‘*Rahab*’, an examination of loyalty, truth, dignity and warfare.<sup>25</sup>

What is fascinating about this approach to engaging through film is that it encourages the development of a positive scriptural voice in the noisy chatter of the cultural narrative. The short films produced are aesthetically and dramatically enticing. They are a thoughtful recapitulation of the word, and avoid the pull towards cliché or a two-dimensional reading of scripture. More significant than the final films, however, is the impact that the project has on a series of future filmmakers – both the winners and others who pitch for the prize. The cultural ground is, in a sense, prepared for them to see that there is valid creative space for an original artistic expression transformed by their encounter with the word. By lending their skills to a culturally-sensitive recapitulation of The Story through the medium of film, the word becomes the leaven within youth culture, enhancing the *semina Verbi* of contemporary filmmaking.

*Verbum Domini* is clear to emphasise that this process of inculturation is to be signified by the incarnation of the Word, rather than by ‘*superficial adaptation*’

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<sup>24</sup> Equally, they have a capacity to make idols of their stars, to misinform and to horrify.

<sup>25</sup> For more information about *Enter the Pitch* visit [www.enterthepitch.com](http://www.enterthepitch.com).

or ‘*confused syncretism*’.<sup>26</sup> ‘*Recapitulation*’ here becomes a useful term. Within music theory, the recapitulation is the concluding section of a sonata which both authentically re-presents the original, tonic key of the music whilst responding to and resolving the developmental section of the piece. A recapitulation of the word, in this sense, re-presents Christ the Word as the resolution and purpose, whilst responding to and acknowledging both the challenges and beauty of development in local cultures.

Education, the arts, the media and digital communications are all identified as areas for fresh encounters with the word.<sup>27</sup> The Synod Document challenges the Christian community to actively engage with culture, whilst reassuring those ‘*who are part of the world of culture that they have nothing to fear from openness to God’s word, which never destroys true culture, but rather is a constant stimulus to seek ever more appropriate, meaningful and humane forms of expression.*’<sup>28</sup>

A faithful sharing of the word *ad extra*, then, can be recognised by the Christ-centred transformation that it brings to the culture through those who have been set on fire by the word.

#### **Characteristic 4: Dialogue for the Common Good**

The final characteristic that should accompany a faithful sharing of the word is an openness to dialogue with an aim to achieving the common good:

The Church considers an essential part of the proclamation of the word to consist in encounter, dialogue and cooperation with all people of good will, particularly with the followers of the different religious traditions of humanity.<sup>29</sup>

The grand narrative of scripture is saturated with stories of God’s care for the outsider, the alien, the other. Not least of these are the gospel accounts of Jesus’ liminal journeys, tenderly and yet courageously entering into dialogue with the Samaritan, the Syro-Phoenecian, and the Roman Centurion.<sup>30</sup> Confidence to engage in authentic dialogue and cooperation with those seemingly outside of our own realm of experience is a natural outworking of transformation by Christ the Word.

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<sup>26</sup> *Verbum Domini* §114.

<sup>27</sup> *Verbum Domini* §111-113.

<sup>28</sup> *Verbum Domini* §109.

<sup>29</sup> *Verbum Domini* §117.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. John 4:5-42; Mark 7:25-30; Luke 7:1-10.

Within our domestic context, organisations like 3ff (the ‘3 Faiths Forum’)<sup>31</sup> are building on the work of Peter Ochs, David Ford and others within the realm of Scriptural Reasoning.<sup>32</sup> Rather than suggesting that the distinct elements of the core texts of the Abrahamic faiths are areas for conflict and disagreement, the process of scriptural reasoning tends to promote dialogue around the areas of deeply held beliefs. This can be achieved either by looking at a scriptural passage shared between the faith groups represented (often highlighting questions of authority, interpretation and tradition), or by looking at thematic material from distinct sacred texts, from which areas of agreement and contrast can be compared. The approach avoids both reductionism and conflict, and focuses dialogue towards areas for collaboration towards achieving the common good. In his excellent recent work, *‘A Public Faith’*, Miroslav Volf describes the potential impact of scriptural reasoning:

At the most basic level, the truth-claims of many religions – notably those of the Abrahamic faiths – are contained in their sacred texts. My suggestion is that people of faith should practice “hermeneutical hospitality” in regard to each other’s sacred texts and exchange gifts as they do so. Each should enter sympathetically into others’ efforts to interpret their sacred texts as well as listen to how others perceive them as readers of their own sacred texts. Such hospitality will not necessarily lead to agreement in the interpretation of each other’s respective scriptures. And it will certainly not lead to overall agreement among different religious communities for the simple reason that they hold distinct – even if, in some cases, partly overlapping – texts as authoritative. But such hermeneutical exchanges of gifts will help people of faith to better understand their own and others’ sacred texts, to see each other as companions rather than combatants in the struggle for truth, to better respect each other’s humanness, and to practice beneficence toward one another.<sup>33</sup>

One of the more innovative ways in which 3ff are opening discussion between those from different faiths is to encourage collaboration through the visual arts. Their ‘Urban Dialogues’ art festival sees submitted work from artists principally of the Abrahamic faiths (although other faith groups also participate) curated in a manner that allows the works themselves to critique and complement one another. Within the festival, three prizes are awarded to collaborative projects that see aspiring artists of different faiths work on a joint piece exploring a

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<sup>31</sup> See [www.threefaithsforum.org.uk](http://www.threefaithsforum.org.uk) for more information.

<sup>32</sup> See, in particular, David Ford and C.C. Pecknold (ed.), *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), p.136.

common theme. At the 2011 awards, one of the winning pieces - A<sup>3</sup> - was a striking typographical analysis of the significance of the first letter of the alphabet in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The finished piece was a fascinating reflection on word, language, expression and the divine.

Projects like these demonstrate the positive contribution that humble confidence in our own experience of the word can make to creative dialogue with others. Gathering around the word provides a space for meaningful conversation, and encourages questions about the nature of values within the public sphere. Indeed, Volf concludes that without the presence of dialogue for the common good, the transformation of our culture for authentic human flourishing becomes almost an insurmountable task:

The common mission [between those of different faiths] is also to make plausible in contemporary culture that human beings will flourish only when the love of pleasure, a dominant driving force in our culture, gives way to the pleasure of love. Different religions will disagree on how the transition from love of pleasure to the pleasure of love can be achieved, and they will not see eye to eye about what a truly pleasurable love concretely means. Yet together they can create a climate in which love of pleasure has been exposed as empty and in which a robust debate is carried on about the most important question of all: “What makes for a life worthy of being called good?”<sup>34</sup>

## **A Time for Reflection?**

We find within *Verbum Mundo* an ambitious model for our sharing of the word *ad extra*. Building on the theological, liturgical, devotional and pastoral content of the preceding sections of *Verbum Domini*, readers are left with an unequivocal mandate to share outwardly with others what they have received inwardly through the gift of an encounter with the Living Word.

There are many ways in which we can assess scriptural initiatives and ministries and discover the fruitfulness of the biblical apostolate throughout the life and mission of the Church. It behoves us to take time to appreciate how God is acting through our openness to the word, as well as to perceive new ways in which we may be invited to engage in mission *ad extra*. What I have sought to do in this essay is to identify, draw out and practically reflect upon four characteristics which I perceive as key to a faithful sharing of the word, as implicitly described in the content of *Verbum Mundo*.

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* p.145.

These four characteristics are not intended to be exhaustive, yet they may allow us to reflect on how we approach the prospect of sharing the word with others. Our sharing should firstly be in response to an encounter with the Living Word in our own lives; it should be accompanied by a credible witness of life; it should bear fruit in a culturally-sensitive recapitulation of the word; and it should foster dialogue for the common good. When our word-sharing is marked by these characteristics, we might trust in God's providence that:

... as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered 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 out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:10-11).