

A HEART ENKINDLED BY THE WORD

BREATHING WITH SACRED SCRIPTURE (II)

The Gospels show us how often our Lord made reference to Sacred Scripture in his own preaching. On one occasion, he speaks clearly about his divinity, about his being one with the Father (cf. *Jn* 5:19 ff). He tells those listening to him, who are perplexed and even scandalized: *You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me* (*Jn* 5:39). The doctrine they heard from Jesus' lips seemed a challenge to their zeal to protect the faith of their fathers. They still needed to raise themselves up to a greater understanding; they needed to prepare themselves to receive from God himself *all the truth* (*Jn* 16:13): the living truth, the truth in Person, Jesus Christ. That is why the Church encourages all Christians to go ever deeper into "*the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus* (*Phil* 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures."¹

The Prelate of Opus Dei invites us to focus our sight once again on "the Person of Jesus Christ, whom we want to get to know, draw close to and love."² And since, as Saint Jerome said, "ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ,"³ Sacred Scripture will take on ever greater importance as we advance along our Christian path, to the point that "we 'breathe' with the Gospel, with the Word of God."⁴ Since Sacred Scripture is "the soul of all theology,"⁵ it should also be at the center of our thoughts and our life. In this regard, the Holy Father asked some very pointed questions: "what would happen were we to treat the Bible as we treat our mobile phone?; were we to always carry it with us, or at least a small, pocket-sized Gospel, what would happen?; were we to turn back when we forget it: you forget your mobile phone – 'oh! I don't have it, I'm going back to look for it'; were we to open it several times a day; were we to read God's messages contained in the Bible as we read telephone messages, what would happen?"⁶

From Scripture to life

Writing to Timothy, who was the head of the Church at Ephesus, Saint Paul reminds him: *from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work* (2 *Tim* 3:15-17). That is the literal meaning of the Greek text: the Apostle says that the man of God, who lives on his Word, is "equipped" to act: he

¹ Vatican II, Dog. Const. *Dei Verbum* (18 November 1965), no. 25.

² Fernando Ocáriz, *Letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

³ Saint Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah*, Prologue (PL 24, 17).

⁴ Fernando Ocáriz, *Letter*, 5 April 2017.

⁵ Vatican Council II, Decree *Optatam Totius* (28 October 1965), no. 16.

⁶ Pope Francis, Angelus message, 5 March 2017.

now has what is truly necessary for his life as an apostle. The Psalmist says it even more emphatically in the extensive meditation about the Word of God in Psalm 119: *The law of thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces (Ps 119[118]:72).*

Jesus calls us to identify ourselves with Him, to live in Him. He awaits us, as Saint Josemaría often said, “in the Bread and in the Word”:⁷ in his silent and efficacious presence in the Eucharist, and in the dialogue of prayer, where God is always available for us. Even when it covers thousands of small events in our daily life, this dialogue finds its most intimate source in Scripture. That’s the way Jesus’ prayer would have been: deeply rooted in the Word of God. Ours too is meant to be like that. “When you open the Holy Gospel, think that what is written there – the words and deeds of Christ – is something that you should not only know, but live. Everything, every point that is told there, has been gathered, detail by detail, for you to make it come alive in the individual circumstances of your life.

“God has called us Catholics to follow him closely. In that holy Writing you will find the Life of Jesus, but you should also find your own life. You too, like the Apostle, will learn to ask, full of love, ‘Lord, what would you have me do?’ And in your soul you will hear the conclusive answer, ‘The Will of God!’ Take up the Gospel every day, then, and read it and live it as a definite rule. This is what the saints have done.”⁸

“*Viva lectio est vita bonorum,*”⁹ Saint Gregory the Great said: the life of the saints is a living Scripture reading, an incarnated reading, transformed into gestures, words and deeds. Some Fathers of the Church said that, with the Incarnation, the Word of God has been “abbreviated.”¹⁰ Similarly, in the lives of the saints, Jesus is also “abbreviated;” the Word of God is made small, in order to spread afterwards throughout the world by means of their deeds and words. Down through history, with each generation of Christians, *day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge ... their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world (Ps 19[18]: 2, 4).*

It is not by chance, Benedict XVI said, “that the great currents of spirituality in the Church’s history originated with an explicit reference to Scripture.”¹¹ The vigor of these branches of the great tree of the Church stems from *the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 15:19)*, which *searches everything, even the depths of God (1 Cor 2:10)*. The same is true of personal conversions, and so many lives of deep and ordinary sanctity that are hidden to history, but that have a powerful effect on the world, in ways only God knows. “The Church is full of hidden saints!”¹² All of them are nourished by Scripture, since even more than by bread, man lives *by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Mt 4:4)*.

⁷ *Christ is Passing By*, no. 122.

⁸ *The Forge*, no. 754.

⁹ Saint Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* 24, 8, 16: PL 76, 295.

¹⁰ Cf. Benedict XVI, Apost. Ex., *Verbum Domini* (30 November 2010), no. 12.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, no. 48.

¹² Pope Francis, Homily in Santa Marta, 11 May 2017.

Richer in his words

For the Word of God to become food for our souls, we need to develop an attitude of listening, even when we don't understand clearly what God wants to say to us. At the beginning, the apostles too may have understood little of our Lord's discourse on the Eucharist in Capernaum. But Saint Peter, on behalf of everyone (and on our behalf too) said: *Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life (Jn 6:68)*. Not even our Lady always understood everything that Jesus did and said, but she listened and meditated calmly, and *kept all these things in her heart (Lk 2:51)*.

Pope Francis suggests: "I think we can all improve a bit in this respect: by becoming better listeners of the Word of God, in order to be less rich on our own words and richer in his words. I think of the priest who has the task of preaching. How can he preach if he has not first opened his heart, not listened in silence to the Word of God? ... I think of fathers and mothers, who are the primary educators: how can they educate their children if their consciences have not been enlightened by the Word of God? If their way of thinking and acting is not guided by the Word? And I think of catechists and of all those who are involved in education: if their hearts have not been warmed by the Word, how can they warm the hearts of others, of children, of youth, of adults? It is not enough just to read the Sacred Scriptures, we need to listen to Jesus who speaks in them."¹³ If we strive to always grow in this attitude of listening, which is also nourished by study and by spiritual reading, we will be able to say with the Prophet Jeremiah: *Thy words were found, and I ate them, and thy words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart (Jer 15:16)*.

Reading and meditating on Scripture requires time and calm. "In the presence of God, during a recollected reading of the text, it is good to ask, for example: 'Lord, what does this text say *to me*? What is it about my life that you want to change by this text? What troubles me about this text? Why am I not interested in this?' Or perhaps: 'What do I find pleasant in this text? What is it about this word that moves me? What attracts me? Why does it attract me?'"¹⁴ When listening to a talk, a class or a homily, people are grateful when Scripture is quoted, if these references are not merely decorative or a pretext for speaking about some topic. The Word of God should impart strength and light to what we say, and the words we cite from Sacred Scriptures should be underscored by the warmth that comes from having studied and meditated upon them, with both head and heart.

We also need to learn to listen to the "silence" of Jesus. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI recently wrote: "We know from the Gospels that Jesus frequently spent nights alone 'on the

¹³ Pope Francis, Discourse, 4 October 2013.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, Apost. Ex. *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), no. 153.

mountain' in prayer, in conversation with his Father. We know that his speech, his word, comes from silence and could mature only there. So it stands to reason that his word can be correctly understood only if we, too, enter into his silence, if we learn to hear it from his silence.

“Certainly, in order to interpret Jesus’s words, historical knowledge is necessary, which teaches us to understand the time and the language at that time. But that alone is not enough if we are really to comprehend the Lord’s message in depth. Anyone today who reads the ever-thicker commentaries on the Gospels remains disappointed in the end. He learns a lot that is useful about those days and a lot of hypotheses that ultimately contribute nothing at all to an understanding of the text. In the end you feel that in all the excess of words, something essential is lacking: entrance into Jesus’s silence, from which his word is born. If we cannot enter into this silence, we will always hear the word only on its surface and thus not really understand it.”¹⁵

Led by the hand of Saint Josemaría

“Every saint is like a ray of light streaming forth from the word of God.”¹⁶ And in the Work, the Gospel receives a special illumination from the teachings and life experience of Saint Josemaría. Like him, we enter into the life of Jesus “like another of the people there”: we are Joseph, Simeon, Nathanael, Simon of Cyrene, Mary Magdalene... and, above all, Christ himself, sons in the Son. It has been said that, although you can alleviate a person’s hunger by giving him a fish, it’s worth much more to teach him how to catch fish. In the same way, Saint Josemaría not only gave us his commentaries on Sacred Scripture, but also taught us how to read it: like a child, contemplating it. His teachings help us to go deeper into the Gospel, and the Gospel itself makes us better understand the spirit God entrusted to him, which is “as old as the Gospel, and like the Gospel new.”¹⁷ That’s why, for example, some classes of Christian formation begin with a reading of the Gospel of the day and a commentary; and why in the Centers of the Work, the day ends with a brief, simple commentary on that day’s Gospel.

As far back as 1933, Saint Josemaría already had his own list of 112 New Testament texts with some occasional, very brief commentaries written on eight quarter-pages with the heading: “Words from the New Testament frequently meditated upon.”¹⁸ Each of us might have, in one way or another, our own list, either on paper or in the depths of our soul: Jesus’ words or gestures, episodes or dialogues that we find eloquent, that one day we read or heard with a special light, because of the state of our soul, or some particular circumstance... Perhaps the words seemed an answer to something we were seeking, or perhaps they surprised us, or brought calm to our soul. They confirmed us in the faith, in our path, in Love. It does us a lot of good to

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, Afterword to second English edition of Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Power of Silence*, Ignatius 2017.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, no. 48.

¹⁷ Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 9 January 1932, no. 91.

¹⁸ Cf. Francisco Varo, “San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, ‘Palabras del Nuevo Testamento, repetidas veces meditadas. Junio – 1933’,” in *Studia et Documenta* 1 (2007), pp. 259-286.

nourish this very personal reading of the Gospel, and also to do so in the light of the liturgy. Sometimes a verse from the New Testament will provide us with material for meditation throughout the day and help us to stay in God's presence.

Our Lady accompanies us along this path to get to know Christ and follow him closely, like the first Twelve.¹⁹ “Mary, woman of listening, open our ears; grant us to know how to listen to the word of your Son Jesus among the thousands of words of this world ... Mary, woman of decision, illuminate our mind and our heart, so that we may obey, unhesitating, the word of your Son Jesus ... Mary, woman of action, grant that our hands and feet may move ‘with haste’ towards others, to bring them the charity and love of your Son Jesus, to bring the light of the Gospel to the world, as you did.”²⁰

¹⁹ Cf. *Friends of God*, no. 299.

²⁰ Pope Francis, Prayer to Mary, 31 May 2013.