

“Take & Read”

Approaching and Appreciating the Sacred Scriptures

- 1) There’s a great story in the life of St. Augustine, which is so relevant to us here and our topic today.
 - He had been struggling for many years with several issues, among which were
 - whether the Christian faith so firmly embraced by his mother Monica was true, or rather some philosophical substitute; he had come to see the truth of the Christian faith but thought it was impossible to live, because of precisely the question:
 - whether he was capable of controlling his lusts and living chastely; He had already had a child out of wedlock and a lengthy concubinage. He had previously prayed to the Lord for the gift of chastity, but “not yet.” He was feeling within a great tug from God, but also the great tug of his flesh.
 - One afternoon when he was 32, St. Augustine was with a friend when his heart was filled with a mighty storm accompanied by a huge shower of tears over the miserable state he felt himself in. He thought it was more fitting, as a man, to cry in solitude, so he went away a long distance from his friend Alypius. Lying prostrate under a fig tree, he began to choke himself on his tears, which were an external sign of an interior plea for mercy to God for all his former iniquities. “How long, O Lord?” he screamed, asking for God’s help to end his impurity.
 - At that moment of profound and agonizing contrition, he heard the voice of what seemed to be a young child coming from what seemed to be a neighboring house. He couldn’t tell whether it was the voice of boy or a girl, but the voice kept chanting “Tolle et lege!” “Tolle et lege!” “Take and read!” “Take and read!”
 - His face changed and he began to wonder whether it was usual for children in any type of game to be singing such words, nor could he ever remember hearing anything similar.
 - Restraining the torrent of his tears, he jumped up, and took the chant as a personal command from heaven to take the Sacred Scriptures, open it, and read the first chapter he turned to.
 - So he ran back to where his friend was with the Sacred Scriptures, grasped Sacred Scripture, opened it and read the first paragraph on which his eyes fell, which happened to be the 13th chapter of the Letter to the Romans: “Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and envying. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its lusts.”
 - He did not read any more, because he didn’t have to. Instantly as the sentence ended, he said, “by a light as it were of security infused into my heart, all the gloom of doubt vanished away.”
- 2) Tolle et lege! Like St. Augustine, we’re told from heaven to take up and read Sacred Scripture.
 - The call for us to take up and read Sacred Scripture is pretty obvious, if you think about it.
 - Why would God have gone through all the effort to inspire the Sacred writers to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the formation of these texts...;
 - why would He have ensured its survival across the centuries through the hundreds of thousands of faithful copies by meticulous monks prior to Gutenberg...;
 - and why would he have given you the ability to read if he did not want you to take the Bible in your hands and read it?
 - God did not will the Bible so that he could be a best-selling primary author or so that it could be a nice dust-collector on your coffee tables or bookshelves. He wrote it for you to read it!
 - This message — tolle et lege — has been sung, said, or written for several hundred years now by the Church, even since the Council of Trent.
 - In the past 110 years, the Church has been saying it more and more emphatically.
 - It started with Pope Leo XIII in *Providentissimus Deus*, the first modern papal document on Sacred Scripture.
 - Fifty years later, Pope Pius XII continued to urge the Church to take up and read the Scriptures in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.

- The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council urged all Catholics to come to a deeper appreciation of the Sacred Scriptures, calling it the soul of all theology, a bottomless well to nourish the prayer of Christians with living water, and, along with Sacred Tradition, the supreme rule of faith. The Church venerates Sacred Scripture, the fathers said, as she venerates the Body of the Lord.
- And Pope John Paul II has been practically losing his deep, baritone voice singing this same refrain, "tolle et lege," "take and read!"

3) The topic of this brief reflection today is "Approaching and Appreciating the Sacred Scriptures." There's a lot that could be said here.

- In many colleges now, even secular colleges, there are courses on the appreciation of Sacred Scripture, as they focus on its appreciation literary work of art or a precious historical resource.
- What we're going to talk about is something much more profound, something that St. Augustine realized when he ran back from the fig tree after hearing the angelic voice.
- Augustine approached Sacred Scripture with already a preliminary, although still undefined, appreciation for what it truly was, the word of God given to us to help to save us.
 - That preliminary appreciation, that first act of faith, coming from his hunger for God's guidance and love, led to his much greater appreciation of the Word of God that he then read, the Word of God that changed his life forever.
- So there are two appreciations:
 - first this first act of faith that God does indeed speak to us in Sacred Scripture; and
 - second, a deeper one, appreciation for what God actually does reveal to us there.

4) We're being called in our day to take and read, to approach Sacred Scripture with a hunger, with a faith, with a confidence that God does indeed speak to us in Sacred Scripture.

- He speaks to us on every page.
- The beautiful thing about St. Augustine's example is that he firmly believed that whatever page he turned to, God would be speaking directly to him.
- That same God speaks to us in Sacred Scripture. He speaks to us *live*.
 - He reveals Himself to us.
 - He reveals us to ourselves.
 - He reveals our beginning in Him.
 - He reveals our sublime calling and vocation.
 - He reveals our capacity to reject him.
 - He also reveals his love in giving us all the means to overcome that same capacity.
 - He ultimately helps us discover the answer to the question of what it means to be a human being, to the transcendental questions of who we are, why we're here, where we're going and where we should be going.
- Our appreciation of Sacred Scripture as a Christian comes first from our deep recognition that it is in Sacred Scripture that we come to hear God's voice speaking to us, about our past, about our present, about our future, as well as about Him and about how we fit into His plan.
- To appreciate Sacred Scripture, therefore, means
 - 1) to appreciate God, his love and his call, and
 - 2) to appreciate that Sacred Scripture reveals God to us.
- As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council said, "In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature. Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself."

5) But our appreciation of Sacred Scripture is not meant to be intellectual.

- We don't approach them merely to know the Truth about God and ourselves;
- We approach them to become one with the Truth, to become One with the Word, to become one with God through them.
- The Blessed Mother heard the Word of God, put it into practice and treasured it so much that that Word literally took her flesh and dwelled among us. We're supposed to hear the Word attentively, live it by

putting it into practice, treasuring it, such that the Word might take on our flesh and become incarnate in us.

- 6) This is what the Holy Father is talking about in his pastoral plan for the Third Christian Millennium, his marching orders for each of us in our lifetime.
- In *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, the Pope said that every renewal in the Church must be a renewal in Jesus Christ, who must become the beginning and end of everything we do.
 - We must contemplate the face of Christ, become more and more like him, and become his hands and feet, his ears and eyes, his heart in bringing him to others, cooperating with Him in the work of the salvation of the world. You can see, therefore, how important Sacred Scripture will be to carry out this mission.
 - It's not so much projects and new ideas that our Church and world needs, but a Person, Jesus, to whom we all must adhere much more closely for the Church to carry out the divine mission Christ gave to her.
- 7) The real, urgent need for our time, the Pope says, is holiness, which flows from a much deeper relationship to the Lord.
- From the very fact of our baptism, he states so clearly, each of us is called to be holy, to be on fire for the Lord, to make His life, His Will, His Love our own and share that life, will and love with others.
 - Every crisis that the Church faces, that the world faces, is a crisis of saints, and we're all called to be the saints of the 21st century.
 - Saints, the Pope says, not "mediocre Christians";
 - saints, not just one more number in religious statistical registers.
 - Saints are those in whom Christ lives, dies and rises, in whom Christ is fully alive.
- 8) Now the Pope knows that to be a saint requires more than just a desire, a hunger, to be a saint, which he prays all of us will cultivate with God's help.
- He says a saint — and therefore all of us, since we're called to be saints — needs to have a training in holiness, a certain plan of life that allows us to grow in true holiness.
 - The Pope lists five essential pillars for this training in holiness, this pathway to become holy.
 - In each of these, it's not just a question of doing something minimal in each of the areas, as if we were on a diet trying to fulfill the essential food-groups.
 - Rather it's a matter of doing each of these things with greater love, with greater quality.
 - If we make a commitment to do these well, the Holy Spirit can then go to work and help us to become the saints God created us and calls us to be.
 - The first pillar is prayer, to make a commitment to seek the Lord in prayer, to try to get to know him, love him, become one with Him, and with His Will. The Pope calls us to daily holy hours and particular exalts Eucharistic Adoration.
 - The second pillar is the Sunday Mass, which should become the center of our whole lives but certainly our weeks.
 - This is "little Easter" for Christians in which we put first in our lives these central truths, central facts, of our faith.
 - Everything he says about the Sunday Mass is also applicable to daily Mass.
 - If Mass is what the Catholic Church believes it is, our participation live in the Last Supper and on Calvary, how could we not base our whole lives, our whole weeks, our whole day on this tremendous privilege to be able to participate in that.
 - What could be more important? Television?
 - In the Mass, we have the chance to listen to the Lord in Sacred Scripture and receive Him inside.
 - The Eucharist is the source from which all the Church's life, from which all growth in holiness flows, and the summit to which it all points. Attentive participation in the Mass is crucial for holiness.
 - The third pillar is the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in which we go, like St. Augustine did, to the Father of Mercies, the Father of the Prodigal Son, to forgive us of our sins and reconcile us to Himself and to his whole family.
 - Regular reception of this sacrament is crucial for our growth in holiness, because sin opposes this growth.

- This sacrament forgives us of our sins, gives us grace to grow in authentic Christian love and helps us, in examining our consciences, to mature in Christian life and receive the help of the Divine Physician in all areas of our life, so that we can become more and more like him, who is Rich in Mercy.

9) The fourth and the fifth pillars are what are most relevant to our discussion today and why your approaching and appreciating Sacred Scripture is so important for your own sakes but as well as for the good of the Church and the whole.

- The fourth pillar is "**Listening to the Word of God in Sacred Scripture.**"
 - There needs to be a return to Sacred Scripture, and the Pope calls us to it (NMI 39):
 - There is no doubt that this primacy of holiness and prayer is inconceivable without a renewed listening to the word of God.
 - Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ (St. Jerome). Ignorance of Sacred Scripture is ignorance of Christ. The corollary of this is the Christian who doesn't read Scripture really isn't a Christian at all, because no one who ignores Christ really is a Christian in fact.
 - And so some questions, today, as a sort of examination of conscience coming from the Holy Father? (Please do not raise your hands; this is for your own interior dialogue with the Lord).
 - How many of you have read the whole Bible?
 - The whole NT?
 - All four Gospels?
 - One?
 - If this is something that has not been a part of your discipleship, now would be the time to make a resolution to make it a crucial part.
 - The Pope adds that it is especially necessary that listening to the word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever valid tradition of lectio divina, which draws from the biblical text the living word which questions, directs and shapes our lives.
 - Lectio divina is not just reading, the way we read text books to learn.
 - This type of reading of Sacred Scripture is to nourish and change our lives.
 - We need to become "doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (Jas 1:22), those who hear the Word, meditate on it, treasure it and act on it.
 - This begins with hearing the word of God.
 - Most people at the places where I've celebrated can't even tell me the responsorial psalm we've said together five times less than five minutes earlier. Even in Convents!
 - Then it involves applying it to our own lives. Sometimes others can do this for us, the homilies of a priest, the applications made by a good commentator on Sacred Scripture.
 - This is how the word takes flesh, how it becomes life-giving. This is the fourth pillar in the call to holiness that the Pope calls each one of us to in his pastoral plan for our lifetime.
- The fifth pillar is equally important: it's **Proclaiming the Word**
 - Listening to the Word is not enough. It must become part of us, take flesh within us, and inspire us to share this greatest treasure with others (NMI 40).
 - Like Mary, who received the Word of God made flesh within and immediately took that Word to her cousin Elizabeth and John the Baptist, so we're called to take the Jesus who has taken flesh in us to others, so that he can make them leap again.
 - To nourish ourselves with the word in order to be "servants of the word" in the work of evangelization: this is surely a priority for the Church at the dawn of the new millennium.
 - Even in countries evangelized many centuries ago, the reality of a "Christian society" which, amid all the frailties which have always marked human life, measured itself explicitly on Gospel values, is now gone.
 - Over the years, the Pope has often repeated the summons to the new evangelization. "I do so again now, especially in order to insist that we must rekindle in ourselves the impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardour of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost."
 - We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor 9:16).

- This passion will not fail to stir in the Church a new sense of mission, which cannot be left to a group of "specialists" but must involve the responsibility of all the members of the People of God.
- Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves, they must proclaim him. A new apostolic outreach is needed, which will be lived as the everyday commitment of Christian communities and groups.
- Christ must be presented to all people with confidence.
 - We shall address adults, families, young people, children, without ever hiding the most radical demands of the Gospel message, but taking into account each person's needs in regard to their sensitivity and language, after the example of Paul who declared: "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22).
 - Especially the young, by this living contact with the Lord through Word and Sacrament.
 - Word is even perhaps more important.
 - Story of St. Bernardine of Siena
 - St. Bernardine of Siena, the great 15th century Franciscan preacher, was once asked a very interesting contrafactual. They asked him: if a Christian community for twenty years could only have one thing or the other — either 20 years of good preaching with no access to the Mass and the Eucharist or 20 years of access to the Mass, but bad or no preaching — which would be better? Think of what your response would be to the same question. St. Bernardine's answer, without any hesitation, was that it was better to have 20 years of good preaching.
 - That's a strange story to tell here in the midst of a Catholic weekend of reflection. It almost sounds Protestant! The reason why St. Bernardine answered the way he did was that he was convinced that after 20 years of the Eucharist with no and bad preaching, the people would no longer understand the importance of the the Mass and would begin to take the Eucharist for granted; whereas, after 20 years of good preaching without the Mass, the people would be salivating for the Eucharist and the other sacraments.
 - When you think about the experience of US Catholicism in our lifetime, St. Bernardine's prediction seems to have been verified. Catholics now for a few decades have generally had, with some notable exceptions, bad preaching. None of us has really been spared it. And we've also seen almost universal access to Holy Communion. What has been the result? Almost 2/3 of US Catholics no longer believe in the real presence. Eucharistic abuses, even sacrileges, occur routinely, as Catholics, whatever their moral state, and sometimes even Protestants, whatever theirs, go in cue to receive the "wafer" or the "bread and wine," ignorant of what they're receiving. 20 or 30 years of access to the Eucharist with no or bad preaching, and the majority of Catholics take the Eucharist for granted.
 - On the other hand, we've seen a massive movement of ex-Protestant ministers and evangelical faithful — Scott Hahn is only the most famous of hundreds — who are flocking into the Church, dying of hunger for the Eucharist and of thirst for the precious blood. They recognized through their study and true-Revelation-centered preaching, that they were being deprived of Eucharist and are coming in, trying to make up for lost time.
 - The Word of God is crucial for the appreciation of everything we have, especially in passing it on to others.
- It's obvious that in order to be able to proclaim the Word of God, you've got to know the Word of God, which is why coming to Listen to the Word in Sacred Scripture is so essential.

10) Common objections

- I realize, though, why some people don't approach Sacred Scripture readily. There are some common concerns, that we can try to tackle very briefly. What are these hesitations?
 - 1) Some hesitate because they know it will require a change in their life.
 - Life and our prayer go together.
 - Unless one in life and in prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture is seeking to discover and do God's will, there will be great hesitation.

- But the solution here is what St. Augustine found: the desire to do the will of God in his life led him to understand and put into practice Sacred Scripture.
 - Starting the reading of Sacred Scripture with a hunger to become more like the God whom you listen to is a good first step here.
- 2) Others hesitate because they're afraid of being confused and of starting to doubt the truths of the faith as a result.
- Some look at Sacred Scripture as a Protestant Book and they still feel a little uncomfortable reading it.
 - I've had some older Catholics ask me whether it was a sin to read the Bible.
 - Two things here.
 - 1) First the Bible is a Catholic (series of) Book(s).
 - Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, each of the books and letters were written;
 - with the help of the Holy Spirit, the Church put them into one volume in the 4th century;
 - 2) The same HS helps the Church interpret the content of Sacred Scripture authoritatively, so that we can be sure of the truths it contains;
 - the same Holy Spirit also helps us to trust in the Church Christ founded and to read the words and these interpretations with faith.
 - There's a handout I gave to my Bible Study class at Espirito Santo that summarizes the central points of Scriptural Interpretation from the Catechism, which may help you if you find yourself with some of these same questions.
 - We don't have time to go into them here, but they're very good to keep in mind whenever we approach the Scriptures.
- 3) The third common objection is perhaps the most prevalent among Catholics, even good Catholics. They don't think reading the Bible is really necessary.
- It's a good thing perhaps, but it's kind of like going for extra credit in the Christian life, something that's good to do but not necessary.
 - People were saved for centuries without being able to read, so it can't be essential. If they try to live the moral life, the life of the Sacraments, obey God through the Church he founded, they'll be able to be saved.
 - "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," they're saying.
 - These people have unfortunately lost something of the great adventure of Christian life.
 - Their fidelity to the Lord is solid, but their love is somewhat tepid.
 - They think they know "enough" to be saved, and hence they're satisfied with merely passing the examination of life rather than doing really well on it.
 - There's a difference between being faithful, which can involve a certain minimalism as in a marriage — not cheating on the other — and being deeply in love and growing in love.
 - For the latter, one will want to get to know as much as possible about the Beloved, and Sacred Scripture allows us to behold the face of God through history.
- Sacred Scripture is a well-spring for Christian prayer and an essential pillar for growth in holiness and for taking up our own mission in the Church of our time. The Holy Father is calling us to make it a staple of our life. God's grace is there to assist us. What a great and inexhaustible treasure it is. God says to you again today, this morning, through his Church, "take and read." How do you respond?