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### Benedict XVI on Prayer through the Bible

1. Familiarity with the Bible
  - a. May 18: I would also like to ask you to benefit from the journey we shall be making in the forthcoming catecheses to become more familiar with the Bible, which I hope you have in your homes and, during the week, to pause to *read it and to meditate upon it in prayer*, in order to know the marvellous history of the relationship between God and man, between God who communicates with us and man who responds, who prays.
2. St. Jerome
  - a. Jesus appeared to him as a young man and told him that he was a Ciceronian, not a Christian. He knew the ancient Roman rhetorician's words far better than he knew Christ's words, than God's words. It changed everything.
  - b. Christian prayer is entering into Christ's own prayer and therefore in order to do that we need to know Christ's words, the words that point to him (OT), the words that he says verbally and in body language (Gospel) and the words the Holy Spirit inspired the apostles to say about him (rest of the NT).
  - c. B16: What can we learn from St Jerome? It seems to me, this above all; **to love the Word of God in Sacred Scripture**. St Jerome said: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ". It is therefore important that every Christian live in contact and in personal dialogue with the Word of God given to us in Sacred Scripture.
  - d. Truly "in love" with the Word of God, he asked himself: "How could one live without the knowledge of Scripture, through which one learns to know Christ himself, who is the life of believers?" (*Ep.* 30, 7). The Bible, an instrument "by which God speaks every day to the faithful" (*Ep.* 133, 13), thus becomes a stimulus and source of Christian life for all situations and for each person. **To read Scripture is to converse with God: "If you pray"**, he writes to a young Roman noblewoman, "**you speak with the Spouse; if you read, it is he who speaks to you**" (*Ep.* 22, 25). The study of and meditation on Scripture renders man wise and serene (cf. *In Eph.*, Prol.). Certainly, to penetrate the Word of God ever more profoundly, a constant and progressive application is needed. Hence, Jerome recommends to the priest Nepotian: "Read the divine Scriptures frequently; rather, may your hands never set the Holy Book down. Learn here what you must teach" (*Ep.* 52, 7). To the Roman matron Leta he gave this counsel for the Christian education of her daughter: "Ensure that each day she studies some Scripture passage.... After prayer, reading should follow, and after reading, prayer.... Instead of jewels and silk clothing, may she love the divine Books" (*Ep.* 107, 9, 12). Through meditation on and knowledge of the Scriptures, one "maintains the equilibrium of the soul" (*Ad Eph.*, Prol.). Only a profound spirit of prayer and the Holy Spirit's help can introduce us to understanding the Bible: "In the interpretation of Sacred Scripture we always need the help of the Holy Spirit" (*In Mich.* 1, 1, 10, 15). A passionate love for Scripture therefore pervaded Jerome's whole life, a love that he always sought to deepen in the faithful, too. He recommends to one of his spiritual daughters: "Love Sacred Scripture and wisdom will love you; love it tenderly, and it will protect you; honour it and you will receive its caresses. May it be for you as your necklaces and your earrings" (*Ep.* 130, 20). And again: "Love the science of Scripture, and you will not love the vices of the flesh" (*Ep.* 125, 11).
3. The Word of God has the power to make us great saints
  - a. Augustine
    - i. There's a great story in the life of St. Augustine, which is so relevant to us here and our topic today.
    - ii. He had been struggling for many years with several issues, among which were

1. 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:
  2. 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.
- iii. 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.
  - iv. 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!”
  - v. 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.
  - vi. 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.”
  - vii. 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.”
- b. St. Mathilde of Hackeborn
- i. B16: Her visions, her teachings, the events of her life are described in words reminiscent of liturgical and biblical language. In this way it is possible to comprehend her deep knowledge of Sacred Scripture, which was her daily bread. **She had constant recourse to the Scriptures, making the most of the biblical texts read in the Liturgy, and drawing from them symbols, terms, countryside, images and famous figures**. She had a special love for the Gospel: "The words of the Gospel were a marvelous nourishment for her and in her heart stirred feelings of such sweetness that, because of her enthusiasm, she was often unable to finish reading it... The way in which she read those words was so fervent that it inspired devotion in everyone. "Thus when she was singing in the choir, she was completely absorbed in God, uplifted by such ardour that she sometimes expressed her feelings in gestures.... "On other occasions, since she was rapt in ecstasy, she did not hear those who were calling or touching her and came back with difficulty to the reality of the things around her" (*ibid.*, VI, 1). **In one of her visions, Jesus himself recommended the Gospel to her**; opening the wound in his most gentle Heart, he said to her: "Consider the immensity of my love: if you want to know it well, nowhere will you find it more clearly expressed than in the Gospel. No one has ever heard expressed stronger or more tender sentiments than these: "*As my father has loved me, so I have loved you* (Jn 15: 9)" (*ibid.*, I, 22).
- c. Verbum Domini
- i. 48. The interpretation of sacred Scripture would remain incomplete were it not to include listening to those who have truly lived the word of God: namely, the saints. Indeed, "*viva lectio est vita*

*bonorum*” (163). The most profound interpretation of Scripture comes precisely from those who let themselves be shaped by the word of God through listening, reading and assiduous meditation. It is certainly not by chance that the great currents of spirituality in the Church’s history originated with an explicit reference to Scripture.

1. I am thinking for example of Saint Anthony the Abbot, who was moved by hearing Christ’s words: “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (*Mt* 19:21).
  2. No less striking is the question posed by Saint Basil the Great in the *Moralia*: “What is the distinctive mark of faith? Full and unhesitating certainty that the words inspired by God are true ... What is the distinctive mark of the faithful? Conforming their lives with the same complete certainty to the meaning of the words of Scripture, not daring to remove or add a single thing.”
  3. Saint Benedict, in his *Rule*, refers to Scripture as “a most perfect norm for human life”.
  4. Saint Francis of Assisi – we learn from Thomas of Celano – “Upon hearing that the disciples of Christ must possess neither gold, nor silver nor money, nor carry a bag, nor bread, nor a staff for the journey, nor sandals nor two tunics ... exulting in the Holy Spirit, immediately cried out: “This is what I want, this is what I ask for, this I long to do with all my heart!”
  5. Saint Clare of Assisi shared fully in the experience of Saint Francis: “The form of life of the Order of Poor Sisters”, she writes, “is this: to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
  6. So too, Saint Dominic “everywhere showed himself to be a man of the Gospel, in word as in deed”, and wanted his friars likewise to be “men of the Gospel”.
  7. The Carmelite Saint Teresa of Avila, who in her writings constantly uses biblical images to explain her mystical experiences, says that Jesus himself revealed to her that “all the evil in the world is derived from not knowing clearly the truths of sacred Scripture.”
  8. Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus discovered that love was her personal vocation by poring over the Scriptures, especially Chapters 12 and 13 of the *First Letter to the Corinthians*; (172) the same saint describes the attraction of the Scriptures: “No sooner do I glance at the Gospel, but immediately I breathe in the fragrance of the life of Jesus and I know where to run.”
  9. Every saint is like a ray of light streaming forth from the word of God: we can think of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in his search for truth and in his discernment of spirits; Saint John Bosco in his passion for the education of the young; Saint John Mary Vianney in his awareness of the grandeur of the priesthood as gift and task; Saint Pius of Pietrelcina in his serving as an instrument of divine mercy; Saint Josemaria Escrivá in his preaching of the universal call to holiness; Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, the missionary of God’s charity towards the poorest of the poor, and then the martyrs of Nazism and Communism, represented by Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), a Carmelite nun, and by Blessed Aloysius Stepinac, the Cardinal Archbishop of Zagreb.
- d. Insofar as we’re called to be saints, we need to follow their example of the assimilation of the Word of God in our life.
- i. The devil is constantly trying to tempt us away from the Word of God, but we’re called to live on every word that comes from the mouth of God.
  - ii. St. Jerome gives a powerful image. Pope Benedict says in *Verbum Domini* that there is a great connection between the way we approach Sacred Scripture and the way we approach the Holy Eucharist.
    1. The sacramentality of the word can thus be understood by analogy with the real presence of Christ under the appearances of the consecrated bread and wine. By

approaching the altar and partaking in the Eucharistic banquet we truly share in the body and blood of Christ. The proclamation of God's word at the celebration entails an acknowledgment that Christ himself is present, that he speaks to us, and that he wishes to be heard. Saint Jerome speaks of the way we ought to approach both the Eucharist and the word of God: "We are reading the sacred Scriptures. For me, the Gospel is the Body of Christ; for me, the holy Scriptures are his teaching. And when he says: *whoever does not eat my flesh and drink my blood (Jn 6:53)*, even though these words can also be understood of the [Eucharistic] Mystery, Christ's body and blood are really the word of Scripture, God's teaching. When we approach the [Eucharistic] Mystery, if a crumb falls to the ground we are troubled. Yet when we are listening to the word of God, and God's Word and Christ's flesh and blood are being poured into our ears yet we pay no heed, what great peril should we not feel?"

- iii. This connection between encountering Christ in the word and then in the Word made flesh we see as well in the scene of Emmaus.
  - 1. VD 54 Luke's account of the disciples on the way to Emmaus enables us to reflect further on this link between the hearing of the word and the breaking of the bread (cf. *Lk* 24:13-35). Jesus approached the disciples on the day after the Sabbath, listened as they spoke of their dashed hopes, and, joining them on their journey, "interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (24:27). The two disciples began to look at the Scriptures in a new way in the company of this traveler who seemed so surprisingly familiar with their lives. What had taken place in those days no longer appeared to them as failure, but as fulfillment and a new beginning. And yet, apparently not even these words were enough for the two disciples. The *Gospel of Luke* relates that "their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (24:31) only when Jesus took the bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them, whereas earlier "their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (24:16). The presence of Jesus, first with his words and then with the act of breaking bread, made it possible for the disciples to recognize him. Now they were able to appreciate in a new way all that they had previously experienced with him: "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" (24:32).
  - 2. Jesus continually wishes to make our hearts burn. He wants to explain to us along the journey of our life what the Scriptures mean. This is one of the central parts of all Christian prayer.
- e. It's not our reality, though.
  - i. Many Catholics have little appreciation for the Word of God.
    - 1. 2008 international survey of Catholic use of Sacred Scripture said that across the globe, of those who come to Mass each Sunday, only 3 percent have any contact with the Sacred Scriptures during the rest of the week.
    - 2. There's a huge Biblical illiteracy, even, sadly, among priests, deacons and religious.
    - 3. It's one of the reasons homilies are so banal in many places, because Sacred Scripture has not made the priests hearts burn. There's a minimalism. People don't really want to know the Word of God, they don't really think they need to learn the Word of God.
    - 4. In some places, in yesteryear, Catholics were even encouraged not to read Sacred Scripture.
  - ii. There's another way: Bishop Anton Justs of Jelgava Latvia, in one very moving intervention during the 2008 Synod on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, talked about the treasure of the Word of God and the joy of being able receive it.
    - 1. "In my presentation," Bishop Justs began in simple, straightforward English, "I would like to talk about the martyrs of twenty century and in particular those in my country Latvia. These are the priests, men and women who died for proclaiming the

Word of God.

2. "I remember one Latvian priest, Viktors, who during the Soviet regime in Latvia was arrested for possessing the Holy Bible. In the eyes of the Soviet agents the Holy Scriptures were an anti-revolutionary book. The agents threw the Holy Scriptures on the floor and ordered the priest to step on it. The priest refused and instead knelt down and kissed the book. For this gesture the priest was condemned to ten years of hard labor in Siberia.
  3. "Ten years later, when the priest returned to his parish and celebrated the Holy Mass, he read the Gospel. Then he lifted up the lectionary and said: 'The Word of God!' The people cried and thanked God."
  4. The Word of God, they knew, was a treasure worth suffering for, even the tortures of a decade in a brutal Siberian labor camp. It was worth getting down on one's knees to kiss. It contained within the open secrets of a true and definitive revolution. Fr. Viktors clearly knew the value of the Word of God and became a living witness to its inestimable value.
  5. He was not alone in this testimony. "In Latvia, during the Soviet era," Bishop Justs continued, "no religious books, no Holy Scriptures, no catechisms were allowed to be printed. The reasoning was: if there is no printed Word of God, there will be no religion. So our Latvian people did what the first century Christians did: they learnt the passages of the Holy Scriptures by heart."
  6. Still today in Latvia there is an oral tradition alive. We stand on the shoulders of our martyrs to proclaim the Word of God. Our grandchildren remember their grandfathers and grandmothers, who died for their faith; they want to be, in their turn, heroes of faith. In Latvia we proclaim the living Word of God! We go in the processions and on the pilgrimages, we sing songs and we pray and say: 'This is the Word of God,' for which our grandparents died."
  7. A people learning Sacred Scripture by heart, taking the Bible on Pilgrimages, proudly proclaiming the Word of God, and seeking to be heroes in witness to it — this is what the Catholic Church is meant to be. As these faithful Latvians demonstrate, the Bible is not a dead document but a "living word," since the Word of God is not principally a book or a series of books but a Person, an incarnate Word, whom we encounter through the Bible's sacred words.
4. How do we get, however, to this type of assimilation of Sacred Scripture? How can Sacred Scripture become a really vital part of our life? It's not just through Bible Study, as important as those are. It's by prayerful assimilation of Sacred Scripture, by contacting God in his word.
- a. August 17 Catechesis
    - i. What is meditation? It means "remembering" all that God has done and not forgetting his many great benefits.
    - ii. Let us therefore speak of a type of prayer which in the Christian tradition is known as "mental prayer". We are usually familiar with vocal prayer.
    - iii. The heart and the mind must of course take part in this prayer. However we are speaking today of a meditation that does not consist of words but rather is a way of making contact with the heart of God in our mind.
    - iv. St Bonaventure, moreover, with reference to the words of Sacred Scripture, says that "they should always be ruminated upon so as to be able to gaze on them with ardent application of the soul," (*Coll. In Hex*, ed. Quaracchi 1934, p. 218). To meditate, therefore, means to create within us a situation of recollection, of inner silence, in order to reflect upon and assimilate the mysteries of our faith and what God is working within us; and not merely on the things that come and go.
    - v. We may undertake this "ruminatio" in various ways: for example, by taking a brief passage of Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles or the Letters of the Apostles, or a passage from a spiritual author that brings us closer and makes the reality of

God more present in our day; or we can even, ask our confessor or spiritual director to recommend something to us.

- vi. By reading and reflecting on what we have read, dwelling on it, trying to understand what it is saying to me, what it says today, to open our spirit to what the Lord wants to tell us and teach us. **The Holy Rosary** is also a prayer of meditation: in repeating the Hail Mary we are asked to think about and reflect on the Mystery that we have just proclaimed. But we can also reflect on some intense spiritual experience, or on words that stayed with us when we were taking part in the Sunday Eucharist. So, you see, there are many ways to meditate and thereby to make contact with God and to approach God; and in this way, to be journeying on towards Heaven.
- b. In *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict gets much more specific in promoting a particular type of rumination.
  - i. VD 86. The Synod frequently insisted on the need for a prayerful approach to the sacred text as a fundamental element in the spiritual life of every believer, in the various ministries and states in life, with particular reference to *lectio divina*. The word of God is at the basis of all authentic Christian spirituality. The Synod Fathers thus took up the words of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*: “Let the faithful go gladly to the sacred text itself, whether in the sacred liturgy, which is full of the divine words, or in devout reading, or in such suitable exercises and various other helps which, with the approval and guidance of the pastors of the Church, are happily spreading everywhere in our day. Let them remember, however, that prayer should accompany the reading of sacred Scripture.” The Council thus sought to reappropriate the great patristic tradition which had always recommended approaching the Scripture in dialogue with God. As Saint Augustine puts it: “Your prayer is the word you speak to God. When you read the Bible, God speaks to you; when you pray, you speak to God”. Origen, one of the great masters of this way of reading the Bible, maintains that understanding Scripture demands, even more than study, closeness to Christ and prayer. Origen was convinced, in fact, that the best way to know God is through love, and that there can be no authentic *scientia Christi* apart from growth in his love. In his *Letter to Gregory*, the great Alexandrian theologian gave this advice: “Devote yourself to the lectio of the divine Scriptures; apply yourself to this with perseverance. Do your reading with the intent of believing in and pleasing God. If during the *lectio* you encounter a closed door, knock and it will be opened to you by that guardian of whom Jesus said, ‘The gatekeeper will open it for him’. By applying yourself in this way to lectio divina, search diligently and with unshakable trust in God for the meaning of the divine Scriptures, which is hidden in great fullness within. You ought not, however, to be satisfied merely with knocking and seeking: to understand the things of God, what is absolutely necessary is oratio. For this reason, the Saviour told us not only: ‘Seek and you will find’, and ‘Knock and it shall be opened to you’, but also added, ‘Ask and you shall receive’”
  - ii. In this regard, however, one must *avoid the risk of an individualistic approach*, and remember that God’s word is given to us precisely to build communion, to unite us in the Truth along our path to God. While it is a word addressed to each of us personally, it is also a word which builds community, which builds the Church. Consequently, *the sacred text must always be approached in the communion of the Church.* In effect, “a communal reading of Scripture is extremely important, because the living subject in the sacred Scriptures is the People of God, it is the Church... Scripture does not belong to the past, because its subject, the People of God inspired by God himself, is always the same, and therefore the word is always alive in the living subject. As such, it is important to read and experience sacred Scripture in communion with the Church, that is, with all the great witnesses to this word, beginning with the earliest Fathers up to the saints of our own day, up to the present-day magisterium”(294). For this reason, the privileged place for the prayerful reading of sacred Scripture is the liturgy, and particularly the Eucharist, in which, as we celebrate the Body and Blood of Christ in the sacrament, the word itself is present and at work in our midst. In

some sense the prayerful reading of the Bible, personal and communal, must always be related to the Eucharistic celebration. Just as the adoration of the Eucharist prepares for, accompanies and follows the liturgy of the Eucharist, so too prayerful reading, personal and communal, prepares for, accompanies and deepens what the Church celebrates when she proclaims the word in a liturgical setting. By so closely relating *lectio* and liturgy, we can better grasp the criteria which should guide this practice in the area of pastoral care and in the spiritual life of the People of God.

- iii. 87. The documents produced before and during the Synod mentioned a number of methods for a faith-filled and fruitful approach to sacred Scripture. Yet the greatest attention was paid to ***lectio divina***, which is truly “capable of opening up to the faithful the treasures of God’s word, but also of **bringing about an encounter with Christ**, the living word of God”. I would like here to review the basic steps of this procedure.
  1. It opens with the reading (*lectio*) of a text, which leads to a desire to understand its true content: *what does the biblical text say in itself?* Without this, there is always a risk that the text will become a pretext for never moving beyond our own ideas.
  2. Next comes meditation (*meditatio*), which asks: *what does the biblical text say to us?* Here, each person, individually but also as a member of the community, must let himself or herself be moved and challenged.
  3. Following this comes prayer (*oratio*), which asks the question: *what do we say to the Lord in response to his word?* Prayer, as petition, intercession, thanksgiving and praise, is the primary way by which the word transforms us.
  4. Finally, *lectio divina* concludes with contemplation (*contemplatio*), during which we take up, as a gift from God, his own way of seeing and judging reality, and ask ourselves *what conversion of mind, heart and life is the Lord asking of us?* In the *Letter to the Romans*, Saint Paul tells us: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2). Contemplation aims at creating within us a truly wise and discerning vision of reality, as God sees it, and at forming within us “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). The word of God appears here as a criterion for discernment: it is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12).
  5. We do well also to remember that the process of *lectio divina* is not concluded until it arrives at action (*actio*), which moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others in charity.
- c. This *lectio* is a path of the saints. Pope Benedict specifically mentioned St. Ambrose:
  - i. From the works of Origen, the indisputable master of the "Alexandrian School", he learned to know and to comment on the Bible. Thus, Ambrose transferred to the Latin environment the meditation on the Scriptures which Origen had begun, introducing in the West **the practice of *lectio divina***. The method of *lectio* served to guide all of Ambrose's preaching and writings, which stemmed precisely from *prayerful listening* to the Word of God. ... Thus, Ambrose's preaching - which constitutes the structural nucleus of his immense literary opus - **starts with the reading of the Sacred Books** ("the Patriarchs" or the historical Books and "Proverbs", or in other words, the Wisdom Books) in order to live in conformity with divine Revelation.
5. But more than anyone, this type of rumination was the path of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
  - a. August 17 Catechesis
    - i. The heart and the mind must of course take part in this prayer. However we are speaking today of a meditation that does not consist of words but rather is a way of making contact with the heart of God in our mind. And here Mary is a very real model. Luke the Evangelist repeated several times that Mary, “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (2:19; cf. 2:51b). As a good custodian, she does not forget, she was attentive to all that the Lord

told her and did for her, and she meditated, in other words she considered various things, pondering them in her heart.

- ii. Thus, day after day, in the silence of ordinary life, Mary continued to treasure in her heart the sequence of marvelous events that she witnessed until the supreme test of the Cross and the glory of the Resurrection. Mary lived her life to the full, her daily duties, her role as a mother, but she knew how to reserve an inner space to reflect on the word and will of God, on what was occurring within her and on the mysteries of the life of her Son.
  - iii. Mary teaches us how necessary it is to find in our busy day, moments for silent recollection, to meditate on what the Lord wants to teach us, on how he is present and active in the world and in our life: to be able to stop for a moment and meditate. St Augustine compares meditation on the mysteries of God to the assimilation of food and uses a verb that recurs throughout the Christian tradition, “to ruminate”; that is, the mysteries of God should continually resonate within us so that they become familiar to us, guide our lives and nourish us, as does the food we need to sustain us.
- b. In a pre-papal work, Seek that which is above, Pope Benedict expanded on what we can learn from Mary’s assimilation of the Word:
- i. Luke ... stressed one particular feature of the picture of Mary that was important to him, ... when he says three times that Mary kept the word in her heart and pondered it. First of all, she is portrayed as the source of the tradition. The word is kept in her memory; therefore she is a reliable witness for what took place. But memory requires more than a merely external registering of events. We can only receive and hold fast to the uttered word if we are involved inwardly. If something does not touch me, it will not penetrate; it will dissolve in the flux of memories and lose its particular face. Above all it is a fact that understanding and preserving what is understood go together. If I have not really understood a thing, I will not be able to communicate it properly. Only by understanding do I receive reality at all; and understanding in turn, depends on a certain measure of inner identification with what is to be understood. It depends on love. I cannot really understand something for which I have no love whatsoever. So the transmission of the message needs more than the kind of memory that stores telephone numbers: what is required is a memory of the heart, in which I invest something of myself. Involvement and faithfulness are not opposites: they are interdependent. In Luke, Mary stands as the embodiment of the Church’s memory. She is alert, taking events in and inwardly pondering them. Thus Luke says that she “preserved them together” in her heart, she “put them together” and “held on to them.” Mary compares the words and events of faith with the ongoing experience of her life and thus discovers the full human depth of each detail, which gradually fits into the total picture. In this way faith becomes understanding and so can be handed on to others: it is no longer a merely external word but is saturated with the experience of a life, translated into human terms; now it can be translated, in turn, into the lives of others. Thus Mary becomes a model for the Church’s mission, that is, that of being a dwelling place for the Word, preserving and keeping it safe in times of confusion, protecting it, as it were, from the elements. Hence she is also the interpretation of the parable of the seed sown in good soil and yielding fruit a hundredfold. She is not the thin surface earth that cannot accommodate roots; she is not the barren earth that the sparrows have pecked bare; nor is she overgrown by the weeds of affluence that inhibit new growth. She is a human being with depth. She lets the word sink deep into her. So the process of fruitful transformation can take place in a twofold direction: she saturates the Word with her life, as it were, putting the sap and energy of her life at the Word’s disposal; but as a result, conversely, her life is permeated, enriched and deepened by the energies of the Word, which gives everything its meaning. First of all it is she who digests the Word, so to speak, transmuting it; but in doing so she herself, with her life, is in turn transmuted into the Word. Her life becomes word and meaning. That is how the gospel is handed on in the Church; indeed, it is how all spiritual and intellectual growth and maturity are handed on from one person to another and within mankind as a whole. It is the only way



in which men and mankind can acquire depth and maturity. In other words, it is the only way to progress.

- ii. Progress in “having,” unless it is matched by progress in “being,” is deadly. But we can only achieve progress at the level of “being” if, inwardly, we are deepened through contemplation, in which we open ourselves to meaning, assimilate it and so ourselves become assimilated to meaning, become meaning-full. In the long run a civilization without contemplation cannot survive. Far less can the Church survive without contemplation! In our activity oriented, one-sidedly masculine western Christianity, contemplation is more and more undervalued. The loss of contemplation ... is largely identical with the loss of the Marian aspect. We have been trying to justify Christianity primarily on the basis of deeds. But where “being” is trampled understood, our deeds some become monstrous. ... Thus the increasingly loss of the Marian element in the Church only serves to underline once again how necessary it is. The Church must be a realm of quiet, a place of meditation and silence. She lives by the heart’s memory, which penetrates to the core of things and so opens them to understanding. This is the only way in which man can enjoy real progress, progress not only in “having” but in depth of “being.” And it is precisely through Marian contemplation, which is not always trying to produce things and yield measurable results, that the Church ministers to man. For by doing so she causes the Word of God to penetrate the world, that meaning without which all our possessions are nothing but dead weight.
- c. Pope Benedict builds on these thoughts in *Verbum Domini*, that she is the model for every believer in encountering through the Word of God.
  - i. VD 27. *Mary, “Mother of God’s Word” and “Mother of Faith”* The Synod Fathers declared that the basic aim of the Twelfth Assembly was “to renew the Church’s faith in the word of God”. To do so, we need to look to **the one in whom the interplay between the word of God and faith was brought to perfection**, that is, to the Virgin Mary, “who by her ‘yes’ to the word of the covenant and her mission, perfectly fulfills the divine vocation of humanity”.<sup>79</sup> The human reality created through the word finds its most perfect image in Mary’s obedient faith. From the Annunciation to Pentecost she appears as a woman completely open to the will of God. She is the Immaculate Conception, the one whom God made “full of grace” (cf. *Lk* 1:28) and unconditionally docile to his word (cf. *Lk* 1:38). Her obedient faith shapes her life at every moment before God’s plan. **A Virgin ever attentive to God’s word, she lives completely attuned to that word; she treasures in her heart the events of her Son, piecing them together as if in a single mosaic** (cf. *Lk* 2:19,51). In our day the faithful need to be helped to see more clearly the link between Mary of Nazareth and the faith-filled hearing of God’s word. I would encourage scholars as well to study the relationship between *Mariology and the theology of the word*. This could prove most beneficial both for the spiritual life and for theological and biblical studies. Indeed, what the understanding of the faith has enabled us to know about Mary stands at the heart of Christian truth. The incarnation of the word cannot be conceived apart from the freedom of this young woman who by her assent decisively cooperated with the entrance of the eternal into time. Mary is the image of the Church in attentive hearing of the word of God, which took flesh in her. Mary also symbolizes openness to God and others; an active listening which interiorizes and assimilates, one in which the word becomes a way of life.
  - ii. 28. Here I would like to mention Mary’s familiarity with the word of God. This is clearly evident in the *Magnificat*. There we see in some sense how she identifies with the word, enters into it; in this marvellous canticle of faith, the Virgin sings the praises of the Lord in his own words: “The Magnificat – a portrait, so to speak, of her soul – is entirely woven from threads of Holy Scripture, threads drawn from the word of God. Here we see how completely at home Mary is with the word of God, with ease she moves in and out of it. She speaks and thinks with the word of God; the word of God becomes her word, and her word issues from the word of God. Here we see how her thoughts are attuned to the thoughts of God, how her will is one with the will of God. Since Mary is completely imbued

with the word of God, she is able to become the Mother of the Word Incarnate”.

Furthermore, in looking to the Mother of God, we see how God’s activity in the world always engages our freedom, because through faith the divine word transforms us. Our apostolic and pastoral work can never be effective unless we learn from Mary how to be shaped by the working of God within us: “devout and loving attention to the figure of Mary as the model and archetype of the Church’s faith is of capital importance for bringing about in our day a **concrete paradigm shift in the Church’s relation with the word**, both in prayerful listening and in generous commitment to mission and proclamation”. As we contemplate in the Mother of God **a life totally shaped by the word**, we realize that we too are called to enter into the mystery of faith, whereby Christ comes to dwell in our lives. Every Christian believer, **Saint Ambrose reminds us, in some way interiorly conceives and gives birth to the word of God: even though there is only one Mother of Christ in the flesh, in the faith Christ is the progeny of us all**. **Thus, what took place for Mary can daily take place in each of us, in the hearing of the word and in the celebration of the sacraments**.

- iii. VD 87: We find the supreme synthesis and fulfillment of this process [of Lectio Divina] in the Mother of God. For every member of the faithful Mary is the model of docile acceptance of God’s word, for she “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (*Lk* 2:19; cf. 2:51); she discovered the profound bond which unites, in God’s great plan, apparently disparate events, actions and things. I would also like to echo what the Synod proposed about the importance of the personal reading of Scripture. ... The reading of the word of God sustains us on our journey of penance and conversion, enables us to deepen our sense of belonging to the Church, and helps us to grow in familiarity with God. As Saint Ambrose puts it, “When we take up the sacred Scriptures in faith and read them with the Church, we walk once more with God in the Garden.”
- iv. 88. Mindful of the inseparable bond between the word of God and Mary of Nazareth, along with the Synod Fathers I urge that **Marian prayer** be encouraged among the faithful, above all in life of families, since it is an aid to meditating on the holy mysteries found in the Scriptures. A most helpful aid, for example, is the individual or communal recitation of the Holy Rosary, which ponders the mysteries of Christ’s life in union with Mary, and which Pope John Paul II wished to enrich with the mysteries of light. It is fitting that the announcement of each mystery be accompanied by a brief biblical text pertinent to that mystery, so as to encourage the memorization of brief biblical passages relevant to the mysteries of Christ’s life. The Synod also recommended that the faithful be encouraged to pray the *Angelus*. This prayer, simple yet profound, allows us “to commemorate daily the mystery of the Incarnate Word”. It is only right that the People of God, families and communities of consecrated persons, be faithful to this Marian prayer traditionally recited at sunrise, midday and sunset. In the *Angelus* we ask God to grant that, through Mary’s intercession, we may imitate her in doing his will and in welcoming his word into our lives. This practice can help us to grow in an authentic love for the mystery of the incarnation.
- d. In his catechesis for the feast of the Holy Family Catechesis last December, Benedict emphasized how the Blessed Mother is, by the power of the Holy Spirit, both model and teacher.
  - i. Mary was a peerless model of contemplation of Christ. The face of the Son belonged to her in a special way because he had been knit together in her womb and had taken a human likeness from her. No one has contemplated Jesus as diligently as Mary. The gaze of her heart was already focused on him at the moment of the Annunciation, when she conceived him through the action of the Holy Spirit; in the following months she gradually became aware of his presence, until, on the day of his birth, her eyes could look with motherly tenderness upon the face of her son as she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in the manger.
  - ii. Memories of Jesus, imprinted on her mind and on her heart, marked every instant of Mary’s existence. She lived with her eyes fixed on Christ and cherished his every word. St Luke says:

“Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (2:19) and thus describes Mary’s approach to the Mystery of the Incarnation which was to extend throughout her life: keeping these things, pondering on them in her heart. Luke is the Evangelist who acquaints us with Mary’s heart, with her faith (cf. 1:45), her hope and her obedience (cf. 1:38) and, especially, with her interiority and prayer (cf. 1:46-56), her free adherence to Christ (cf. 1:55).

- iii. And all this proceeded from the gift of the Holy Spirit who overshadowed her (cf. 1:35), as he was to come down on the Apostles in accordance with Christ’s promise (cf. Acts 1:8). This image of Mary that St Luke gives us presents Our Lady as a model for every believer who cherishes and compares Jesus’ words with his actions, a comparison which is always progress in the knowledge of Jesus. After Bl. Pope John Paul II’s example (cf. Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*) we can say that the prayer of the Rosary is modeled precisely on Mary, because it consists in contemplating the mysteries of Christ in spiritual union with the Mother of the Lord.
- iv. **Mary’s ability to live by God’s gaze, is so to speak, contagious.** The first to experience this was St Joseph. His humble and sincere love for his betrothed and his decision to join his life to Mary’s attracted and introduced him, “a just man”, (Mt 1:19), to a special intimacy with God. Indeed, with Mary and later, especially, with Jesus, he began a new way of relating to God, accepting him in his life, entering his project of salvation and doing his will. After trustfully complying with the Angel’s instructions “Do not fear to take Mary your wife” (Mt 1:20) — he took Mary to him and shared his life with her; he truly gave the whole of himself to Mary and to Jesus and this led him to perfect his response to the vocation he had received.

## 6. Practical resolutions

- a. To make a resolution to get to know God much more through the Bible.
  - i. Begin with familiarity. Story of Johanna Tyburski. Making it a priority. Road map to treasure of heaven.
    - 1. St. Jerome’s question: “How could one live without the knowledge of Scripture, by which we come to know Christ himself, who is the life of believers?”.
    - 2. More important than all jewelry and silk, pearls and treasures.
  - ii. Then, or simultaneously, ruminatio/compositio locis/lectio divina.
- b. Forming communion based on the Word
  - i. Catechesis on Jerome: However, to avoid falling into individualism, we must bear in mind that the Word of God has been given to us precisely in order to build communion and to join forces in the truth on our journey towards God. Thus, although it is always a personal Word, it is also a Word that builds community, that builds the Church. We must therefore read it in communion with the living Church. The privileged place for reading and listening to the Word of God is the liturgy, in which, celebrating the Word and making Christ’s Body present in the Sacrament, we actualize the Word in our lives and make it present among us. We must never forget that the Word of God transcends time. Human opinions come and go. What is very modern today will be very antiquated tomorrow. On the other hand, the Word of God is the Word of eternal life, it bears within it eternity and is valid for ever. By carrying the Word of God within us, we therefore carry within us eternity, eternal life.
- c. Word of God at home
  - i. 85. The great mystery of marriage is the source of the essential *responsibility of parents towards their children*. Part of authentic parenthood is to pass on and bear witness to the meaning of life in Christ: through their fidelity and the unity of family life, spouses are the first to proclaim God’s word to their children. The ecclesial community must support and assist them in fostering family prayer, attentive hearing of the word of God, and knowledge of the Bible. To this end the Synod urged that *every household have its Bible*, to be kept in a worthy place and used for reading and prayer. Whatever help is needed in this regard can be provided by priests, deacons and a well-prepared laity. The Synod also recommended the formation of small communities of families, where common prayer and meditation on

passages of Scripture can be cultivated. Spouses should also remember that “the Word of God is a precious support amid the difficulties which arise in marriage and in family life”.

d. Meditation on readings in preparation for Mass.

e. Liturgy of the Hours

i. *In dialogue with God through his words* (24). The word of God draws each of us into a conversation with the Lord: the God who speaks teaches us how to speak to him. Here we naturally think of the *Book of Psalms*, where God gives us words to speak to him, to place our lives before him, and thus to make life itself a path to God. In the Psalms we find expressed every possible human feeling set masterfully in the sight of God: joy and pain, distress and hope, fear and trepidation: here all find expression. Along with the Psalms we think too of the many other passages of sacred Scripture which express our turning to God in intercessory prayer (cf. *Ex* 33:12-16), in exultant songs of victory (cf. *Ex* 15) or in sorrow at the difficulties experienced in carrying out our mission (cf. *Jer* 20:7-18). In this way our word to God becomes God’s word, thus confirming the dialogical nature of all Christian revelation and our whole existence becomes a dialogue with the God who speaks and listens, who calls us and gives direction to our lives. Here the word of God reveals that our entire life is under the divine call.

ii. *The word of God and the Liturgy of the Hours* (62). Among the forms of prayer that emphasize sacred Scripture, the Liturgy of the Hours has an undoubted place. The Synod Fathers called it “a privileged form of hearing the word of God, inasmuch as it brings the faithful into contact with Scripture and the living Tradition of the Church”. Above all, we should reflect on the profound theological and ecclesial dignity of this prayer. “In the Liturgy of the Hours, the Church, exercising the priestly office of her Head, offers ‘incessantly’ (*1 Th* 5:17) to God the sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name (cf. *Heb* 13:15). This prayer is ‘the voice of a bride speaking to her bridegroom, it is the very prayer that Christ himself, together with his Body, addressed to the Father’.” The Second Vatican Council stated in this regard that “all who take part in this prayer not only fulfill a duty of the Church, but also share in the high honor of the spouse of Christ; for by celebrating the praises of God, they stand before his throne in the name of the Church, their Mother”. The Liturgy of the Hours, as the public prayer of the Church, sets forth the Christian ideal of the sanctification of the entire day, marked by the rhythm of hearing the word of God and praying the Psalms; in this way every activity can find its point of reference in the praise offered to God. Those who by virtue of their state in life are obliged to pray the Liturgy of the Hours should carry out this duty faithfully for the benefit of the whole Church. Bishops, priests and deacons aspiring to the priesthood, all of whom have been charged by the Church to celebrate this liturgy, are obliged to pray all the Hours daily. ... I also encourage communities of consecrated life to be exemplary in the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, and thus to become a point of reference and an inspiration for the spiritual and pastoral life of the whole Church. The Synod asked that this prayer become more widespread among the People of God, particularly the recitation of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. This could only lead to greater familiarity with the word of God on the part of the faithful. Emphasis should also be placed on the value of the Liturgy of the Hours for the First Vespers of Sundays and Solemnities, particularly in the Eastern Catholic Churches. To this end I recommend that, wherever possible, parishes and religious communities promote this prayer with the participation of the lay faithful.

7. Prayer

a. Peter said in Capernaum, “To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!”

b. The people were astonished and amazed at Jesus’ words, as he spoke on hill sides, in plains, in synagogues, in the temple precincts, on journeys, at the shores, and from boats. We need to ask the Lord to be filled with this same reverential awe. In the word of God, the Lord responds to our petitions throughout the psalms, “Teach me your ways, O Lord.”

- c. Foundation of our life. Either on rock or sand. The one who hears these words of mine and acts on them.
- d. We finish with Pope Benedict's words at the end of *Verbum Domini*:
  - i. I remind all Christians that our personal and communal relationship with God depends on our growing familiarity with the word of God. I turn to every man and woman, including those who have fallen away from the Church, who have left the faith or who have never heard the proclamation of salvation. To everyone the Lord says: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (*Rev* 3:20).
  - ii. May every day of our lives thus be shaped by a renewed encounter with Christ, the Word of the Father made flesh: he stands at the beginning and the end, and "in him all things hold together" (*Col* 1:17). Let us be silent in order to hear the Lord's word and to meditate upon it, so that by the working of the Holy Spirit it may remain in our hearts and speak to us all the days of our lives. In this way the Church will always be renewed and rejuvenated, thanks to the word of the Lord that remains for ever (cf. *1 Pet* 1:25; *Is* 40:8). Thus we too will enter into the great nuptial dialogue which concludes sacred Scripture: "The Spirit and the bride say: 'Come'. And let everyone who hears say: 'Come!'" The one who testifies to these things, says: 'Surely I am coming soon!' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (*Rev* 22:17, 20).