

Fr. Roger J. Landry
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“Enrolling in the School of the Saints”

Hearing and Proclaiming the Word of God

Pope John Paul II, NMI 39-41

- **Listening to the Word**

- There is no doubt that this primacy of holiness and prayer is inconceivable without a renewed listening to the word of God.
- Great progress has certainly been made in devout listening to Sacred Scripture and attentive study of it.
- Individuals and communities now make extensive use of the Bible, and among lay people there are many who devote themselves to Scripture with the valuable help of theological and biblical studies.
- But it is above all the work of evangelization and catechesis which is drawing new life from attentiveness to the word of God.
- Dear brothers and sisters, this development needs to be consolidated and deepened, also by making sure that every family has a Bible.
- 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.

- **Proclaiming the Word**

- 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, I have 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.
- 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)..
- May the shining example of the many witnesses to the faith ... sustain and guide us in this confident, enterprising and creative sense of mission. For the Church, the martyrs have always been a seed of life.
- Perhaps we were too used to thinking of the martyrs in rather distant terms, as though they were a category of the past, associated especially with the first centuries of the Christian era. ... Our own time is particularly prolific in witnesses, who in different ways were able to live the Gospel in the midst of hostility and persecution, often to the point of the supreme test of shedding their blood. In them the word of God, sown in good soil, yielded a hundred fold (cf. Mt 13:8, 23). By their

example they have shown us, and made smooth for us, so to speak, the path to the future. All that remains for us is, with God's grace, to follow in their footsteps.

Listening

1. There's a great story in the life of St. Augustine, one of the most influential saints in the history of the Church, who died in northern Africa in 430.
2. As a young man, he had been struggling for many years with several issues, among which were
 - a. 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:
 - b. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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!"
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. So he ran back to where his friend was with the Sacred Scriptures, grasped the Holy Writ, 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."
8. 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."
9. Tolle et lege! Like St. Augustine, we're told from heaven to take up and read Sacred Scripture.
10. The call for us to take up and read Sacred Scripture is pretty obvious, if you think about it.
 - a. 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...;
 - b. Why would He have ensured its survival across the centuries through the hundreds of thousands of faithful copies by meticulous monks prior to the Gutenberg printing press...;
 - c. 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?
 - d. 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! He wrote it for you to listen to it being read.
11. This message — tolle et lege — has been sung, said, or written for several hundred years now by the Church, especially since the Council of Trent.
12. In the past 110 years, however, the Church has been saying it more and more emphatically.
 - a. The Popes have written beautiful documents on it.

- b. 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.
 - c. And Pope John Paul II has been practically losing his deep, baritone voice singing this same refrain, “tolle et lege,” “take and read!”
13. 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.
 14. 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.
 15. That same God speaks to us in Sacred Scripture. He speaks to us *live*.
 - a. He reveals Himself to us.
 - b. He reveals us to ourselves.
 - c. He reveals our beginning in Him.
 - d. He reveals our sublime calling and vocation.
 - e. He reveals our capacity to reject him.
 - f. He also reveals his love in giving us all the means to overcome that same capacity.
 - g. 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.
 16. In Sacred Scripture — both the reading of it at Mass and our own reading of it at home — 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.
 17. As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council said,
 - a. “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.”
 18. Pope John Paul II has recognized, though, that for many Catholics, the Sacred Scriptures do not play the role they should play in our Christian discipleship. It’s like a tremendous gift given to us out of love by God that we leave in a corner of our lives still covered with wrapping paper. Few of us take that gift, rip off that wrapping paper and read it.
 19. The Pope says clearly that for us to become the saints God calls us to be, we have to listen to the Word of God given to us on these sacred pages. The Bible is not a thing, but Someone who speaks to us throughout the pages and every time Sacred Scripture is read at Mass. The Pope says that there must be a return to the Sacred Scripture. “The primacy of holiness and prayer,” he writes, “is inconceivable without a renewed listening to the word of God.”
 20. St. Jerome, the saint who translated the Bible from the original Greek and Hebrew to the Latin language of the people in the early 400s, once wrote, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.”
 21. This point was brought home to me last week when I preached gave a homily during the Mission of one of my home parishes. They asked me to preach on the theme, “Living our discipleship,” and so I mentioned many of the things that Jesus said in the Gospel about living our discipleship, like, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions,” and I mentioned what they meant. After the mission, there was a reception downstairs. One of the women, who was probably in her 60s, came to me and said, “Father, that was incredible. I’ve never knew that Jesus gave us those criteria. No one has ever preached on it before. Thank you.” The woman, who has been a parishioner there at least since the time I was a child, obviously was giving me a compliment. But part of me was sad

that she had never heard it before. Maybe none of the priests ever stressed it in a homily during her life. But I wanted to ask her, “Ma’am, do you know that it’s read twice a year at daily Mass and two times every three years at Sunday Mass?” Just because the priest may focus on something else, it’s still there for you to listen to and digest. I also wanted to ask her if she had ever read the Gospel of St. Matthew or St. Luke, because it’s right there, featured prominently. This particular woman, a daily Mass goer and, from everything I know, a good Catholic, was ignorant of what Christ had said about discipleship, because she did not know Sacred Scripture.

22. There’s no way a priest can tell us everything we need to know in homilies. Each of us needs to take some personal responsibility, the Holy Father is saying, to make sure that through the pages of Sacred Scripture, we might come to know Christ more and know what he reveals to us about ourselves. Without this, it would take a miracle for us to become holy. To get to know Christ, we have to treasure the Bible, which tells us about Christ. Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ, and one cannot be a good Christian if one is ignorant of Christ.
23. So we can ask ourselves some questions, as a sort of examination of conscience on our attitude toward the gift of Sacred Scripture. This is for each of us to answer privately. How much of the Bible have you read? If you haven’t read it all, would you even have the desire to do so? Have you read the New Testament or the four Gospels? How about just one? I had a friend whom I was preparing for marriage last year from a distance. She worked for a Wall Street Bank, so her schedule was fierce. But she told me that during her 15 month engagement, she was going to try to read the whole Bible, because that would be one of the best gifts she could give to her future husband, a much more profound knowledge of God. She made it a priority in her free time, which was never more than a couple of hours a weekday and five-to-six hours on Sunday. She finished the whole Bible in about 5 months and she said it changed her life and set her on fire for the faith.
24. We also have the treasure of the readings of Sacred Scripture at Mass, but many Catholics have become some used to the reading of Sacred Scripture that they don’t listen with very much attention. The proclamation of Sacred Scripture at Mass should do nothing short than to change our lives. I often use an analogy that if I were to tell you that there is a buried treasure of a \$250 million somewhere on the Church property and that I’m going to give you oral directions in 17 steps how to find it, how much attention would you spend? When I use the analogy with kids, many of them tell me that they would learn each of the steps — and I believe them. But what Jesus gives us in Sacred Scripture are the directions to end up in heaven, to obtain a treasure that moths can’t destroy, rust corrode, or the IRS tax. But often we don’t listen to Sacred Scripture in this way.
25. To prove my point, I sometimes quiz people on the readings, to see if they’ve treasured it and if it’s stuck. It’s not, again, a memorization contest, but it’s a self-examination to see if we’ve paid attention to it, for if we really considered it crucially relevant we would. Can you remember the content of the Gospel passage we read tonight? How about Sunday’s Gospel? Many of us need help and need even human incentives to be able to listen to God’s word in Sacred Scripture better. At my last parish, I challenged kids to ask their parents about the readings and if the parents didn’t get it, that the parents should have to give them \$10. Many of them did and made a killing. The next week, when they came back, I told parents that they could ask their children the same questions and if they didn’t get it, then their children would have to give it back. It led to a healthy spiritual competition to try to pay attention to the word, to talk about it on the way home from Mass or later on in the day, to try to make sure that the seeds God plants through the word take root.
26. In terms of the appreciation of Sacred Scripture, our Protestant brothers and sisters often put us Catholics to shame, even though the Catholic Church gave all of us the Sacred Scriptures. Few Catholics would be comfortable having a discussion on Sacred Scripture with an intelligent Protestant, because few Catholics know Sacred Scripture well enough to have that discussion. Catholics sometimes say, rightly, that Catholics have the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, so really what do we need Sacred Scripture for. Oftentimes Catholics look at the Bible as a student would look at something that’s extra-credit — not strictly speaking necessary, but helpful. Illiterate people have been saved, someone can say. How really necessary can it be? But these are not the questions of one who loves. One who loves someone wants to

- find out all he can about another. When a loved one writes a letter, they open it up with relish. It's the same way with God. The Bible is a bunch of love letters from God, written to us.
27. There's a story of St. Bernardine of Siena, the great 15th century Franciscan preacher, who 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.
 28. That's a strange story to tell here in the midst of a Catholic retreat. 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 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.
 29. 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.
 30. 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.
 31. Imagine how much more Catholics would appreciate the Eucharist if they knew everything Christ said about the Eucharist in Sacred Scripture! Thanks be to God, we don't have a contrafactual. We can have both the Eucharist and great access to Sacred Scripture, both through preaching as well as our own individual contact. But we need to act on it. For this to occur, however, we have to make the effort to listen anew to Christ speaking to us in the Mass and on the pages of the Bible which is the most important thing we could read each day.

Proclaiming the Word of God

1. Listening to the Word of God is not just a selfish pursuit, to help us individually with our relationship with Jesus. It's also meant to equip us with the ability of sharing that treasure with others. The Pope says in his letter, "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, I have 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)."
2. The Lord is calling for a new Acts of the Apostles, with each of us playing a starring role, but to do that, we need to listen to God's word, to assimilate it, and to spread it. To proclaim the Word of God, we have to live it, and the message of what we live is much louder than what we say with our words. St. Francis of Assisi used to tell his friars, "Preach always, and when necessary use words."

3. In the beautiful ordination rite for deacons, the bishop gives us the Gospel, and says, “Receive the Gospel of Christ whose herald you now are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, put into practice what you teach.” Those words apply to all of us. We are heralds of the Gospel, called to read and believe it, teach what we believe and practice what we teach.
4. Jesus reiterated this point in terms of the real source of his mother’s beatitude. Once a woman cried out from the crowd to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that bore thee and the breasts that nursed thee.” Jesus replied about the real reason why his mother was great: “Blessed, rather, is she who heard the word of God and kept it.” Mary heard the word of God and treasured it in her contemplative heart that that word literally took her flesh and dwelled among us. That is the model for us. We’re supposed to hear the word of God and treasure it and put into practice such that the Word takes our flesh and dwells in the midst of the world.
5. Italian teacher and student — When I was in Italy there was an interview with an actor who had become famous in pornographic movies. In the course of the interview, the journalist discovered that the actor had gone to Italy’s Catholic University and, contrary to what the reporter might have thought, loved his time there. The porn-star specifically lauded one of the ethics professors there, whose course he said he really enjoyed so much that he never missed a class and actually did well on the final exam. The journalist thought it might be an interesting angle for the story to interview that professor. When asked about his now famous alumnus, the philosophy professor simply said, “that man was never my student.” The reporter then opened up the notebook and repeated some of the things that the student had said, how he had never missed a class, how he had done well on the oral final exam, how he even remembered some of the professor’s notable quips. The professor repeated, however, that he was never his student. “So are you saying he was never in your class?” the reporter queried. “I didn’t say that,” the professor replied. “He was definitely in my class. I remember even where he used to sit. I think he’s right that he in fact did do well on the final exam, but that man was never my student. To be a student,” he continued, “means more than just attending classes, taking notes and regurgitating the information. To be a student means to put what the teacher taught into practice. And obviously that man was never my student.” Disciple is just the Greek word for student. To be a disciple of Jesus means more than to know what he said or he did. It means more than believing that he was the Son of God and the Savior of the World. It means putting what the Master said into practice, living by what he taught. To be a disciple of Christ means not just to know how many beatitudes there are, but to become the beatitudes. It means to become more and more like Christ, to allow Christ’s own life and love to flow through our veins.
6. The Word of God is supposed to ground our whole life and flow into who we are and everything we do. Jesus said in the Gospel that we will be wise or foolish on the basis of how well we listen and put it into practice, how well we proclaim it by our deeds and words. “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell — and great was its fall!”
7. In another place, he developed the same point further and showed a little of his frustration on those who pray without hearing and acting on his word. “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.”
8. The foundation of our spiritual house, Jesus says, is on how well we hear his word and act on it. That’s why the Holy Father said that listening to and acting on the word of God are two essential pillars for holiness.

9. If we don't act on it, St. James tells us, we're lying to ourselves. Listen to what he wrote to the first Christians: "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act — they will be blessed in their doing" (James 1:22-27). The word of God is the mirror about who we really are, and if we don't put it into action, it's similar to forgetting what we look like.
10. The more we look at the Word of God, the more we see whom we're called to be, and the easier it is to live it and to pass it on. It is a greater treasure, the greatest gift we could give to those we love. The more we know it, the more we can help those we love come to Jesus, live as God wants, and come to heaven. If any of us were ever called to do a serious operation on a member of our family, one we loved dearly, we would want to make sure that we knew medicine as well as possible. It's the same way with the faith. We're called to pass on that faith to others, including those we know and love most. In order to pass it on well, we have to know it well.

Deus Caritas Est

1. The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*).
2. These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable.
3. We proclaim the Gospel by what we say and how we act, and how we act means our day to day moral decisions, our charity, our celebration of the Lord publicly and privately in prayer.
4. For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.

School of the Saints

1. Good summary of whole retreat.
2. We've listened to the word of God about his calling us to be saints, about the means he wishes to provide us.
3. But then wants us to act on this word, to hear it, to treasure it, to en flesh it, to put it into practice. If we do, we will set the world ablaze.