

DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE READING?

BREATHING WITH SACRED SCRIPTURE (I)

When recounting the first steps of the young Church's expansion beyond Jerusalem, Saint Luke introduces us into the chariot of an Ethiopian official who was treasure-keeper for the Queen of Nubia, a region south of Egypt. He had been to Jerusalem to adore the God of Israel (cf. *Acts* 8:27-28). Now on his way back home this pilgrim was reading Isaiah, though without understanding much. Then God moved Philip to intervene (cf. *Acts* 8:26, 29). *Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him (Acts 8:30-31).* The Ethiopian Queen's minister had come to the prophetic words: *as a sheep led to the slaughter... (Is 53:7-8).* Philip, beginning with this Scripture passage, *told him the good news about Jesus (Acts 8:35).* After baptizing him in a wayside pool, he entrusted him to the mysterious action of the Holy Spirit, who had led him to this soul *thirsting for God, the living God (Ps 42:2).*

In one of his letters Saint Jerome pointed out that Philip shows his companion "Jesus who was hidden, as if imprisoned in the words."¹ Through the guidance and explanations of believers, Scripture acts powerfully as a *two-edged sword (Heb 4:12)* in the soul of each person who draws close to it. Philip revealed and "set free" the figure of Our Lord before the eyes of someone who until then had understood nothing. And we too, writes Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et Misera*, are called "to be living vessels for the transmission of God's Word,"² in such a way that many men and women come to perceive "the attraction of Jesus Christ."³

Tradition, looking with faith

In the Hebrew world the Sacred Scriptures had a very important role. The synagogue services that nourished the piety of the Jews throughout the year revolved around the reading of the Torah and the Prophets and the singing of the Psalms.⁴ The Scriptures of Israel were the written form of an oral tradition: the inspired authors put into writing the teachings of the patriarchs and prophets. This tradition not only preceded the Scriptures, but also accompanied their reading, as a penetrating gaze by which the just – those who seek the Lord⁵ – could grasp, or at least glimpse, what was meant.

¹ Saint Jerome, *Epistle 53*, 5.

² Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter, *Misericordia et Misera*, 20 November 2016, no. 7.

³ Saint Josemaría, Notes from a meditation, 1 April 1962.

⁴ The Torah (Hebrew for "instruction," "teaching," "law") is the heart of the Hebrew Bible and is also known as the Pentateuch (Greek for "five rolls"). It consists of the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

⁵ This expression is often used in the Psalms, e.g. *Ps 9:10; Ps 40[39]:16; Ps 70[69]:4.*

The same thing happens in the Church, the new people of Israel. Tradition precedes Scripture, starting with the fact that the Church is the one who tells us which writings are to be included in the list of the sacred books.⁶ “I would not believe in the Gospel,” wrote Saint Augustine “had not the authority of the Catholic Church already moved me to do so.”⁷ In this regard, what happened during the Council of Trent, as related by one of those present in his diary, is quite significant. In one of the sessions, the Council rejected the opinion that the Gospel according to Saint John is to be believed because the author is Saint John; rather, it concluded, this Gospel is to be believed because it has been accepted by the Church.⁸ But the role of Tradition is not limited to defining the canon of Sacred Scripture; it also has the constant role of discerning its true meaning, in which the Church has the help of the light of the Holy Spirit. *I have yet many things to say to you, Jesus said at the end of his life on earth, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth (Jn 16:12-13).*

Tradition, then, is inseparable from Scripture, just as the act of looking is inseparable from what is seen. There are ways of looking that see certain things and others that do not. For example, an architect standing before a particular building will see details that others will miss; a poet or a painter may be deeply stirred by a small occurrence that others will regard as quite ordinary. Tradition looks at Scripture from the standpoint of the Church’s faith. This is a living way of looking, since it is guided by the Holy Spirit; it is accurate and true, since only from the heart of the Church can the Word of God be understood in all its depth. Just as Jesus did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the Holy Spirit makes the heart of the Church, the heart of every Christian, burn when explaining the Scriptures to us (cf. *Lk 24:32*). The Word of God is a Word that traverses the centuries – *heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away (Mt 24:35)* – and it needs a reader who also traverses the centuries: the People of God travelling through history. Therefore, Saint Hilary said, in reality “Sacred Scripture is found more in the heart of the Church than in the actual written books.”⁹

Reading that is listening

“Through Sacred Scripture, kept alive by the faith of the Church, the Lord continues to speak to his Bride, showing her the path she must take to enable the Gospel of salvation to reach all mankind.”¹⁰ The preaching of the Word of God acquires special power when it is read in the liturgical assembly. The story of the solemn reading of the Torah by Ezra the scribe, filled with many striking details, is particularly impressive (cf. *Neh 8:1-12*). The majority of the people had just returned from Babylon, and they received the Word of God with an outpouring of pent-up emotion from their decades in exile. *How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, the exiles cried out, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you! (Ps 137:4-6)*. Now, hearing once again the Law of God, the crowd wept on realizing the distance between their own lives and the Lord’s

⁶ See Council of Trent, Session 4 (8 April 1546), *DS* 1501-1504.

⁷ Saint Augustine, “Contra epistolam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti”, 5, 6, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 119.

⁸ “Ait enim Cavensis episcopus: Evangelio Joannis non credo, quia ab ecclesia sit receptum, sed quia Joannis est. Cui hoc esse haereticum responsum est.” Concilii de Trento, *Diartorum, Actorum, Epistularum, Tractatum nova Collectio*, Herder, Friburg 1901, vol. I, p. 480.

⁹ Saint Hilary of Poitiers, *Liber ad Constantium Imperatorem*, 9.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, no. 7.

commandments. But Ezra, who was reading, and the Levites, said to the people: *This day is holy to the Lord your God, do not mourn or weep (Neh 8:9).*

In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah, who announces his future coming. *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives (Lk 4:18; cf. Is 61:1).* Twenty centuries later Scripture continues speaking about the present and to the present, just as it did that day in Nazareth: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (Lk 4:21).* Every day, and especially every Sunday, “God’s word is proclaimed in the Christian community so that the Lord’s Day may be illuminated by the paschal mystery ... The Lord continues to speak to us today as to friends; he dwells in our midst in order to accompany us and show us the path of life. His word gives a voice to our inmost needs and worries, and offers a fruitful response, so that we can concretely experience his closeness to us.”¹¹

When this conviction is strong, great care is put into the Liturgy of the Word at Holy Mass. Talking about the best way to proclaim the Word of God, Saint Josemaria gave his priest sons some advice imbued with common sense and love for God. He recommended that they read it in a way that “expresses the meaning,” which doesn’t mean “reading it emphatically, or shouting, but marking the necessary pauses; as when reading a text to three or four people who are listening. So it would be good to practice a bit before reading an epistle, a gospel, a preface...”¹² This advice is also good for all those who take part in the Liturgy of the Word, since Scripture needs this kind of care from everyone. It shouldn’t be read as if it were just any text, or simply as information to be transmitted, but rather with a heart filled with affection, careful listening, and hunger to be nourished with *every word that comes from the mouth of God (Mt 4:4; cf. Deut 8:3).* That is why the “*sursum corda*, which is a very ancient prayer in the liturgy, should come before the Preface, before the liturgy, as the ‘path’ for our speaking and reflecting. We must raise our hearts to the Lord not only as a ritual response, but as an expression of what is happening in a heart that is uplifted and also lifts up others.”¹³

Understanding the Scriptures

“The Bible is the great story of the marvels of God’s mercy. Every one of its pages is steeped in the love of the Father, who from the moment of creation wished to impress the signs of his love on the universe.”¹⁴ The Scriptures enkindle a living, personal response filled with wonder. They don’t overpower our intellect, but rather spur and enlighten it. *Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Ps 119[118]: 105).* The Word of God gives the world and creatures their true dimensions, unlike the limited, short-sighted view of reality sin brings with it. *For the Word of God 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).* Hence, anyone who knows the Bible and meditates on it, even though they may not be highly educated, has the wisdom that others perhaps fail to find in their studies. *For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind (Jn 9:39).*

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, no. 6.

¹² Saint Josemaría, Notes taken in a family gathering, 12 February 1956.

¹³ Pope Benedict XVI, Speech, 31 August 2006.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, no. 7.

From the standpoint of faith, the events narrated in the Bible have a meaning beyond a mere record of historical acts. Through the actions and trials of the People of God, we come to see how God works through them and for them. Our Mother Mary expressed it very clearly: *For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name (Lk 1:49)*. The events of world history, and of our personal history, also are illumined by the light of Scripture. *And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do (Heb 4:13)*. The Word of God embraces and gives light to our life; that is why prayer and apostolate find their natural setting there.

Nevertheless, although God has created us to live with Him, *the way is hard that leads to life (Mt 7:14)*. So we shouldn't be surprised that sometimes we find some passages in the Scriptures difficult to understand. Pope Benedict once said that a friend of his, "after hearing sermons that included long anthropological reflections intended to lead us to the Gospel, used to say: 'I am not interested in these approaches, I want to understand what the Gospel says!'" And the Pope added, "I often think that instead of longwinded preambles, it would be better to say, 'We do not like this Gospel, we are opposed to what the Lord says! But what exactly is it trying to say?' If I say with sincerity that at first glance I do not agree, we have already awakened attention. It is obvious that, as a man of today, I would like to understand what the Lord is saying. Thus without taking a long circuitous route, we can reach the heart of the Word."¹⁵

Neurologists tell us that we only actually use a small percentage of our real brain capacity. Similarly we could say that the Scriptures possess inexhaustible depths of riches. *I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commands are boundless (Ps 119[118]:96)*. Hence the Fathers of the Church distinguished between various levels of meaning in the same text. Later, in mediaeval times, the idea of the four "senses" of Scripture was developed: the literal sense, the allegorical sense, the moral sense, and the anagogical sense.

The literal sense, the foundation of all the others,¹⁶ is not merely the direct meaning the words have for the reader; the words also need to be understood in the context of the times in which they were written to avoid interpretations that seem correct, but are in fact distorted. The relationship of the literal sense with the other three levels of meaning often requires the guidance of someone who has done specialized studies. Thus it is very helpful, and sometimes essential, to use editions of the Scriptures that have good introductions and notes, as well as other books of biblical theology and commentaries. The indices of quotations from Sacred Scripture found at the end of many of these books, and especially the one in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, provide a guide to interpret many passages with more depth.¹⁷

No text of Sacred Scripture can be isolated from the whole, which has the unity of the Word of God. "Different as the books which compose it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the centre and heart, open since his Passover."¹⁸ Hence the New Testament is read in the light of the Old Testament, and the key to interpreting

¹⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, Speech, 26 February 2009.

¹⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.1, a.10, ad 1.

¹⁷ Moreover, according to the authoritative voice of one of the coordinators of the *Catechism*, nos. 101-104 offer a brief methodology for an authentic theological reading of Scripture. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "Is the Catechism of the Catholic Church Up-to-Date? Reflections Ten Years After Its Publication," *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005, p. 147.

¹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 112 (cf. *Lk 24:25-27, 44-46*; and Vatican Council II, Const. *Dei Verbum*, no. 12).

the Old Testament is Christ, according to Saint Augustine's famous phrase: the New is hidden in the Old, and the Old is revealed in the New: *Novum in Vetere latet et in Novo Vetus patet*.¹⁹ As Saint Thomas Aquinas taught, the phrase "heart of Christ" can refer to Sacred Scripture, "which makes known his heart, closed before the Passion, as the Scripture was obscure. But the Scripture has been opened since the Passion; since those who from then on have understood it, consider and discern in what way the prophecies must be interpreted."²⁰

When the Risen Lord appeared to the disciples, *he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures* (Lk 24:45). Our Lord does the same with us when we let Him accompany us along the path of our life, by listening carefully, by searching sincerely. Led by the hands of the saints and so many brethren in the faith, we find in the Scriptures "the voice, the gestures, the beloved figure of our Jesus."²¹

¹⁹ Saint Augustine, *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, 2, 73.

²⁰ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio in Psalmos* 21, 11 (quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 112).

²¹ Javier Echevarria, "Introduction," *While He Spoke to us on the Way*, p. 8.