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Sacred Scripture as a Means of Dialogue with God

Sacred Scripture is the basic sacred holy book of Christianity; it is the source of faith, the liturgy, theology, and ministry.¹ It is also an important cultural code in literature and in world culture.² Thus we are encouraged and even urged to read and study Biblical texts, both individually and in groups, as often as possible. However, frequent contact with the Bible breeds certain problems, because we always hear the same words and know many of them by heart, which causes us to fall into a routine and question the meaning of constantly returning to these texts. This problem was once expressed well by a second grade elementary school student during catechesis in school. When we began to discuss the scene of the Annunciation, which was presented in the textbook as a drawing accompanied by a short text, she raised her hand and declared that she had learned about this during the previous school year. What she meant was that there was no point to reflect upon a text well known to her again. Many adults arrive at similar conclusions. Thus what is the point

¹ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Dei verbum*, 21–26.

² Cf. N. Frye, *Wielki Kod. Biblia i literatura*, Bydgoszcz 1998; D. Fouilloux [et al.], *Dictionnaire culturel de la Bible*, Paris 1990; M. Starowieyski, *Tradycje biblijne. Biblia w kulturze europejskiej*, Kraków 2015; G. Ravasi, M. Gallarani, *Bibbia, arte e musica*, Cinisello Balsamo 1992 (Supplemento di “Jesus”); G. Ravasi, *Przykazania w Piśmie Świętym i w sztuce*, Kielce 2003.

of constantly reading Sacred Scripture? Having become familiar with the sacred book once, can't we simply put it on the shelf?

1. Three Functions of the Word

In order to respond to these dilemmas, it is worth recalling the functions that the human word, and thus also God's Word, serves, because God's Word is in the form of human words in the Bible. "For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men."³ According to linguists, the human word serves three functions: to inform, to express, and to implore.

The word is above all the carrier of information about people, things, facts, and events. It is then of an objective nature and most frequently uses the third person present indicative form. We can most frequently find it in science and in didactics, but also in everyday life, in order to transmit information on a variety of topics. In this function, it is expressed as a symbol, or a representation of reality.

The word can also express the person and his or her interior, emotions, state of mind, or attitudes. It is then subjectively tinted and most frequently makes use of the first person indicative form. It appears above all in confessions, memoirs, letters, and poems. Here, it receives the name of a symptom: internal expression.

Finally, the word can contain an appeal directed to the other person from whom we expect, desire, or want something; whom we ask for something, to whom we suggest something, and whom we command to do something. It then takes an interpersonal form and is usually used in the imperative mood. This type of word is present in requests, applications, appeals, summons, commandments, and demands, and it is often called a signal, or a sign directed towards others.

³ Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Dei verbum*, 13.

The differentiation between these three functions of the word is somewhat theoretical, because in practice each word has these functions in different proportions. They constitute a certain entirety, mutually supplementing each other. Even dry information expresses something from the person and directs an appeal to other people. Similarly, personal confessions also contain some information and an appeal to the other person. Meanwhile, the appeal is not entirely devoid of objective contents and subjective emotions.⁴

Language is a rich reality that describes the person. Without language, man would not be fully himself. One definition of the person is solely based on the fact of language: the person is an animal that speaks.⁵ We need words in order to receive and transmit information; have knowledge about the world and be well orientated in it; to create; and also to express oneself and one's hopes, and to appeal to the other person, initiating contact with him or her. Words are used for communication between people and are the most useful tool for dialogue with others. Subjects, signs, gestures, and body language are sometimes very useful and the only available forms of communicating with others, but they will never replace language, with its precision and depth. Thus we read academic and popular books, self-help books and newspapers; talk about different topics, but also confide in others, complain, express joy and sorrow, and direct appeals and requests to others. In addition to dry and unambiguous academic and technical language, we also use strongly emotional, ambiguous language in which the contents are relegated to the back burner because we want to pour our souls and heed the attention of others to us. Sometimes, we talk about "nothing," about the weather and about flowers, in order to initiate and maintain contact with the other person, narrow the distance to him or her, and to pass the time together.

Thus the human word has numerous functions; it is not limited to the contents themselves, but it also serves to express oneself and to engage

⁴ Cf. L. Alonso Schökel, *Słowo natchnione. Pismo Święte w świetle nauki o języku*, Kraków 1983, p. 100–102; V. Mannucci, *Bibbia come Parola di Dio. Introduzione generale alla Sacra Scrittura*, Brescia 1981, p. 14–17 (Strumenti, 17).

⁵ Cf. M Heidegger, *In cammino verso il linguaggio*, Milano 1973, p. 189.

in dialogue with the other person. The richest word is the one in which three functions are most fully utilized. It is not strictly academic language concentrated on the objective truth, nor is it pure lyricism expressing the author's internal self. It is not an appeal directed to the other person, either. This full word is the language of friendship and love, in which the three aspects find their greatest synthesis. We then have the full expression of the person, full unity with the other and the preserving of one's individuality as well as complete information, because in order to love, one has to know (and vice versa).⁶

2. God's Friendly Word

The Word of God inscribed in Sacred Scripture also has these three functions. It transmits important information about God, man, and the world, which steers our way of seeing and acting. One must know the contents of the sacred books better, which requires careful reading and intense study. Considering the enormous size of the Bible, which in the Catholic canon consists of seventy-three books that, on average take up about 1,300 pages, this is a very demanding task, even if we limit ourselves to just the most important truths. Furthermore, 2,000–3,000 years and enormous differences in language and culture separate us from those works. In order to understand the contents of Sacred Scripture, one must overcome these barriers. In all likelihood, few people could say that they know the books of the Bible well and do not need to look into them. Biblical scholars constantly study them and never run out of work. Even if at the level of information we cannot say that we already know Sacred Scripture well and do not need to read it and deepen our knowledge of it, it is enough to just review the truth enclosed in it from time to time.

Thus one cannot ignore the Bible when we take into consideration the remaining functions of language. The Word of God is not mere dry

⁶ Cf. V. Mannucci, *Bibbia come Parola di Dio*, p. 17–20. In addition to the already-mentioned three function, language has others, such as the aesthetic and ethical functions; see: L. Alonso Schökel, *Słowo natchnione*, op. cit., p. 110–112.

information that we should just acknowledge and that we should believe in. It also expresses God; reveals His plans and desires; and discusses His love and joy, but also His sadness and anger. It discovers His life and heart, His attitude to the person and to the world. This word is at the same time a constant appeal directed to the person. These dimensions of the Word of God cannot be dealt with just by one reading of the Bible and even through an exhaustive study of it. They require us to reach for it in order to engage in dialogue with God, who not only wants to inform us about something, but also to initiate contact with us. “Through this revelation, the invisible God (see Colossians 1 : 15, 1 Timothy 1 : 17) speaks to people as to friends in His great love (see Exodus 33 : 11, John 15 : 14n and stays with them and accept them into communion with Himself.” “For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them.”⁷

Sacred Scripture is the recorded testimony of God’s dialogue with people that God wants to constantly pursue. Reading it, we enter into this centuries-old current to learn to listen to God and answer Him as the people of the Bible showed us. “St. Jerome was fully aware that the Bible is a tool ‘thanks to which God speaks to the faithful everyday’ [*Epistula* 133, 13].”⁸ Thanks to Sacred Scripture, we can get to know Christ. “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ” (St. Jerome, *Commentariorum in Isaiam libri*, prologus)⁹). It is encounter that makes it possible to form a bond with Him. Without Sacred Scripture, our dialogue with God would be greatly impoverished and prone to a subjectivity that creates one’s own image of God that eventually will dissolve in generalities or disappear altogether. Faith in God is born of listening to

⁷ Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Dei verbum*, 2, 21.

⁸ Benedict XVI, apostolic adhortation *Verbum Domini*, 72. In the German text, the Pope used the word *Mittel* (“means,” “method”), which was faithfully recreated in the English translation (*means*). Meanwhile, just as we see *narzędzie* (“tool”) in the Polish version, in the Italian translation we have *strumento*, in the French we have *instrument*, in the Spanish we have *instrumento*, and in Portuguese we have *instrumento*.

⁹ Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Dei verbum*, 5; Benedict XVI, apostolic adhortation *Verbum Domini*, 30.

Christ's words (see Romans 10:17). This responds to the person's expectations well, to his or her deepest desire for meaning and life, and gives answers to basic questions, but does not come out of us; it does not grow from the ground but comes from above.

St. Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) called Sacred Scripture “God’s letter to man.” One must reach for the Bible in the same way that one reaches for the letter of another person that is not physically present in order to remember that person, bring him or her closer, make him or her present, and to “hear” that person. The summary of a personal letter by another person cannot replace the reading of that letter. Similarly, direct contact with the Biblical text will not be replaced by a summary of the truths in it expressed as dry theses.

The Sacred Scripture is not a collection of neutral truths; it throbs with emotions and asks for answers. One can accept the fact that God loves us, but this statement will not set us aflame, nor will it capture us like God’s living Word, full of passion and tenderness for man, transmitted to us by the prophet Hosea, for instance (11:1–9):

¹ When Israel was a child I loved him,
out of Egypt I called my son.

² The more I called them,
the farther they went from me,
Sacrificing to the Baals
and burning incense to idols.

³ Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
who took them in my arms;

⁴ I drew them with human cords, with bands of love;
I fostered them like one who raises an infant to his cheeks;
Yet, though I stooped to feed my child,
they did not
know that
I was their healer.

⁵ He shall return to the land of Egypt,
and Assyria shall be
his king;

⁶ The sword shall begin with his cities and end by consuming his solitudes.
Because they refused to repent,
their own counsels shall devour them.

⁷ His people
are in suspense about returning to him;
and God, though in unison they cry out to him, shall not raise them up.

⁸ How could I give you up, O Ephraim,
or deliver you up, O Israel?
How could I treat you as Admah,
or make you like Zeboiim?
My heart is overwhelmed,
my pity is stirred.

⁹ I will not give vent to my blazing anger,
I will not destroy Ephraim again;
For I am God and not man,
the Holy One present among you; I will not let the flames consume you.¹⁰

The sentence “The person experiences internally the drama caused by submission to evil internally; it finds its solution in Christ when we compare it with Paul’s text in Romans 7:14–25, matching or even superseding similar ancient and modern texts with its expression” doesn’t sound great, either.

¹⁴ We know that the law is spiritual but I am carnal, sold into slavery to sin.

¹⁵ What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I concur that the law is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

¹⁸ For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want. ²⁰ Now if (I) do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. ²¹ So, then, I discover the principle that when I want to do right, evil is at hand. ²² For I take delight in the law of God, in

¹⁰ Biblical texts from: *The New American Bible*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_INDEX.HTM.

my inner self,²³ but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.²⁴ Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body?²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore, I myself, with my mind, serve the law of God but, with my flesh, the law of sin.

These examples show that in the Biblical texts, not only the information is important, but the expression and form of addressing the reader are as well. No summary can fully replicate the meaning of the entire text, its richness, strength, and beauty. The Word of God is a word of friendship and love direct to the entirety of the person, not only to his or her reason. One must answer it with one's entire being; one should realize it (see Exodus 24 : 3, 7; Luke 6 : 46) and live it in order to enter into dialogue with God, and to "come to share in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1 : 4).¹¹

3. The Need for an Integral Reading of the Bible

In light of what has been said thus far, the need to constantly read Sacred Scripture has become evident. A systematic study with the use of all the tools and methods worked out and made available by the exegetes in order to understand the holy books increasingly well is also necessary.¹² A mere academic reading is not enough, because it is limited to the informative dimension. "Why do you not spend the time which you have free from your duties in the church in reading? Why do you not go back again to see Christ? Why do you not address Him, and hear His voice? We address Him when we pray, we hear Him when we read the sacred oracles of God. What have we to do with strange houses? There is one

¹¹ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Dei verbum*, 2–6; L. Alonso Schökel, *Słowo natchnione*, op. cit., p. 102–114; V. Mannucci, *Bibbia come Parola di Dio*, op. cit., p. 21–34.

¹² Różne metody i podejścia w interpretacji Pisma Świętego prezentuje Papieska Komisja Biblijna, *Interpretacja Biblii w Kościele*, [In:] *Interpretacja Biblii w Kościele. Dokument Papieskiej Komisji Biblijnej z komentarzem biblistów polskich*, przekł. i oprac. R. Rubinkiewicz, Warszawa 1999 (Rozprawy i Studia Biblijne, 4).

house that holds all. They who need us can come to us. What have we to do with tales and fables? An office to minister at the altar of Christ is what we have received; no duty to make ourselves agreeable to men has been laid upon us" [St. Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum*, I, 20, 88].¹³ In addition to "diligent study," a "spiritual reading" and a "pious reading,"¹⁴ known in the Church under the name *lectio divina* ("Divine reading") since antiquity, are also needed.

A spiritual reading of Sacred Scripture is of an integral nature and involves encompasses levels. First, we have the *lectio*, or the reading of a selected Biblical text in order to understand it. Here, we look for an answer to the question and to what the text is saying. We explain the meaning of individual words and images; we give stop to study the people who appear, their attitudes and activities; we try to describe the time, place, and context of each situation. We can make use of the available literature and audio-visual materials that explain the text read from us, and of all research equipment. In the case of other books, our reading ends as soon as we understand the text. With the Bible, however, this is just the beginning.

The second stage is *meditatio*, or meditation, reflection on the text that had just been read in order to try to answer the question of what it says to the reader. We refer God's Word to ourselves and to our lives. We ask: what does it make me notice? What does it remind me to do? What does it encourage and implore me to do? What does it caution me against? This stage requires a very personal confrontation with God's Word, which can show the reader the road to escape a spiritual abyss, show new perspectives, and also to correct the reader's thinking and behavior.

The third stage is *oratio*, or prayer. The read and meditated upon text becomes the inspiration for turning to God. Sometimes, Biblical words can be directly used as worship, an expression of gratitude, or a request; they always motivate one to speak with God as a result of better understanding of the situation during the reading. The subject of prayer could be joy from discovering God's concerns and gifts for the first time;

¹³ Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Dei verbum*, 25.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

contrition for evil done; asking for help in conquering fear; and carrying out discerned tasks. The Word does not make us stop on ourselves, but it directs us to God and makes dialogue with Him possible.

The last stage of a spiritual reading of Sacred Scripture is *contemplatio vel actio*: contemplation or action. Ultimately, reading Sacred Scripture should lead to experiencing God and His presence, to unify oneself with him and to participate in His life and glory. Such is the aim of God's Word directed to man. This Word should also lead us to wise and effective activity in the world. After a good reading of Sacred Scripture – naturally, while at the same time developing one's general knowledge and professional skills – the person knows who he or she is and has the strength to live in accordance with his or her deepest identity in order to fulfill what should be fulfilled.¹⁵

We see that *lectio divina* does not stop at just the informative stage. Rather, it leads to dialogue with God and to a life resulting from encounter with Him. It is an unusually rich reading, one that engages the person in his or her entirety and makes dialogue with God possible by participation in His reality. God's Word shapes this reality and continually creates it anew.¹⁶ On the one hand, in this reading we read Sacred Scripture; on the other, it reads us, screening and renewing us.¹⁷ We can clearly see

¹⁵ Cf. Benedict XVI, apostolic adhortation *Verbum Domini*, 86–87; J. Kudasiewicz, *Modlitwa Biblią. Wprowadzenie w lectio divina*, Kielce 2000; S. Wronka, *Osiemdziesiąta rocznica założenia Papieskiego Instytutu Biblijnego w Rzymie*, "Collegium Polonorum" 10 (1989/1990), p. 246–256; C. M. Martini, *Lud w drodze. Medytacje*, Kraków 1992, p. 11–19 (Duc in altum – Wypułń na głębie, 7); I. Gargano, *Lectio divina. Wprowadzenie. Wskazania metodologiczne z wyjaśnieniem niektórych fragmentów zaczerpniętych z Ewangelii św. Mateusza*, Kraków 2001 (Lectio divina, 1); M. Masini, *Iniziazione alla «lectio divina»*. *Teologia, metodo, spiritualità, prassi*, Padova 1989; K. Wons, *Jak żyć Słowem Bożym na co dzień?*, Kraków 2010 (Modlitwa Słowem Bożym).

¹⁶ Cf. John Paul II, *Wierzę w Boga Ojca Stworzyciela*, Città del Vaticano 1987, p. 24: "God's Word, as a result of which the world was created, also creates an internal world of every believer."

¹⁷ Cf. R. Huning, E. Ballhorn, B. Eltrop, *Wasser Licht Leben. Die Lesungen der Osternacht*, Stuttgart 2012 (Dem Wort auf der Spur. Das Lectio-Divina-Leseprojekt des Bibelwerks, 7).

hear how important and life-giving reading Sacred Scripture is and why we cannot stop reading it if we want to grow as people.

A spiritual reading should not, however, avoid an academic reading of the Bible; after all, one cannot separate (spiritual) exegesis in the Church from (scientific) exegesis in the Sorbonne,¹⁸ although this is not easy in practice. A spiritual or mystical reading should make use of the achievements and results of scientific exegesis in order to avoid subjectivism, fideism, or fundamentalism, which distort the meaning of the Biblical texts. Meanwhile, a scientific reading should have its supplement in the conclusions for one's life and personal application of the word in order to not stop at theoretical analyses.¹⁹

Pope John Paul II had recalled this on numerous occasions. In an address directed to the members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on April 7, 1989, he said: "In the Church, all methods should, directly or indirectly, serve evangelization. Recently, many Christians have complained about the fact that exegesis has become a refined art without reference to the life of God's people. This criticism can certainly be questioned; however, in many cases it is not justified. Nonetheless, there are reasons to be cautious. Mere fidelity to the task of interpretation requires of the exegete that he or she not be content with studying aspects of Biblical texts that are of secondary importance, but to emphasize their central message, which is a religious message, with an appeal for conversion and the Good

¹⁸ Cf. F. P. Dreyfus, *Exégèse en Sorbonne, exégèse en Eglise. Esquisse d'une théologie de la Parole de Dieu*, Les Plans-sur-Bex 2006 (Sagesse et cultures). This expression was frequently used by Augustyn Jankowski, OSB.

¹⁹ Cf. John Paul II, *Przemówienie na temat interpretacji Biblii w Kościele*, 3–5, [in:] *Interpretacja Biblii w Kościele. Dokument Papieskiej Komisji Bibliijnej z komentarzem biblistów polskich*, przekł. i oprac. R. Rubinkiewicz, Warszawa 1999, p. 11–13 (Rozprawy i Studia Biblijne, 4); R. Laurentin, *Come riconciliare l'esegesi e la fede*, Brescia 1986 (Universale Teologica, 16); *Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit*, hrsg. von J. Ratzinger, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1989 (Quaestiones Disputatae, 117); I. de la Potterie i inni, *L'esegesi cristiana oggi*, Casale Monferrato 1991; W. Wink, *The Bible in human transformation. Toward a new paradigm for biblical study*, Philadelphia 1988.

News of salvation, which is capable of transforming all people and all of human society, bringing it into communion with God.”²⁰

During the presentation of the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* on April 23, 1993, the Pope asked that exegetes not limit themselves to the human aspects of Biblical texts but find in them God’s Word thanks to openness to the Holy Spirit, prayer, and fidelity to the Church’s magisterium, and to bring this Word closer to the faithful in pastoral work. “Thus they will avoid becoming lost in the complexities of abstract scientific research which distances them from the true meaning of the Scriptures. Indeed, this meaning is inseparable from their goal, which is to put believers into a personal relationship with God.”²¹

We can find similar words by John Paul II in his preface to the volumes of the *Nowy Komentarz Biblijny* (The New Biblical Commentary): “Exegesis is a scientific discipline that, on the one hand, requires the application of the appropriate research methods that are not directly linked to theology. On the other, it requires deep faith in Christ, the Son of God, in Whom the Revelation fully occurred. Then the study of Sacred Scripture is not merely a dry historical, literary, or structural analysis of the text, but it is the discovery of the deepest message that God wanted to give to the person through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As I said during a meeting with the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1991: ‘The People of God need such exegetes who on the one hand will honestly perform their research, but on the other will not stop in the middle of the way but, on the contrary, will continue their efforts until the treasures of light and life contained in Sacred Scripture will be fully presented so that priests and the faithful would have easier access to it and could make more generous use of its fruit’ (April 11, 1991).”²²

²⁰ John Paul II, *Discorso ai membri della Pontificia Commissione Biblica*, 7 aprile 1989, “L’Osservatore Romano”, 8 April 1989, p. 5.

²¹ John Paul II, *Address of Pope John Paul II to Pontifical Biblical Commission*, 11.

²² John Paul II, [*Słowo wstępne*], A. Paciorek, *Ewangelia według Świętego Mateusza. Wstęp, przekład z oryginału, komentarz*, t. 1. Rozdziały 1–13, Częstochowa 2005, p. 7 (Nowy Komentarz Biblijny. Nowy Testament, 1.1).

John Paul II himself linked together the various dimensions of reading Sacred Scripture well, beginning to read the Bible in his childhood and continuing to do so throughout his life. One can identify four dimensions of his approach to the Bible. The first is the intellectual dimension, which is expressed in the study of the Word while making use of exegesis, theology, philosophy, and specific academic disciplines in order to discern the Biblical message and interpret it in one's contemporary realities. The spiritual (religious, mystical) dimension is visible in prayer as well as openness to the Holy Spirit and the tradition of the faith in order to initiate contact with God Who speaks in the sacred books. The existential (moral) dimension is highlighted by an effort to turn God's Word into practice and being faithful to it throughout one's life. Finally, the pastoral (ministry) dimension consists of sharing the encountered and accepted Word; preaching it to others; and giving witness to its beauty, truth, and power. Since his youth, the Pope had an unusual intuition of mystery and of the magic of the human word, and an even greater one of God's Word. He tried to probe God's Word and to penetrate the reality it speaks of. Reading Sacred Scripture leads the reader to the God Who formed and sent him or her to others. God's Word preached by John Paul II became reality, for example, in his powerful summoning of the Holy Spirit in Warsaw on June 2, 1979: "Let Your Spirit descend! Let Your Spirit descend! And renew the face of the earth, of this earth."²³

Neither familiarity with textbooks on Biblical and general theology nor the Catechism can replace reading the Bible. They summarize the truths contained in Sacred Scripture, present them in their entirety, and confront them with the present state of human knowledge. However, they lack the expression and appeal present in the Bible as well as its poetics. They are a well-thought-out synthesis of the Biblical message. Such a synthesis is necessary in order to not lose oneself in the details of the Biblical books that are not a ready textbook but rather a collection of statements with various contents expressed with the help of literary genres: narration,

²³ Cf. Wronka S., *Od słowa do rzeczywistości – Jana Pawła II integralna lektura Biblii*, [in:] *Ioannes Paulus II – In Memoriam. Księga Pamiątkowa Stowarzyszenia Biblistów Polskich ku czci Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II*, ed. W. Chrostowski, Warszawa 2006, p. 425–456.

poetry, parables, allegories, proverbs, admonitions, legal norms, apparitions, Gospels... Reading the Bible, one slowly comes to a certain synthesis because Scripture explains Scripture (i.e., the Biblical texts shed light on each other and “the Sacred Scriptures grow with the one who reads them” [Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Ezechielem* I, VII, 8]²⁴). Reaching for the Catechism and theological works²⁵ can assist in complementing this synthesis. Without it, understanding the message of Sacred Scripture is chaotic, incoherent, and selective, which can lead to the falsification of our relationship with God and our neighbor.

4. Calls for Closeness with Sacred Scripture

The Hebrew People and later the first Christians were very aware of the significance of sacred books. This is expressed by St. Paul’s words directed to Timothy: “But you, remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it,¹⁵ and that from infancy you have known (the) sacred scriptures, which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3: 14–17). The author of the Second Letter to Peter has also recommended: “Moreover, we possess the prophetic message that is altogether reliable. You will do well to be attentive to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1: 19). At the same time, he noted that the aim of Sacred Scripture is not “personal interpretation” (2 Peter 1: 20), because it was brought by people “moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1: 21). He also referred to St. Paul’s epistles and

²⁴ Benedict XVI, apostolic adhortation *Verbum Domini*, 30.

²⁵ The most useful is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* along with the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, but there are also other modern-day works. Among the theological works, one can first make use of Biblical and theological dictionaries, for example.

the books of the Old Testament, recalling that the Apostle explained the situation of Christians in light of Parousia, which brings problems that are difficult to understand. “Therefore, beloved, since you await these things, be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace. And consider the patience of our Lord as salvation, as our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, also wrote to you, speaking of these things as he does in all his letters. In them there are some things hard to understand that the ignorant and unstable distort to their own destruction, just as they do the other scriptures” (2 Peter 3: 14–16). The authors of the quoted letters have encouraged their readers to reach for Sacred Scripture and to persist at its side, because it is like a lamp in the darkness that teaches wisdom and leads to perfection.

In the early centuries of the Church, Christians were often reminded of the need to read Sacred Scripture. This is attested to, for instance, by the admonitions of St. Jerome (347–420), the author of the *Vulgate*, the Latin translation of the Bible that is the official text in the Latin Church, as well as numerous exegetical and theological works. He reminded the priest Nepotian, for example: “Read the divine scriptures constantly; never, indeed, let the sacred volume be out of your hand. Learn what you have to teach” [*Epistula* 52, 7].²⁶ Meanwhile, he gave the Roman matron Laeta advice on bringing up her daughter: “And let it be her task daily to bring to you the flowers which she has culled from scripture. [...] Let reading follow prayer with her, and prayer again succeed to reading. [...] Let her treasures be not silks or gems but manuscripts of the holy scriptures” [*Epistula* 107, 9, 12].²⁷ The prince of the exegetes encouraged the lay faithful and the clergy, the adults and the young, to regularly read Sacred Scripture. Everyone needs this nourishment in order to grow in the faith.

With the passage of centuries, individual reading of the Bible became limited because of the “scandalizing” passages and fears that they would be misinterpreted. Sacred Scripture was read during the liturgy and was studied in schools and universities. However, there was no shortage of simple souls that had a very close relationship to the Bible. Among them

²⁶ Benedict XVI, apostolic adhortation *Verbum Domini*, 72.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 72.

must be the Carmelite nun Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, O.C.D. (1873–1897). She discovered the beauty and depth of the Bible rather quickly. Reading it gave her more than all the ascetic books that she made use of. For some time, Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* was her first book to read, as she knew it almost by heart. She fell in love with Sacred Scripture in Carmel, and she discovered a treasure within it at the age of nineteen. "If I open a book composed by a spiritual author (even the most beautiful, the most touching book), I feel my heart contract immediately and I read without understanding, so to speak. Or if I do understand, my mind comes to a standstill without the capacity of meditating. In this helplessness, Holy Scripture and the *Imitation* come to my aid; in them I discover solid and very pure nourishment. But it is especially the Gospels that sustain me during my hours of prayer, for in them I find what is necessary for my poor little soul. I am constantly discovering in them new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings" [*Manuscript A 83 r°/v°*].²⁸ St. Thérèse has also compared reading the Gospel to breathing the scent of Jesus' life. [*Manuscript C 35 v°*].²⁹ According to Mother Teresa's testimony, at the end she said: "As for me, with the exception of the Gospels, I no longer find anything in books. The Gospels are enough" [*St. Therese of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations 44*].³⁰

The Gospels were so dear to her that she removed them from the *Christian Guidebook* and always wore them on her breast, attached together. Then she added the Old Testament texts she valued the most to them. St. Thérèse did not have access to the entire Bible, and if she did, it was sporadic. She knew many passages from Sacred Scripture from the ascetic writings. She passionately read Biblical texts, repeated them, copied them, meditated on them, and prayed with them; they were really evident in her life and they directed her to new steps in her journey. Occasionally, she worked on them, for example comparing various translations or trying to harmonize various Gospel accounts of Jesus'

²⁸ Therese of Lisieux, *Biblia z Teresq*, vol. 1: Stary Testament, Kraków 2002, p. 32 (Żywa Wiara, 40).

²⁹ Benedict XVI, apostolic adhortation *Verbum Domini*, 48.

³⁰ Teresa z Lisieux, *Biblia z Teresq*, vol. 1, p. 33.

Resurrection. At one point, she expressed this in a desire that was very considering her time and situation; “Had I been a priest, I would have learned Hebrew and Greek, and wouldn’t have been satisfied with Latin. In this way, I would have known the real text dictated by the Holy Spirit” [*St. Therese of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations* 132].³¹ She wanted to receive God’s Word from the direct source, being aware that the translation cannot perfectly reproduce the original text (see: Syr Prolog 20–27).

St. Thérèse could boast of very impressive knowledge of Sacred Scripture and of an uncanny ability of applying it to specific situations in which she herself or others found themselves, which astonished not only her sisters, but priests as well. This is a testimony of St. Thérèse of St. Augustine during her cause for beatification: “The Servant of God delighted in Sacred Scripture. She never had any difficulty with selecting the most appropriate passages for the soul; it was obvious that they were nourishment for her internal life each day” [*Proces Apostolski* 330]³². Meanwhile, Canon Maupas, prior of Carmel, said: “She struck me with her expansive familiarity with Sacred Scripture and her very accurate ability to apply it to nearly any situation” (*Dziejów duszy*). Her fluency greatly superseded what could be expected of such a young nun. [...] I would be very happy if I could do the same” [*Proces Apostolski* 399].³³ In St. Thérèse’s writings, we can find approximately 440 quotations and paraphrases of the Old Testament and 650 from the New Testament. The words of Sacred Scripture always resounded in her heart and were on her lips; she thought with them and expressed herself with their aid. They became her words that were not mechanically repeated, but instead were creatively applied to her own life and that of others.

With the aid of the Gospels, St. Thérèse wanted to penetrate the reality of Jesus, hear Him, and unite with Him in love. In order to express it,

³¹ Ibidem, p. 13. “Si j’avais été prêtre, j’aurais étudié à fond l’hébreu et le grec, afin de connaître la pensée divine telle que Dieu daigna l’exprimer en notre langage humain” – Thérèse de l’Enfant-Jésus et de la Sainte-Face, *La Bible avec Thérèse de Lisieux*, Paris 1979, p. 10 (Foi Vivante).

³² Therese of Lisieux, *Biblia z Teresq*, vol. 1, p. 15.

³³ Ibidem, p. 16.

she frequently referred to Song of Songs. She experienced Jesus Himself admonishing her: “Never have I heard Him speak, but I feel that He is within me at each moment; He is guiding and inspiring me with what I must say and do. I find just when I need them certain lights that I had not seen until then” [*Manuscript A 83 vº*].³⁴ On the verge of death, she made Jesus’ words her own, making use of a long passage from John 17, using the feminine gender. This attests to how closely she identified with Jesus. Following the main proscriptions of the Rule of Carmel led to this statement: “How blessed is anyone who rejects the advice of the wicked and does not take a stand in the path that sinners tread, nor a seat in company with cynics, but who delights in the law of Yahweh and murmurs his law day and night” (Psalm 1 : 1–2).³⁵

St. Thérèse’s close relationship with Sacred Scripture can be encouragement and a model for us. The most important fathers of the Second Vatican Council encouraged us to do this: “Therefore, all the clergy must hold fast to the Sacred Scriptures through diligent sacred reading and careful study, especially the priests of Christ and others, such as deacons and catechists who are legitimately active in the ministry of the word. This is to be done so that none of them will become ‘an empty preacher of the word of God outwardly, who is not a listener to it inwardly’ [St. Augustine, *Sermons* 179, 1]. Since they must share the abundant wealth of the divine word with the faithful committed to them, especially in the sacred liturgy.”³⁶ The Council fathers directed a similar incentive to all the faithful. “The sacred synod also earnestly and especially urges all the Christian faithful, especially Religious, to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the ‘excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil. 3 : 8) [...] Therefore, they should gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose and other aids which, in our time, with approval and active support

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 11–49.

³⁶ Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Dei verbum*, 25.

of the shepherds of the Church, are commendably spread everywhere.”³⁷ The Council also considered it to be “the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life.”³⁸

The conciliar incentives, repeated by popes and synods,³⁹ have had their impact in the Church. Numerous Bible study groups and circles have been formed, as have new movements such as the Life-Light Movement, Focolare, and the Neocatechumenal Way; meanwhile, many believers have undertaken the study of Sacred Scripture on their own. One cannot neglect reading the Bible or grow tired of God’s Word. It is always relevant, because it not only transmit important information; it also expresses God’s heart and directs an appeal to us. Through Sacred Scripture, God wants to always be in dialogue with us. Thus the next time we here the pericope about the Annunciation, we should not say that we know it. Rather, we should try to engage in God’s saving dialogue with people, which has been going on for centuries and gives meaning to history and to the life of every person.

Abstract

Sacred Scripture as a Means of Dialogue with God

Sacred Scripture is the basis of Christianity and the code of the whole culture; therefore this knowledge is essential for every Christian and human. However, continuous returning to the same texts seems pointless. The author of the article shows that such a belief is wrong because the word, and therefore also the Bible, has not only informative function but also expressive and directive one. Truths contained in Sacred Scripture can be mastered, even though the large volume of books of the Bible and the gap of time and culture that divides us from them makes this a difficult task. By contrast, self-expression and appeal led by God to man require a constant response from the man. Sacred Scripture is the means of dialogue between God and man and therefore it must be constantly read if this dialogue has to continue and lead to communion with God and to

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 25.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 21–22.

³⁹ Cf. ex. Benedict XVI, apostolic adhortation *Verbum Domini*, 121–124.

share in His nature. This reading cannot keep only the informative dimension but must include all the functions of the word, must be integral. An example of such a reading is *lectio divina* taken for centuries.

Keywords

Sacred Scripture; God; dialogue; means; *lectio divina*; integral reading of the Bible; St. Jerome; St. Therese of Lisieux; Second Vatican Council; St. John Paul II; Benedict XVI

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