

Pope Francis' Catechesis on Prayer, arranged for each liturgical week

Seventeenth Sunday of the Year 28th July 2024

Today our gospel speaks of barley loaves and fish which were miraculously multiplied to feed all. What does this mean? And how is it a sign of future promises. We are called to use sacred scripture in prayer to grow in understanding, in Hope and in God's strength. We return to Pope Francis' catechesis on Prayer with the Sacred Scripture, given on Wednesday 21 January 2021, which we first looked at during Advent.

The prayer with the Sacred Scripture

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good morning!

Today I would like to focus on the prayer we can do beginning with a Bible passage. The words of Sacred Scripture were not written to remain imprisoned on papyrus, parchment or paper, but to be received by a person who prays, making them blossom in his or her heart. The Word of God goes to the heart. The Catechism affirms that: "prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture" — the Bible cannot be read like a novel — "so that a dialogue takes place between God and man" (n. 2653). This is where prayer leads you, because it is a dialogue with God. That Bible verse was written for me too, centuries and centuries ago, to bring me a word of God. It was written for each of us. This experience happens to all believers: a passage from Scripture, heard many times already, unexpectedly speaks to me one day, and enlightens a situation that I am living. But it is necessary that I be present on that day for that appointment with the Word. That I be there, listening to the Word. Every day God passes and sows a seed in the soil of our lives. We do not know whether today he will find dry ground, brambles, or good soil that will make that seed grow (cf. Mk 4: 3-9). That they become for us the living Word of God depends on us, on our prayer, on the open heart with which we approach the Scriptures. God passes continually through Scripture. And here I return to what I said last week, to what Saint Augustine said: "I am afraid of God when he passes". Why is he afraid? That he will not listen to him. That he will not realize that he is the Lord.

Through prayer a new incarnation of the Word takes place. And we are the "tabernacles" where the words of God seek to be welcomed and preserved, so that they may visit the world. This is why we must approach the Bible without ulterior motives, without exploiting it. The believer does not turn to the Holy Scriptures to support his or her own philosophical and moral view, but because he or she hopes for an encounter; the believer knows that those words were written in the Holy Spirit, and that therefore they should be welcomed and understood in that same Spirit, so that the encounter can occur.

It bothers me a little when I hear Christians who recite verses from the Bible like parrots. "Oh, yes... Oh, the Lord says... He wants this...". But did you encounter the Lord, with that verse? It is not only a question of memory: it is a question of the memory of the heart, which opens you to the encounter with the Lord. And that word, that verse, leads you to the encounter with the Lord.

Thus, we read the Scriptures so that they may "read us". And it is a grace to be able to recognize oneself in this passage or that character, in this or that situation. The Bible was not written for a generic humanity, but for us, for me, for you, for men and women in flesh and blood, men and women who have a name and a surname, like me, like you. And when the Word of God, infused with the Holy Spirit, is received with an open heart, it does not leave things as they were before: never. Something changes. And this is the grace and the power of the Word of God.

Christian tradition is rich in experiences and reflections on prayer with the Sacred Scripture. In particular, the method of “Lectio divina” was established; it originated in monastic circles, but is now also practised by Christians who frequent their parishes. It is first of all a matter of reading the biblical passage attentively: even more, I would say with “obedience” to the text, to understand what it means in and of itself. One then enters into dialogue with Scripture, so that those words become a cause for meditation and prayer: while remaining faithful to the text, I begin to ask myself what it “says to me”. This is a delicate step: we must not slip into subjective interpretations, but rather become part of the living Tradition, which unites each of us to Sacred Scripture. The last step of Lectio divina is contemplation. Words and thoughts here give way to love, as between lovers for whom sometimes it is enough to just look at each other in silence. The biblical text remains, but like a mirror, like an icon to be contemplated. And in this way, there is dialogue.

Through prayer, the Word of God comes to abide in us and we abide in it. The Word inspires good intentions and sustains action; it gives us strength and serenity, and even when it challenges us, it gives us peace. On “bad” and confusing days, it guarantees to the heart a core of confidence and of love that protects it from the attacks of the evil one.

In this way the Word of God is made flesh — allow me to use this expression: made flesh — in those who receive it in prayer. The intuition emerges in some ancient texts that Christians identify so completely with the Word that, even if all the Bibles in the world were to be burned, its “mould” could still be saved through the imprint it left on the life of the saints. This is a beautiful expression.

Christian life is at the same time a work of obedience and of creativity. Good Christians must be obedient, but they must be creative. Obedient, because they listen to the Word of God; creative, because they have the Holy Spirit within who drives them to be so, to lead them forward. At the end of one of his discourses addressed in the form of parables, Jesus makes this comparison: “Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure” — the heart — “what is new and what is old” (Mt 13:52). The Holy Scriptures are an inexhaustible treasure. May the Lord grant us all to draw ever more from them, through prayer. Thank you.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on Christian prayer, we now consider the importance of the Sacred Scriptures in the life of prayer. The Catechism encourages the prayerful reading of Scripture, so that a dialogue can take place between God and ourselves (cf. No. 2653). Since the Holy Spirit who inspired the writing of the sacred texts also dwells in the hearts of every believer, we are enabled, through our frequent and prayerful encounter with the revealed word, to enter more deeply into relationship with the Triune God. As a living word, the Scriptures speak to us in the here and now of our lives, illuminating new situations, offering fresh insights and often challenging our habitual way of thinking about and seeing the world. The interplay of prayer and the reading of Scripture is seen especially in the practice of lectio divina. This consists of slowly reading a biblical passage, then spending a period of time meditating on the text in openness to the Holy Spirit, letting God speak to us through a particular word, phrase or image. The fruit of this prayerful dialogue is contemplation, as we silently rest under the Father’s loving gaze. The Scriptures thus become an inexhaustible source of peace, wisdom and strength as we grow in faith and give it concrete expression in charity and service of others.