

The Bible and Prayer

THEMES FROM THE SYNOD

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by Michael D. Guinan, O.F.M.

We Catholics are certainly deep into our Christian faith, but, honestly, our understanding of Sacred Scripture has room for growth. Vatican II set out to change that. Among its contributions were the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* and the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*. Both urged that the Scriptures become more available to all for their spiritual nourishment. How

is that renewal going? How can it be improved? These were some key reasons why Pope Benedict XVI chose “The Scriptures in the Life and Mission of the Church” as the theme for the 12th World Synod of Bishops, at Vatican City, in October of 2008.

Over 250 representative bishops, superiors of religious communities, and assorted scholars and experts met for most of the month to discuss Scripture and the Church today. This *Update* will take a look at one important area they discussed: the role and place of the

Bible in our prayer life. We’ll focus especially on the Eucharist as the basic model for praying the Scriptures and, second, the ancient practice of *lectio divina* as a guide in doing this.

Eucharist sets the stage

When we begin to think of praying the Bible, we might first imagine ourselves sitting alone, quietly (no radio, TV, or iPod!),



at home or, perhaps, outdoors, with the Bible open in our laps. While this is certainly a good thing to do, it is just as certainly not a good place to begin. If we begin there we could miss some very important dimensions of praying the Scriptures. The Synod stressed repeatedly that the place to begin is with our hearing and praying Scripture in the context of the Eucharist. If we approach the Eucharist with the question, “What can we learn about praying the Bible?” a number of features emerge.

1. WE COME FOR THE EUCHARIST IN COMMUNITY.

Throughout Scripture, God calls a people; individuals are called only in service to the community. Called by the Spirit from our everyday lives, we come together as a Church. We come to worship as an expression of our faith in God. When “I” pray the Scriptures, I am always part of a larger “we.” Later, when I am alone with my Bible, I still pray as part of a community of faith.

2. WE RECOGNIZE THAT WE ARE FAR FROM PERFECT.

At the start of the Eucharist we have a short penance rite. While our worship expresses our faith, we acknowledge our weakness, failures and dependence. In the liturgy we are both reminded and empowered to live our Christian lives more fully. When we pray the Scriptures, we do so then in a spirit of humility and hope, open to the call and challenge of God in our lives.

3. WE DO NOT PICK THE READINGS; WE RESPOND TO THEM.

In the Liturgy of the Word, we hear readings from the Lectionary. The variety challenges us to move beyond our favorite books or passages to deal with the overview of God’s revelation. In the Sunday Eucharist, we have three readings, first, from the Old Testament (usually

selected to tie in with the Gospel of the day), then, usually, from the epistles, and, finally, from the Gospels. In the weekday Eucharist, with two readings, each one tends to follow sequentially within a given book. Of necessity, the selections are relatively short. The Synod raised the question of whether the Lectionary should be reviewed in order to present a wider range of biblical material.

4. READINGS ARE PROCLAIMED IN THE ASSEMBLY.

This is the heart of the Liturgy of the Word and contains a double challenge. On the one hand, the importance of the office of lector stands out; the Word should be proclaimed clearly and intelligibly. On the other, the assembly is called to listen: to listen—not “to read along with.” If the readings are printed in the missalette, we should not be reading them now (unless one has a hearing impairment or other good reason). It is in the bond created between the speaker and the listener(s) that the sacramental structure of the living Word of God is realized.

As Vatican Council II said, in its *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, “[Christ] is present in His Word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in the church” (#7). We are so used to reading the printed word with our eyes (a solitary experience) that we can easily forget that this was literally impossible until the 15th-century invention of printing and the

subsequent spread of literacy. The Word lives when it is proclaimed and listened to by me and by the assembly.

5. WE REFLECT. After each reading, a short period of silence should follow for personal reflection on and assimilation of what has just been heard. These are necessarily short; we may just be “getting into” the reading when we are pulled back by the next reading. This may be annoying to some, but there is a lesson here. It serves once again to remind us that we pray as part of a community. It also points to the need to return to the Scriptures outside of the Eucharist, when we will have more time.

6. READINGS ARE FOLLOWED BY A HOMILY.

This is an important and integral part of the Service of the Word. A good homily contains a number of features. The Scriptures come from an ancient time, place and culture, and their language and imagery can be at times remote or confusing. A homily can provide some background and explanation of the readings. But this is not enough.

Because we believe that they are also the Word of God for us today, a homily should help us relate to them from our time, space, culture and circumstances. A favorite word in church documents for this is “actualization.” The Scriptures are not a dead letter but should become “actual” for us today. The Synod was concerned about the quality of homilies, since they are such an important part of the liturgy.

7. LITURGY OVERFLOWS INTO ACTION.

Our praying of the Scriptures in the liturgy does not stay within the confines of the Liturgy of the Word. In the prayers of the faithful, we think of and remember the needs of the Church, of our parish, of our world. We share in the Lord’s Supper, receiving food and drink, nourishment for strength in living the Christian life. And we are sent out, back into our everyday lives, our families, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our worlds. When we go out,

we are meant to carry the Eucharist with us and to continue putting into practice what we have done there.

Taking the Eucharist home

How, then, do we take praying the Scriptures out with us into our wider lives? For priests and religious, and a growing number of laity, perhaps the first step appears in the Liturgy of the Hours, especially Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. This is part of the Church's official liturgy and is related to the Mass of the day or the season. Here the psalms are of special importance and are meant to be part of our prayer life (see *Catechism* #1174-78).

Other settings are also of importance, especially Bible study groups and Bible prayer groups. While their emphases are different, these are not and should not be totally separated; they mutually inform and enrich each other. If study is not joined with prayer, it can become a mere intellectual exercise; if prayer does not incorporate study, then it is too easy to make the Scriptures say anything we want them to.

In either setting we could take, as a point of departure the readings of the Sunday, either before (as preparation)

or after (as follow-up). Or we could take a particular book and work through it (perhaps with a guide such as the *Little Rock Scripture Study* series). These settings can help to remind us that our praying of Scripture takes place in the context of community. The Scriptures can be proclaimed aloud (by different members), and more time can be given both to studying their meaning and to praying them.

But of course, we also can and should pray the Scripture by ourselves, in our time and with our own rhythms, our private, personal prayer. While it can also be used in group settings, the practice of *lectio divina* can be a help and guide for us, and was an important theme of the Synod.

Lectio divina

Lectio divina is an ancient practice, going back to the days of early Christianity, to the desert fathers and mothers and monastic communities. The Latin expression means literally "divine reading" (reading of "divine things," i.e., the Bible); perhaps a more popular translation would be "biblical spiritual reading." It has been strongly recommended by Pope Benedict XVI (see lower right) and is being revived today, in different forms, worldwide.

In the 12th century, the superior of a Carthusian monastery, Guigo II, wrote a letter about it for his monks, entitled, *The Ladder [or Steps] for Monks*. In it, he set forth what has become, with some modifications, the classic formulation of four steps to be followed: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio*.

1. LECTIO (Reading). After putting ourselves in a quiet place and humbly in the presence of God, we read the text. Even if we are alone, we could read it aloud so as to "hear" it. The text should not be overly long, but should be a unit. We reflect on it: What are its context, images, characters, structure? Referring to a more popular commentary could help here as well. For Guigo, reading "puts food in the mouth."

2. MEDITATIO (Meditation). Having read the text, we begin to let it enter into our own beings. How do I see myself in this reading? When/how does



Iwould like in particular to recall and recommend the ancient tradition of *lectio divina*. The diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying responds to him with trusting openness of heart (cf. *Dei Verbum* #25). If it is effectively promoted, this practice will bring to the Church—I am convinced of it—a new spiritual springtime." (Address of Benedict XVI to the International Congress commemorating the 40th anniversary of *Dei Verbum*, Sept. 16, 2005)



PHOTOS: LEFT, CNS/GREG TARCZYNSKI; RIGHT, ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/FLOREA MARIUS CATALIN

it challenge me? We need to slow down (quite a countercultural activity in its own right!) and take time with the text. For Guigo, meditation “chews the food and breaks it up.”

3. ORATIO (Prayer). In *lectio* and *meditatio*, we try to see what God is saying to us in and through the text of Scripture. In *oratio*, we begin to respond. What do I want to say to God? What do I want to express in the context of my life and concerns? We may not always have a lot to say; then, we can sit quietly with it. Continuing his eating metaphor, Guigo tells us that prayer “extracts the flavor of the food.”

4. CONTEMPLATIO (Contemplation). Contemplation is “the sweetness [of the food] itself which gladdens and refreshes us.” We rest in God in wordless silence, simply enjoying the experience of being in God’s presence. When we recall that the expression “the Word of God” does not refer primarily to the Bible, but to the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, we can see that the goal of praying the Scriptures is to enter into deeper relationship with God.

5. ACTIO (Action). Many writers today make explicit a fifth step which was more implicit in earlier discussion of these steps. The basic point is this: Praying the Scriptures is not complete until we ask: How does, how will, how can this overflow into my actions, my life, my behavior? We live our lives immersed in relationships: to God, to ourselves, to other people, to the whole created world. These do not exist in isolation. How does my prayer relationship to God affect these other relationships in my life?

Lectio divina is both simple and flexible. As we begin, it may be good to follow the steps in order, but after a while, we should go with the flow, or perhaps better, with the wind, the breath, the Spirit of God. While Guigo used the image of a ladder, we can also conceive

of the process as a circle that we can enter at any point. As our biblical prayer becomes more personal, it should develop its own rhythms and styles.

Mary—model of praying the Bible

Scripture itself presents us with a model of what it means to pray the Word of God: Mary, the Mother of Jesus. This is a last theme of the Synod important for our topic.

Luke especially presents Mary as a model of prayer. In chapters 1-2 (the Infancy Narrative), she answers Gabriel, “let it be with me according to your word” (1:38). Elizabeth praises her, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” (1:45). Mary gives birth to Jesus in the manger (2:1-7), and later “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” (2:19) and, after returning from Jerusalem with the boy Jesus, she “treasured all these things in her heart” (2:51). Later, Jesus himself will praise her, “Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and obey it” (11:28).

We see in Mary then a twofold activity. First, she hears the word of God. In the Bible, while the sound goes in through the ear, the primary organ of hearing is the heart. We truly hear when the word enters deeply into our heart, our person, and we are

changed. The opposite of this is to be “hard-hearted” (see Psalm 95:7b-8). In the Bible, the expressions for “obedience” involve truly hearing. Second, Mary treasures it, keeps it, obeys it and bears it to the world. She is so open to receive the Word that she bears him to the world.

This same twofold structure ultimately lies at the heart of *lectio divina* and of the praying of Scripture in the Eucharist. We come humbly before God; we hear the Word, it enters into us, into our hearts and we are changed. And so we are sent out to bear fruit, to give birth to him in our lives and in our world today. ■

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UPDATE

Question Box

- 1) Why is the Eucharist so critical to our understanding Scripture?
- 2) What is the link between Scripture and action at Mass? At home?
- 3) How is Mary a model of what it means to pray the Word of God?

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LECTIO DIVINA: *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina* (by Stephen J. Binz, The Word Among Us Press).

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