

**The Importance of the Scriptures**  
**Through Pope Benedict XVI and *Verbum Domini***  
**by Tom Perna**

Today I want to talk to you about the importance of the sacred scriptures through the writings of Pope Benedict XVI, specifically in his document, “*Verbum Domini*”. In the introduction to, “*Verbum Domini*” the Holy Father says,

“I wish to point out certain fundamental approaches to a rediscovery of God’s word in the life of the Church as a wellspring of constant renewal. At the same time I express my hope that the word will be ever more fully at the heart of every ecclesial activity...I would like the work of the Synod to have a real effect on the life of the Church: on our personal relationship with the sacred Scriptures, on their interpretation in the liturgy and catechesis, and in scientific research, so that the Bible may not be simply a word from the past, but a living and timely word.”

So, for today I want to focus on five points: hearing and knowing the scriptures, the scriptures in the liturgy, the sacred scriptures and the sacraments, what is the mission of the lay faithful to the scriptures and then praying with the scriptures.

The first point, hearing and knowing the scriptures. In, “*Verbum Domini*” Benedict XVI says,

“To receive the Word means to let oneself be shaped by him, and thus to be conformed by the power of the Holy Spirit to Christ, the “only Son from the Father” (Jn 1:14).”

Reading the scriptures will allow us to be formed by our Lord and guided directly by the Holy Spirit. Don’t forget St. Jerome’s famous quote,

“Ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ”.

If we don’t know the scriptures how are we every going to know Jesus Christ? Not just the New Testament is important but both testaments are equally important. The new does not cancel out the old. The Holy Father says in the same document,

“The roots of Christianity are found in the Old Testament, and Christianity continually draws nourishment from these roots.”

We can't read the Old Testament without the New. And you can't read the New without the Old. Both are important and both must be read together and prayed together. I think a lot of us focus on the New Testament but there is so much in the Old Testament that we could be praying with; the Psalms, any of the Wisdom literature is beautiful to pray through. Even the Torah and looking at Genesis and Exodus and praying through the beauty of those scriptures.

So, as Catholics, we must not only hear the word of God we must also bring the word of God to the world. The Holy Father says,

“The Church is a community that hears and proclaims the Word of God. Only those who first place themselves in an attitude of listening to the Word can go on to become its heralds.”

So, really for us to preach the scriptures, we must be able to hear the scriptures; to hear them for ourselves. So, pray with them as well. The Holy Father further states that,

“The mission of proclaiming the Word of God is the task of all disciples of Jesus Christ based on their baptism. No believer in Christ can feel dispensed from this responsibility which comes from the fact of our sacramentally belonging to the Body of Christ.”

The second point is the scriptures in the liturgy. Pope Benedict XVI says in, “Verbum Domini”,

“To understand the word of God, then, we need to appreciate and experience the essential meaning and value of the liturgical action. A faith-filled understanding of sacred Scripture must always refer back to the liturgy...”

As Catholics we must know that the sacred scriptures are part of our daily lives through the Holy Mass. Although it's through the worship of the church that we see the sacred scripture alive, the liturgy is soaked with scriptural references. That's why daily mass, for us if we can make it if it fits into our schedules, is so important. It's here that we really experience the beauty of scriptures in the liturgy.

In regard to those who choose to proclaim the Word in the ministry of the reader, being lectors, Benedict stressed the importance of adequate training for readers in liturgical celebrations. I am a lector here at my parish, the parish I work at here at St. Mary Magdalen, and I've been a lector going back almost 16 years now. I love

proclaiming the scriptures because it prepares me for the week ahead as I read through those scriptures as I'm preparing to read them as well. The Holy Father states,

“All those entrusted with ... the ministry of Reader, should be truly suitable and carefully trained. This training should be biblical and liturgical, as well as technical: 'The purpose of their biblical formation is to give readers the ability to understand the readings in context... The liturgical formation ought to equip readers to have some grasp of the meaning in relation to the word and the sacraments. The technical preparation should make the readers skilled in the art of reading publicly, either with the power of their own voice or with the help of sound equipment”.

As lectors we become, “heralds” of the scriptures. We proclaim God’s word to the faithful. The scriptures should be read in a certain way, with a certain vigor and rigor and beauty. A proclamation that is different than when we are reading the instructions for how to put together a couch or a table from Ikea. Very different from reading instructions on putting something together!

My third point is: the sacred scripture and the sacraments. At the synod, the bishops discussed the scriptures. There was a great need to know the relationship between the Word and the Sacrament. This is a key factor in the Church’s pastoral activity and theological reflection. As the lay faithful we must come to understand the unity between the Word and the Sacrament. It is the unity between gesture and word; what we do and what we say.

Benedict XVI says,

"It is the task of priests and deacons to instruct the faithful as they administer the sacraments... the unity between word and sacrament."

We see this clearly in salvation history. There is no separation of what God says and what God does. The Word is alive and it's active. So, when we learn that word has action we come to know the importance the Word has in salvation history and it has in our own lives.

In regards to the Holy Eucharist, the Word is the foundational witness of the scriptures. Both the Fathers of the Church affirm this and the Second Vatican Council of Bishops also affirmed this. There are two references in the scriptures where we see this concretely. The bread of life discourse in John 6 and the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. When you read these two scripture verses we come to the

conclusion that there is a systematic unification between the Word and the Eucharist. What God says and what God does.

Benedict says directly,

“[The] Word and Eucharist are so deeply bound together that we cannot understand one without the other: the word of God sacramentally takes flesh in the event of the Eucharist. The Eucharist opens us to an understanding of Scripture, just as Scripture for its part illumines and explains the mystery of the Eucharist. Unless we acknowledge the Lord’s real presence in the Eucharist, our understanding of Scripture remains imperfect.

...Saint Jerome teaches us how we should approach the Eucharist and the word of God [when he says], “We are reading the sacred Scriptures. For me, the Gospel is the Body of Christ; for me, the holy Scriptures are his teaching. And when he says: whoever does not eat my flesh and drink my blood (Jn 6:53), even though these words can also be understood of the [Eucharistic] Mystery, Christ’s body and blood are really the word of Scripture, God’s teaching. When we approach the [Eucharistic] Mystery, if a crumb falls to the ground we are troubled. Yet when we are listening to the word of God, and God’s Word and Christ’s flesh and blood are being poured into our ears yet we pay no heed, what great peril should we not feel?”

I mean, it’s an amazing amazing quote from St. Jerome! About the importance of hearing the scriptures and how important the scriptures are especially when we are listening to the words of consecration. The greatest place we can pray, the highest form of prayer, is in the liturgy. So, hearing the scriptures, praying with the scriptures and being able to go to mass; that our highest form. The Rosary is important, the Divine Mercy Chaplet is important, novenas are important but the highest form of prayer for us Catholics is the sacred liturgy.

My fourth point is the mission of the lay faithful to the scriptures. So, the question is, “What is the mission of the lay faithful in regards to the scriptures?”.

The first point would be, read the scriptures! In paragraph 72 of , “Verbum Domini”, the Holy Father states,

"I express my heartfelt hope for the flowering of a new season of greater love for sacred Scripture on the part of every member of the People of God, so that their

prayerful and faith-filled reading of the Bible will, with time, deepen their personal relationship with Jesus.”

As we hear from the Holy Father, he wants us to have a greater and deeper understanding of the holy scriptures for our prayer life. That’s one of the main things our prayer life should be focused on; the sacred scriptures! Through our prayer life, we will come to know Jesus more.

So, a great thing you could do during Lent is not only pray with the scriptures and read the scriptures but also go to adoration. If there’s a Eucharistic adoration chapel close by, if your parish or a parish nearby has perpetual adoration, I would encourage you to go and study and pray the scriptures in front of our Lord in the blessed sacrament.

The great St. Thomas Aquinas, whose icon is behind me here, he used to study and pray all the time in front of the Holy Eucharist in adoration.

The second thing the lay faithful need to do is we need to study the scriptures! Not only should we read them but we should study them. Benedict encouraged all pastors and lay faithful to recognize the importance of bringing the scriptures to all pastoral work and placing an emphasis on the Bible.

However, we must come to know through the scriptures, in accordance with the living Church, without tradition you have many sects out there misinterpreting the scripture to fit their particular brand of christianity. So, really, we must look at scripture with tradition. We must look at both of them together because if you don’t then you think, as i just said, you get different brands of christianity that want to focus on whatever their agenda is. That’s what they are going to focus on and they are going to use the scripture; they’re going to cherry-pick scripture verses. So, we must read scriptures as Catholics through the lens of the Church and through the tradition of the Church.

Benedict emphasized the importance of Biblical catechesis; the handing down and teaching of the scriptures. He says,

"Catechetical work always entails approaching Scripture in faith and in the Church’s Tradition, so that its words can be perceived as living, just as Christ is alive today...”

There are two wrong ways to study the scriptures. The first wrong way is to not study them at all. Just blow them off. It's too difficult. It's too hard. I don't want to do it. I can't do it. So, I'm not going to do it.

The second wrong way is to study it as if you're the Lone Ranger; as if you're the first person to study the scriptures. Let me tell you, we've been receiving biblical catechesis from the Early Church, from many of the Church Fathers and throughout the history of the Church. So, there are areas and sources that we can go to; to study the scriptures. Not as the Lone Ranger but within the community of the Church.

We have many map makers, Early Church Fathers, Doctors of the Church, many saints and theologians that have provided for us a great source of study with tradition and scripture.

Benedict reiterated what Vatican II says in, "Dei Verbum",

"The study of the sacred page should be, as it were, the very soul of theology."

The scriptures give life to theology. The sacred page gives us life! Just like the soul is what illuminates the body, the scriptures illuminate all of theology. It's the sacred page that gives theology its life.

And the third point is to receive suitable training. Ask for doctrinally sound Bible studies that offer suitable training because, I can tell you, there are Bible studies out there that are not very sound. Benedict in the synod stressed the importance of academic avenues and centers of instruction and how these institutions should be established and train the laity and missionaries to bring the Word of God.

I can tell you from my own life when I started studying the scriptures in a different way, when I started studying them academically, when I was able to understand what they actually meant; it deepened my prayer life. So, when I prayed with them there was a difference. There was a beauty that opened up to me that wasn't necessarily there. So, you know, we should read the scriptures, we should study the scriptures and we should receive suitable training. Good scripture catechesis, good scripture Bible studies will help you when you learn the scriptures, will help in your prayer life.

The last point I want to focus on is praying the scriptures and the Lectio Divina. Now, there's not a whole lot of time to go into great detail about Lectio Divina. It's

very easy you can just Google “Lectio Divina” or “Praying with the scriptures” and you will get a plethora of links of how to teach you on how to specifically do Lectio Divina.

However, Pope Benedict says this,

“There must be a great need for the prayerful approach to the scriptures especially on Lectio Divina.” He says, “The word of God is at the basis of all authentic Christian spirituality.”

The synod, which was the gallery and the Bishops that happened before this document was written, they had followed what the Church Fathers had given us coming to the scriptures and dialogue with God.

St. Augustine says,

“Your prayer is the word you speak to God. When you read the Bible God speaks to you. When you pray, you speak to God.”

The scriptures read in a communal way also helps us to see that the scriptures are alive and do not belong just in the past. Reading the scriptures as a community has been passed down to us from the Church Father, theologians, saints and the Magisterium itself. Pope Benedict XVI says that,

“Lectio divina, which is truly “capable of opening up to the faithful the treasures of God’s word, but also of bringing about an encounter with Christ, the living word of God.”

As Catholics we cannot be afraid of the scriptures. We can’t be afraid to pray with them. We can’t be afraid to study them. As Fr. Peter Stravinkas says,

“We are the Bible Church.”

And what Pope St. John-Paul II says,

“Be not afraid!”

Study the scriptures and your prayer life and personal relationship with Jesus Christ will grow deeper and deeper every day of your life.

God bless you.