

Homily for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Have you ever heard someone say, “I never hear from God!” Or, maybe that person was yourself! I mean you’ve heard about God speaking to people like Moses in the Bible, or perhaps you’ve heard about friends or other people talking about how God speaks to them in prayer, and you just think to yourself – “Well, if only God would talk to me... or, God must not love me as much as them... or, if God’s not going to talk to me, then I’m not going to talk to Him either.”

So, what are we to make of this? Can we really hear from God? The answer is absolutely and unequivocally a resounding YES! After all isn’t the Bible the Word of God? Don’t we proclaim at the end of each Scripture reading at Mass, “the Word of the Lord”? Do you think that’s just poetry or a spiritual way to end the reading? NO! This is a proclamation of the truth that the words contained in the Bible are not merely the words of man, but rather the inspired, inerrant Word of God. In other words, the Holy Spirit Himself inspired those people to write that which they wrote. In fact, every time we pray the Nicene Creed we profess the Holy Spirit as the one “who has spoken through the prophets”. I cannot stress this truth enough. The Bible contains the very words of God Himself to us. Or, think about it this way, the Bible is a love letter from God the Father to us, His children.

Therefore, reading Scripture has the very power of God Himself to change and transform our lives so that we can grow into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. In the Scriptures, we discover God's plan of sheer goodness for humanity, which is meant to inspire us to a greater love, devotion, and service to Him, and to living out God's will in our lives on a daily basis.

In one of the most important documents of Vatican II, called *Dei Verbum (The Word of God)*, the bishops of the world stated the following: "In the sacred books [of the Bible], the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons and daughters, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life."

Now, this all sounds beautiful – and it is. But, if we don't learn *how* to read Sacred Scripture, then we might be tempted to treat it just as any ordinary book. The key is for us to realize that really understanding the Bible depends on us having a living relationship with Jesus Christ, who is the very eternal Word of the Father. In other words, the words spoken to us by God in the Bible are meant to engage us in growing deeper in our personal relationship with Christ through His Church. The question then becomes, how will we respond to God's initiative? We will even read His Word? Will we just try to intellectually grasp the words? Will we try to bring them into the core of our being, and then try to live them out from there?

Sometimes, when it comes to reading the Bible, I'll just ask the Holy Spirit to guide me to a passage, and then read and pray with it. Other times, God will remind me of a particular passage, and then I'll go hunting for it. But, in our Catholic tradition, one of the best ways to engage and be engaged by the Sacred Scriptures is something called *Lectio Divina*. *Lectio Divina* is a Latin phrase which means "divine reading". It's an ancient practice of scriptural reading, meditation and prayer intended to promote communion and conversation with God and to increase our personal knowledge of God's Word. It does not treat Scripture as texts to be studied, but as the Living Word of God. Traditionally, *Lectio Divina* has four separate steps: read; meditate; pray; contemplate.

Just to simply explain each step a bit. First, you choose a passage to **read**, or one that you are lead to, or one from Sunday Mass. Just read it slowly – not necessarily a whole chapter, but just a short section. The goal here, as far as possible, is to *objectively* understand what is this passage saying in itself – what's going on here? What's God's message for us?

Then, you move on to the second step – **meditation**. Go back and slowly read through the passage again. This time, though, the focus is reflecting on the passage in a *subjective* way. Kind of like a cow chewing on its cud, we linger with and ponder over a particular word or phrase from the passage that has caught our attention. The goal here is to make personally relevant in our lives what God's saying. In other words, what does this mean to me?

From here, you move on to the third step – simply called **prayer**. In particular, we respond to what we just heard God revealing to us personally. This step brings us into personal conversation with God, in that we are talking to Him. St. Teresa of Avila called this step of prayer, “a conversation between friends”. Here we take the time to talk to God about what we just read, what we heard, what we’ve experienced, and any questions in our hearts.

And finally, we come to the final step, **contemplation**. By contemplation, I mean a continued type of reflection, but this time in such a way that God Himself inspires within us new thoughts or ideas about how we might be changed by our insight into this passage. In other words, as we continue to sit and be still with this passage, we let God do the work of drawing us deeper into relationship with Him, which will extend behind the limited time of this prayer. And this brings to fulfillment the goal of lectio divina – for God to transform us.

And so, my brothers and sisters, the Bible is a treasure which has been given to us through the Church by the Holy Spirit. Let us open up this treasure chest, so as to read, pray, and encounter God Himself in His living Word. And in this way, we will foster a deeper relationship with God while He personalizes His love letter given to us. God bless you.