

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As I mentioned last week, Pope Francis has asked that this Sunday be dedicated to the Word of God. As I joked last week, we Catholics aren't known for our familiarity with the Bible. If you've ever had a "Bible Based Christian" talk to you about the Bible, you may have found yourself at a loss as they quoted chapter and verse from memory. While we may not be able to quote the Bible, or even find certain books in the Bible, the Sacred Scriptures are an important part of our faith. The Liturgy of the Word is an extensive and essential part of the Mass. We hear a great part of the Bible through the weekend and weekday readings, as well as finding the Scriptures quoted in many different prayers in the Mass. You may be more familiar with the Bible than you realize, even if you can't find your way through it.

So why is the Bible so important?

Simply put, it is because the Bible is the Word of God. It is God speaking to us here and now, today. The Church in the past may have discouraged individual reading of the Bible because of misinterpretation. Today, however, the Church encourages each Christian to pray with and study the Bible. St. Jerome, one of the Fathers of the Church, is famous for having translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin (the *lingua franca* of the day). He famously said, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." If we want to know Christ, we need to become familiar with His Word. Henri de Lubac reminds us that the Scriptures are the Word of God, breathed by the Holy Spirit:

Scripture is not only divinely guaranteed, it is divinely true. The Spirit did not only dictate it; he is, as it were, contained in it. He inhabits it. His breath perpetually animates it. The Scripture is 'made fruitful by a miracle of the Holy Spirit.' It is 'full of the Spirit.'

All of this is to say – *it is really important to read the Bible!*

The problem is that the Bible is also very hard to understand. Not only are we reading the Scriptures in a language different from the inspired texts (no, they were not written in English... not even Elizabethan English), but we are also dealing with a big cultural difference (which can still be experienced by contrasting the Middle Eastern culture to our American culture), as well as 2000-3000 years distance from when the Scriptures were written.

Yet, God wants to speak to each of us here and now today through the Bible. So what do we do?

First of all, we remember that the Bible is the story of a marriage – the marriage between God and humanity. In this, we must remember to read the Bible in relationship to God... meaning in prayer. If we are to read the Bible as it was meant to be written, we must approach it in prayer. We ask the Holy Spirit – the One who wrote the Bible and is "contained in it... inhabits it... animates it," – to speak to our hearts. God has something to say to us.

We need to decide where to begin. If this is your first experience with the Bible, it is best NOT to start at the beginning and work your way through. I encourage you to begin with the Gospels. Right now, we are making our way through the Gospel of Matthew, so maybe you could start there (just skip over the genealogy if it is too boring).

Then, slowly read His Word... there's no race to get through the Bible – you have your whole life! Sometimes it helps to get a solid Biblical commentary, so we can know the context, as well as what certain difficult texts mean (or, at least, what they don't mean). (One good series is the Ignatius Catholic Study Bible series. While this series is still being written, all of the New Testament is completed and good portions of the Old Testament. You can download the app from the Augustine Institute [lighthousecatholicmedia.org], or buy hard copies of them.) You may use your imagination to envision the scene, or to ponder over where you might be if you were there. Read until something strikes you. It may be a word, a phrase or an image. It may be something you don't understand and have to wrestle with (that's ok!). Whatever it is that strikes you, spend time with it. It is an opportunity to encounter the living God. Ask God what this means for you here and now today, how He is speaking to you.

You see, the Bible is God's Word – still living and active. His word has the power to set us free. St. Augustine was struggling with a sexual addiction. He prayed about it and struggled with it, but was unable to overcome its power. At one moment, God inspired him to take up the Scriptures and read, and the words he read gave him power to overcome the authority of that snare. When we open ourselves to encounter God's Word, He speaks love to us. It may be a word of consolation. It may speak to our worth. It may be a word to set us free. It may be a challenge to change our lives. It may be a warning that we are heading toward destruction. In any case, God will speak His Word of love to our hearts, if we but open ourselves to that Word.