

Preparing for the Third Millennium (In the Light of Sacred Scripture)

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These five words, which make up the theme for this Congress, carry a lot of weight. Pope John Paul II, in His Apostolic Letter "Tertio Millennio Adveniente", issued from the Vatican on the 10th of November, 1994, states: "The best preparation for the new millennium can only be expressed in a renewed commitment to apply, as faithfully as possible, the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every individual and of the whole Church. It was with the Second Vatican Council that, in the broadest sense of the term, the immediate preparations for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 were really begun." (Par 20).

Among the sixteen documents that Vatican II produced, we find the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation; entitled "Dei Verbum" "The Word of God". Chapter 6 of this important document is entitled: "Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church". In the first paragraph of this chapter we read these words: "The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since from the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life, especially in the sacred liturgy. She has always regarded the Scriptures together with sacred tradition as the supreme rule of faith, and will ever do so." (D. V. par 21)

Further down in the same paragraph we come across a very beautiful and powerful statement concerning the Bible: we read: "For in the sacred books, 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 remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life." (D.V. par 21)

When we look around us and try to read the signs of the times, perhaps it will be a surprise to discover that the words of the prophet Amos are literally being fulfilled in our days. In chapter 8, verse 11 of the book of the prophet Amos we read: "Behold the days are coming when I will send a famine into the land - not a hunger for bread, nor a thirst for water, but to hear the words of the Lord."

Brothers and sisters, we, as Teresian Carmelites, are called to have a love relationship with the Word of God. In Chapter six of Our Constitutions, which is entitled "Our Order's Apostolic Role", we come across the following words: "Through assiduous reading and study we must be well versed in the Scriptures and acquire a surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ (cf. Phil 3.8), so that we are able to share with others the treasures of the word of God. We try too to discern the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of God's word. We Keep up our ongoing formation and try to develop those virtuous qualities that are highly valued in human relations." (Cons. Par 90). Along the same line of thought, when Our Constitutions speak about our Ideal (Cons. Ch 1, par 2) we are reminded "to take the Virgin Mary as the mother and patroness of the Order; and to look upon her life and her sharing in the mystery of Christ as a model of religious consecration. Among venerable biblical figures the prophet Elijah stands out as Carmel's source of inspiration, as he contemplates the living God and burns with zeal for his glory. We look upon his prophetic charism as the prototype of our own vocation to ponder God's word and proclaim it to the world."

In these words which I have just quoted from our Constitutions, there is a lot to think about. Allow me to pin-point again four topics that these two paragraphs present in front of each one of

us.

- 1..We are called to share with others the treasures of the Word of God;
2. To discern the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of God's word;
3. To look upon the life of the blessed Virgin Mary and her sharing in the mystery of Christ;
4. To look upon the prophetic charism of the prophet Elijah as the prototype of our own vocation to ponder God's word and proclaim it to the world.
5. We are called to share with others the treasures of the Word of God.

In order to be able to share these treasures we must, I repeat: must first and foremost discover them ourselves. An advice or two from the letter to the Hebrews and the documents of Vatican II are worth heeding. In the letter to the Hebrews we are told: "Though by this time you ought to be teachers of the Word of God, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food, for solid food is for those who are mature, those who have trained their faculties by the practice of the virtues." (Heb 5.12-14). This someone about whom the sacred author is speaking is none other than the Holy Spirit. Jesus had already told us: "The Spirit will teach you, ... will bring to your remembrance all that I have told you ... and the Spirit will guide you into all the truth." (John 16.13)

Dei Verbum tells us that "prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together"; for "we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine sayings." (D.V. par 25). The wisdom of Hugh of St. Victor is worth recalling, where he says: "All Sacred Scripture is but one book, and that one book is Christ, because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ." (De arca Noe 2.8; PL 176, 642)

After these words it is no wonder that in paragraph 133 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church we come across the following statement: "The Church forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful ... to learn the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ, by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ."

Hans Urs Von Balthasar says that Scripture is God's message to man. The word to which Scripture bears witness is not past but present, not addressed to some other person but to me, now. Just as the Eucharist is not the commemoration of a past event but the "presenting" of the unique, eternal Body and sacrifice of our Lord, similarly Scripture is not just history but the channel by which God is forever bringing his Word to us.

On the 23rd of April, 1993, during the course of an audience commemorating the centenary of the encyclical of Leo XIII, "Providentissimus Deus" and the fiftieth anniversary of the encyclical of Pius XII, "Divino afflante Spiritu", both dedicated to Biblical studies; Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger presented to the Pope an important document of the Biblical Commission on "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church". Part IV of this document deals with the use of the Bible. For the sake of clarity the document speaks about the use of the Bible under four headings:

1. In the Liturgy;
2. In Lectio Divina;
3. In Pastoral Ministry; and
4. In Ecumenism.

1. In the Liturgy

From the earliest days of the Church, the reading of Scripture has been an integral part of the Christian liturgy, an inheritance to some extent from the liturgy of the Synagogue. If we stop for a while and try to feel the needs of the people around us, we will discover that in the hearts of these people there is a hunger, not so much for theology (study about God) or religion (dogma and doctrine) or morality (right and wrong) or ethics (set of values), but for spirituality, for connections with God, each other, the earth, our deepest selves, for a centered life that frees us to dance on the every edge of possibilities. Spirituality is an awakening to the Sacred and an ordering of one's life toward that consciousness. How do I describe spirituality? Remember that scene in the synagogue in the fourth chapter of St. Luke, when Jesus declares his mission: "God has anointed me to set the oppressed free, to bring deliverance to captives, to preach the Gospel to the poor" ...? At the end of his declaration, Luke tells us that "Jesus rolled up the scroll", that is, Jesus closed the book. Why did Jesus close the book? He closed the book to give us a clear message that He did not come to bring us a book religion. He meant to translate word into life, to get faith out of the book, out of creed and doctrine and translate it into belief, into living experiences and actions which, like a sacrament, give tangible, visible form and witness to an "inward, infinite power at work in us." Here, dear brothers and sisters, we are reminded of the words of John in his introduction of his 1st letter: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us - we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." (1John 1.1-3)

The liturgy of the Word is a crucial element in the celebration of the Sacraments of the Church; it does not consist simply in a series of readings one after the other; it ought to involve as well periods of silence and of prayer. This liturgy, in particular the Liturgy of the Hours, makes selections from the book of Psalms to help the Christian community pray. Hymns and prayers are all filled with the language of the Bible and the symbolism it contains. The document on the "Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" states: "It is necessary that participation in the liturgy be prepared for and accompanied by the practice of reading Scripture."

2. Lectio Divina

The same document on the interpretation of the Bible, defines Lectio Divina as: "a reading, on an individual or communal level, of a more or less lengthy passage of Scripture, received as the Word of God and leading, at the prompting of the Spirit, to meditation, prayer and contemplation."

Further down we continue to read on the importance of Lectio Divina where we find these exact words: "Insistence on Lectio Divina in both its forms, individual and communal, has therefore become a reality once more. The end in view is to create and nourish an efficacious and constant love of Sacred Scripture, source of the interior life and of apostolic fruitfulness" (E.B,

591 and 567).

At this point of our reflection we pose a question: How are we to fall in love with God the way He wishes to be loved? The commandment in Deuteronomy comes to our rescue to give the proper answer. "Listen, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you today, shall be upon your heart." (Deut 6.4-6)

In the great anthology of Midrashic literature known as the Yalkut, we are told: "If you do not know how to fulfill the command to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart ...,' you can learn how this may be done by reading on: 'And these words which I command you today, shall be upon your heart ...' "

The Maggid of Dubno comments: "If you wish to release a bird from a trap, all you need do is open the trap and the bird will fly out of his own volition. It is not necessary for you to lift out the bird with your hands and help it spread its wings. The bird can do that by itself.

Our soul, like the bird, is entrapped, caught in the snare of the evil inclination of our heart. If this trap is sprung by the mighty effort of our willpower, the soul will need no help in breaking free and finding its connection with its Heavenly home."

And he would cite the Moshoi about the peasant from a small village who went to the city to buy a fine coat for himself. "This one will surely fit you," said the dealer. But the peasant could not get into the coat which the dealer had brought out; it seemed to be too tight.

The dealer laughed. "If this coat is to fit you, you must first take off your old sheepskin jacket and all your other rags. If you don't, it's quite obvious that you'll never be able to get into this fine garment. Besides, those rags certainly don't go well with such a coat."

Most men are like that peasant. They seek to clothe themselves in the attire of the love of God, but they find, to their dismay, that they cannot ever get into this new garment until they have cast off the ragged remnants of their evil impulses and the slovenly habits which have become their second nature. If men could readily discard the evil that is in them they would not find any difficulty in knowing how to love God.

Now what must we do if we are to love God in all truth and sincerity? The Torah itself gives us the answer: "And these words ... shall be upon your heart ..." The sacred teachings of God must be directly next to your heart, with no barriers in between. You must remove from your heart all its wrappings of smugness and sophistication so that the word of God may rest directly upon it, inscribed upon your heart to remain there forever. It is only in this manner that you can love your God as He wishes to be loved.

An important thing to remember is the fact that there is no easy way or shortcut to assimilate and absorb the Word of God. The following illustration proves my point:

"In the days of Teramas HaDeshen, several hundred years ago, a group of yeshivah students devised an innovative idea. In order to save themselves the trouble of getting up from their seats so search for a sefer, they invented a revolving tabletop, similar to a "lazy Susan". Thus, if they needed a sefer from the other end of the table, they could merely turn the tabletop to bring the sefer to them. The Terumas HaDeshen, however, did not approve of this invention. He explained that learning will be remembered only if it is accomplished through toil and hard work, not through shortcuts and making things easy."

Each one of us, like Jacob in the Book of Genesis (Gen 32.23-31) find ourselves wrestling in the night with God's Word only to end up being wounded like Jacob, but at the same time experience the change of heart (the change of name Jacob - Israel). This wounding is a process of cleaning that the Word performs on each one of us: "You are clean because of the words that I told you" (Jn 15.3), it is a process of healing as we read in Deuteronomy: "I wound, and I heal" (Deut 32.39). Yes, brothers and sisters, this Word is the conveyer of the experience that Jacob experienced after his wrestling in the night. Notice the beauty of the words that are used to describe the aftermath of the struggle: "So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip." (Gen 32.30-31). This event in the life of Jacob is repeated in the life of each one of us and at the same time it is a concrete and classical example of how God hides Himself in His manifestations and shows Himself in His concealments! Many incidents in our lives that we may have labeled as coincidences are nothing more than God's way of remaining anonymous.

Lectio Divina is not a ready-made, microwave T.V. meal. An old man once said, "For a long time, reading Scripture presented many difficulties to me. I finally came to the conclusion that reading the Bible was like eating fish. When I find a difficulty, I lay it aside, and call it a bone. Why should I choke over the bone when there is so much nutritious meat for me? Some day I may find that even the bone may afford me nourishment.

3. Pastoral Ministry

The third way in which we can make use of the Bible according to the above-mentioned document is in Pastoral Ministry. Here the document speaks of three principal situations: Catechesis; Preaching; and Biblical apostolate. Following the directives mentioned earlier and referred to as the fourth topic that Our Constitutions place in front of us, that is, to look upon the prophetic charism of the prophet Elijah as the prototype of our own vocation to ponder God's word and proclaim it to the world; we ought to manifest a particular interest and zeal in this Biblical apostolate. In explaining the purpose of Biblical apostolate, the above mentioned document places great emphasis on the presentation of the Gospels that should be done in such a way as to elicit an encounter with Christ, who provides the key to the whole biblical revelation and communicates the call of God that summons each one to respond. Biblical apostolate has as its objective to make known the Bible as the Word of God and source of life. The question that was addressed to the prophet Elijah is the same question that addresses

each one of us with the same challenge that it presented to Elijah: "At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'" 1 (Kgs 19.9) (EXPLAIN)

4. Ecumenism

If the ecumenical movement as a distinct and organized phenomenon is relatively recent, the idea of the unity of God's people, which this movement seeks to restore, is profoundly based in Scripture. Such an objective was the constant concern of the Lord (John 10.16; 17.11, 20-23). It looks to the union of Christians in faith, hope and love (Eph 4.2-5), in mutual respect (Phil 2.1-5) and solidarity (1 Cor 12.14-27; Rom 12.4-5), but also and above all an organic union in Christ, after the manner of Vine and branches (Jn 15.4-5), Head and members (Eph 1.22-23; 4.12-16). This union should be perfect, in the likeness of the union of the Father and the Son (Jn 17.11,22). Scripture provides its theological foundation (Eph 4.4-6; Gal 3.27-28), the first apostolic community its concrete, living model (Ac 2.42-44, 4.32).

The second of the four topics which our Constitutions, as mentioned earlier, places in front of us is the obligation to discern the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of God's word.

Two friends who had not seen each other for some time were engaged in an animated discussion when one of them asked, "Would you want me to read your horoscope?" "I didn't know you believed in astrology", her friend replied. "Oh," said the first friend, "I believe in everything a little bit." We hedge our spiritual bets. We are reluctant to make total commitments. We don't mind too much being classified as "religious" but we would not want to be considered "fanatics". Everything in moderation.

Sydney Lanier, the nineteenth-century American poet and critic, captured the mood of our time when he wrote:

"We live in an age of half faith and half doubt;
standing at the Temple doors head in, heart out."

To those of us who share the spiritual ambivalence of our time, there is a well-known biblical verse that ought to shake us up: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your wealth" (Deut 6.5). The Scriptures ask us to love God totally, completely, with our whole being. Moderation is not enough. Indeed, as we stop to think about it, we realize that the statement "Everything in moderation" is only moderately true.

In studying the credentials of a prospective employee, a bank executive would not be overly impressed by a letter of recommendation describing the applicant as being "moderately honest." A defendant on trial for his life would not choose a lawyer who was moderately competent. A parent with a desperately ill child would not choose a doctor who is moderately skillful. And there is not too much hope for a marriage in which the partners are moderately faithful. When a man is drowning twenty feet off shore, a fifteen-foot-long rope will not do. In certain crucial

areas, moderation is simply not enough.

Dear brothers and sisters, the love of God is one of those areas. Every morning and every evening the faithful Jew recites the words found in the mezuzah, the small traditional ornamental container that Jews affix to their door frames: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Open your ears ... and be prepared for this statement: "A divided heart is never all your heart." St. Teresa in *The Way of Perfection* writes, "Do you think He is silent? Even though we do not hear Him, He speaks well to the heart when we beseech Him from the heart." (W.P. 24:5).

Pope John Paul II, in His Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, issued on the 30th December, 1988 writes: "To all people of today I once again repeat the impassioned cry with which I began my pastoral ministry: "Do not be afraid! Open, indeed, open wide the doors to Christ! Open to his saving power the confines of states, and systems political and economic, as well as the vast fields of culture, civilization, and development. Do not be afraid! Christ knows what is inside a person. Only he knows! Today too often people do not know what they carry inside, in the deepest recesses of their soul, in their heart. Too often people are uncertain about a sense of life on earth. Invaded by doubts they are led into despair. Therefore - with humility and trust I beg and implore you - allow Christ to speak to the person in you. Only he has the words of life, yes, eternal life." (C.F.L. par 34 and Homily of Pope John Paul II at the Beginning of His Ministry as Supreme Shepherd of the Church, 22nd October, 1978).

From the quotation just quoted it is clear that the "motto" which is to herald the Third Millennium, i.e. "Open wide the doors to Christ" is not a new cry. Pope John Paul II had already placed it in front of us in 1978 (twenty-one years ago!). Did we heed to his call? ... Did we accept the invitation? ... Without doubt The Blessed Virgin Mary opened wide the doors of her heart and received the word; not only, but as Luke tells us: "She treasured it and pondered upon it in her heart." As our Mother, she speaks to us and set an example for us to imitate. At the Wedding Feast in Cana, she told us: "do whatever He tells you." (Jn 2); and in the book of the Acts of the Apostles we encounter her immersed in prayer together with the rest of the apostles! At this point, it is worth remembering that Mary was Jewish, and for the Jewish people prayer is called *Avoda She' baLev*: the service of the heart.

God wants our hearts, and the reason is, as we read in chapter 3 of Proverbs, because the heart accepts the divine teachings. A similar quote is to be found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24, where the disciples of Emmaus confessed: "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road?" Jesus walks with the disciples as they flee. To leave Jerusalem is, for Luke, an act of despair. Like many people in the Church today they are disappointed, disillusioned. Jesus does not stop them or bar their way. He walks with them, accepts their hospitality and enters their house, eats their bread. This ends their journey away from faith! Explain.

In the *Christifideles Laici*, the Pope exhorts us:

"The whole Church, Pastors and lay faithful alike, standing on the threshold of the Third

Millennium, ought to feel more strongly the Church's responsibility to obey the command of Christ, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16.15, and take up anew the missionary endeavor. A great venture, both challenging and wonderful, is entrusted to the Church - that of a re-evangelization, which is so much needed by the present world. The lay faithful ought to regard themselves as an active and responsible part of this venture, called as they are to proclaim and to live the gospel in service to the person and to society while respecting the totality of the values and needs of both."

We, as the people of God and as Teresian Carmelites are on a journey. A journey requires that we take with us a luggage, a suitcase.

"A young man preparing for a long trip remarked to his companion, "I am just about packed. I only have to put in a guidebook, a lamp, a mirror, a microscope, a telescope, a volume of fine poetry, a few biographies, a package of old letters, a book of songs, a sword, a hammer, and a set of books I have been studying."

"How can you pack all this?" his friend protested. "It is impossible to get all that in your suitcase."

"Oh, but it doesn't take much room", replied the young man, as he placed his Bible in the corner of the suitcase and closed the lid."

The Bible has several words for the act of seeking God (darkash, bakkesh, shahar). In some passages these words are used in the sense of inquiring after His will and precepts (Ps 119.45, 94, 155). Yet, in other passages these words mean more than the act of asking a question, the aim of which is to elicit information. It means addressing oneself directly to God with the aim of getting close to Him; it involves a desire for experience rather than a search for information. Seeking Him includes the fact of keeping His commandments, but it goes beyond it. In Psalm 105 verse 4 we read: "Seek the Lord and His strength; seek His face (presence) continually." The people of God have always treasured this craving for God despite the warning "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." (Ex 33.20). Among the people who yearned to see God's face we find St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, and St. Therese. However, I feel that I am indebted to use the words of Jehuda Halevi who has succeeded to express this yearning for seeking God's face in an unforgettable utterance: "To see the face of my King is my sole desire. I fear none but Him; I revere only Him. Would that I might behold His face within my heart! Mine eyes would never ask to look at anything else."