



The Word of God as a Source of Prayer

by Christopher Chapman

In Romans 8:26, St. Paul tells us, "We do not know how to pray as we ought." The news, while part of God's gracious revelation, is hardly earth shattering. It confirms something most of us already intuit: our prayer life isn't as it should be. We are easily distracted, selfish in our desires, impure in our intentions. Even the Apostles recognized these problems in themselves. Hence their petition in Luke 11:1, "Lord, teach us to pray."

In answer to their request, Jesus teaches them, and by extension all of us, what we know as the "Our Father."

In that prayer, Jesus identifies "give us this day our daily bread" as one of the petitions we should address to the Father. There are many meanings packed into this single petition, the most obvious of which (at least for Catholics) is an allusion to the Eucharist (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], no. 2836). But there is another kind of "daily bread," which Jesus references when Satan tempts him in the desert. There, Jesus, as recorded in Matt. 4:4, rebukes Satan's invitation to turn the rocks into bread by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3: "Man does not live by bread alone, but . . . by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God"

The Eucharist is essential to human flourishing. But, as Jesus makes clear in that passage, the Word of God is just as essential to our existence and life. If we want to pray "as we ought," we need to meditate and "chew" on it daily.

The Purpose of Prayer

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms in its opening pages, "the desire for God is written in the human heart" (CCC, no. 27). It goes on to quote this beautiful passage from *Gaudium et Spes* (GS 19): "The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being."

This deep and abiding human desire for conversation and communion with God is ultimately answered by Jesus Christ. And it is within the Church that we find the full means of growing with and toward God, which includes Sacred Scripture.

By faith, we assert and believe that "Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit" and that "[*Holy*] *Tradition* transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit" (CCC, no. 81).

The Catechism also affirms, in the words of *Dei Verbum* 11, "[that] since therefore all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures" (CCC, no. 107).

Note that both in the creation of man and in the inspiration of Holy Scripture, we speak of God *breathing*.

First, with regard to man, "the biblical account expresses this reality in symbolic language when it affirms 'then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being'" (CCC, no. 362, Gn 2:7).

Secondly, with regard to Sacred Scripture, St. Paul reminds both St. Timothy and us that "all scripture is *inspired* by God and is useful for teaching, refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness . . ." (2 Tm 3:16). The word Paul uses there for inspiration is the Greek *theopneustos*, which translates literally as "God-breathed."

Those two Scriptural passages help us see that the conversation and communion between man and God is closely connected with Sacred Scripture. We are meant to breathe in and out the words of God, which are all related to *the* Word of God, Jesus Christ, "his one Utterance in whom he expresses himself completely" (CCC, no. 102).

The Church's Exhortation

St. Jerome famously asserted, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." It is a statement that is profound in its simplicity and insight. But do we take it seriously? How well do we really know Jesus Christ? How well do we know Scripture? These questions are intimately related. If we do not know Jesus well, is it possible to converse well with him? Is not conversation what prayer is? Should not our reading and listening to Scripture be an intimate part of our conversation with God?

In the Catechism, the Church calls on Christians to overcome both those deficiencies through the prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture:

"The Church 'forcefully and specially exhorts all the Christian faithful . . . to learn' 'the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ' {Phil 3:8} by frequent reading of the Divine Scriptures . . . Let them remember, however that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that a dialogue takes place between God and man. For 'we speak to him when we pray; we listen to him when we read the divine oracles'" The spiritual writers, paraphrasing Matthew 7:7,

summarize in this way the dispositions of the heart nourished by the word of God in prayer: 'Seek in reading and you will find in meditating; knock in mental prayer and it will be opened to you by contemplation'" (CCC, nos. 2653-2654)

We don't need to look far for what this type of Scripture-soaked prayer looks like; Jesus himself is thoroughly saturated with Scripture as he prays, speaks, and teaches. No greater example can be found than Jesus on the Cross: At the zenith of his mission and in the midst of an unimaginable agony, we hear Jesus speaking to the Father, actually praying aloud, the first words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is as if Scripture bleeds out of him even as the blood leaves his body. The Word of God utters the words of God.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus also used Scripture to illuminate the minds and hearts of his listeners, leading them, in turn, to a closer relationship with God.

For instance, in Luke 20, we see him disputing with the chief priests and the scribes. In verse 9, he begins the parable of the vineyard owner who lets out the vineyard to tenants. The owner puts various servants in charge who are mistreated by the tenants. Finally the owner sends his beloved son, whom the tenants kill. The listeners respond with a "God forbid"—an interesting response—and Jesus "looked at them and said, "What then is this that is written: 'The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but when it falls on any one it will crush them.'"

These words of Jesus directly reference Isaiah 8:14-15. Jesus knew this, not only in his divine nature from all eternity, but also in his human nature through prayer and study. His meditation on Scripture, which can also be said to be his praying the Scriptures, bears fruit in wisdom.

We find the same kind of intimate familiarity with Scripture flowing from the Blessed Mother. In Luke's Gospel, Mary responds to the overwhelming and singular grace communicated to her by St. Gabriel the Archangel with a song of praise: the *Magnificat*. On closer inspection though, we see that this spontaneous song is a variation on the song of praise sung by Hannah that appears in 1 Samuel 2:2-10. Hannah sang her praise when, after years of infertility, she conceived Samuel. She had long begged God for the gift of a child, and when God answered her prayers, a song was her joyful act of thanks.

The similar experience of Mary—receiving a miraculous child as a gift from the Lord—expands in her heart and mind, until, inspired by the Holy Spirit, she calls to mind the song of Hannah and makes it her own in a new and stunning prayer. Luke records this in 1:47-55. Although Mary's *Magnificat* is an extraordinary manifestation of the interaction of God's grace and Scripture, it gives us a practical example of what happens when we meditate on Scripture and how it can bear fruit in our lives and the lives of others.

In the Catechism, we are reminded that prayer is a "drama" (CCC, no. 2598). It is this drama that lies at the heart of human prayer, and it is Scripture that is meant to illuminate and guide our praying. In reading Sacred Scripture, we enter into a dialogue with God that is a real

conversation. God expects us to question him, search him out, and invest ourselves in his Word. In return, he promises us that we will find wisdom. It really is ours for the asking.

A Contemporary Example

As we affirmed at the beginning, "we do not know how to pray as we ought." In Isaiah, the Lord reveals, "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts" (Is 55:9).

Then what is our hope? It is the Revelation of God. He wishes us to know his ways. He invites us to ponder and pray, and then he also shows us the way. What we must do, like the psalmist, is promise God, "I will meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. In your statutes I will delight; I will not forget your words" (Ps 119:15-16). When we do that, God then works with our efforts, helping us discover in his Word more than we ever expected to find. "Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart" (Heb 4:12). In effect, Scripture is as dynamic as our lives.

In a candid and telling blog post, Abraham Villela illustrates that point by recounting the day a short Scripture passage, used by a catechist, pierced his fifteen-year-old heart and mind.

He explains, "I was 15, and a metal head that wore band t-shirts, like Marilyn Manson, to class and Mass. I had no interest in church. I remember bluntly telling a catechist on the first day of class that I didn't want to be there, that I was going to sit in the corner and listen to music on my portable CD player. . . ."

One day, however, Villela forgot to bring his headphones to class. With nothing else to occupy his attention, he found himself listening to the teacher for the first time.

"What happened next," he continues, "changed the direction of not just my life —but of my eternal destiny. My catechist grabbed her Bible, and read 1 Peter 5:7: 'Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.'"

As Villela recalls in his essay, from an early age, he had struggled with a consuming and "crippling" anxiety. But, upon hearing those words of St. Peter's, he writes, "My heart was pierced and I was filled with peace. It's not that I never believed in God but I just never thought he believed in me. It was a Hebrews 4:12 moment."

Cut by the "living and effective" sword of Scripture, Villela began to weep. Then, after class, he approached the catechist: "With teary eyes, I asked if she believed that God cares — if he really wants us to give him our anxieties. I think she realized that God had spoken to me in that class, and with emotion, she told me she believes He does."

That encounter didn't magically heal Villela's anxiety. He still struggles with it to this day. But prayer and meditation on the Word of God have given him deep insights on the meaning of his cross and brought consolation to his life.

"The anxiety I experience is an opportunity to encounter God in prayer," he concludes. "If every time I experienced anxiety I stopped and prayed, I would be so much holier than I could even imagine. It's like when Saint Paul asked the Lord to remove the 'thorn in his side' and the Lord responded to him with 'my power is made perfect in weakness,' (2 Cor 12:9)."

Scripture is a constant and penetrating reality in the life of every disciple, from Abraham Villela to the Mother of God. God's desire, for every man and every woman, is that the words of the prophet Jeremiah would be their own: "When I found your words, I devoured them; they became my joy and the happiness of my heart" (Jer 15:16).

An encounter with God through Scripture should not be a one-time event or a happy accident for those special privileged souls whom God selects. It is bound up with discipleship: a loving demand from God to all those who seek to follow Christ. To answer that demand, we must commit to regular reading and praying of the Bible. The First Psalm reveals to us that the happy person "delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on his law day and night" (Ps 1:2). May this be true of us.

A few practical suggestions:

- Pray the Divine Office: Search out an on-line option -there are a number of them- or one could purchase a set.
- Search out a Bible study that provides an introduction to Salvation History.
- The Rosary is a profoundly scriptural prayer. There are many aids-online and in print which link scriptural passages to each mystery to intensify the scriptural content.
- Commit to reading the Gospels, one chapter per day, or read through the whole Bible in a year with an on-line aid.

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