

Forming Priests as Lifelong Students of the Word of God

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***Abstract:** Most Catholics would agree that our homilies are poor, but we tend to shrug this off as if it hardly matters, since we have the Eucharist and other sacraments. However, both Church documents and the Scriptures themselves make clear that a priest's first duty—indeed the foundation of his sacramental ministry—is to preach the Gospel. A priest can only fulfil this prophetic office by immersing himself in the Scriptures. Seminaries should make it their goal to form such priests, not to train aspiring academics: instead of Scripture classes that treat the Bible as a disparate collection of texts to be examined by purely technical methods, seminaries should teach the Scriptures as a unified whole that is God's word. Seminarians should not primarily study theories about the Bible, but its actual contents, and meditate on them in lectio divina. They should learn to use both appropriate techniques of modern scholarship and the patristic tradition of the spiritual sense to go deeper into the meaning of the word. The study of scripture is not a free-standing, abstract discipline, but rather an activity inseparable from theology and spirituality, one in which the priest encounters the Christ he preaches.*

When I found your words, I devoured them;
they became my joy and the happiness of my heart,
Because I bore your name, O Lord, God of hosts.
—Jeremiah 15:16

With his characteristic candor, Pope Francis writes of homilies in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*:

We know that . . . both [the faithful] and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them! It is sad that this is the case. The homily can actually be an intense and happy experience of the

Spirit, a consoling encounter with God's word, a constant source of renewal and growth.¹

Pope Benedict is no less frank in *Verbum Domini*:

The quality of homilies needs to be improved . . . Generic and abstract homilies which obscure the directness of God's word should be avoided, as well as useless digressions which risk drawing greater attention to the preacher than to the heart of the Gospel message.²

A story told by Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor illustrates this experience of homiletical distress. After a relative of hers converted to Catholicism—a rare event in the American south of the 1950s—many people were aghast. They wondered why on earth anyone would do such a thing. “Well,” the relative said, “the preaching was so bad I figured there must be something else to keep folks coming back.”³

Nearly all agree that there is room for improvement in Catholic preaching. Yet there is a tendency to vastly underestimate the necessity of a renewal in preaching for the revitalization of the Church as a whole. Many are content to note, with O'Connor's relative, that there is indeed “something else to keep folks coming back”—namely, the sacraments—and to relegate preaching to a relatively minor role in the spiritual vitality of the Church. But a renewal of Christian life will *begin* with good preaching or it will not begin at all. “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ” (Rom 10:17). The lukewarm will be converted, the rarely-practicing will return to the sacraments, and ordinary Catholics will pursue a fervent, countercultural life of holiness and mission only if their hearts are stirred to do so by preaching that brings them into an encounter with Christ. And preaching will do this only if it, in turn, opens up the Scriptures with a power and effectiveness that proceed from the preacher's own personal encounter with Christ through his word.

One of the primary reasons for the lack of vitality in Catholic preaching today is that priests are not adequately prepared by their seminary formation to be lifelong students of the word of God. Seminarians often graduate lacking both the zeal to continue disciplined study of the Bible and the tools for doing so. This deficiency can be traced in part to the fact that many seminary Scripture courses approach the Bible in essentially the same way university courses approach it: as an ancient artifact to be studied according to the best methods of historical-critical, literary, and socio-political analysis. No sooner do seminarians begin the advanced study of the Bible than they encounter the Documentary Hypothesis, the Q Hypothesis (usually treated as fact), doubts concerning the historical reliability of the texts, and a thicket of technical questions that have little relationship to theology or to the lives of their

1. *Evangelii Gaudium* 135.

2. *Verbum Domini* 59.

3. Recounted by Charles E. Bouchard, “What's Wrong with Catholic Preaching?” Remarks delivered at the Minneapolis Club, November 17, 2011 (posted at the Dominican Shrine of St. Jude Thaddeus web site).

future parishioners. They are taught to view the Bible as a loose collection of books bearing witness to antiquated, disparate and sometimes contradictory theological ideas. After years of studying Scripture in this manner, it is not surprising that they emerge perplexed as to how to read the Bible as a single unified witness to Christ and how to explain the interconnections between the Old Testament and Gospel readings given in the very lectionary on which they will be preaching throughout their lives.

Rather than whetting their appetite for further study, such courses often distance seminarians from the word and convince them that biblical interpretation is best left to the experts. Although their devotional life as priests will include daily readings from the Lectionary and the Office, their *study* of Scripture will in many cases be limited to consulting biblical resources for homily preparation. Since the entire lectionary cycle, including both the Sunday and daily readings, comprises only 28 percent of the content of the Bible, the result is at best a superficial and ad hoc familiarity with Scripture.⁴ This lack of familiarity, in turn, largely explains why homilies today, more often than not, take the biblical texts as a springboard for a loosely-related moral or devotional reflection rather than opening up the meaning of the texts themselves.

There is an urgent need, therefore, for seminaries to prepare preachers who have learned to devour the word, to thoroughly assimilate it into their hearts and lives. Only then will their proclamation of the word come to the hearts of the listeners “in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thes 1:5). In this essay I would like to propose three ways in which seminaries can inculcate a love for Scripture and form future priests (as well as deacons and lay ecclesial ministers) as lifelong students of the word of God. First, seminary formation as a whole needs to impart a sense of the priority of preaching the word of God in their future priestly ministry. Second, seminary Scripture and homiletics courses need to teach and model a form of preaching that deeply engages with the biblical texts and to provide students with the tools they need to continue doing so. Finally, the seminary needs to form students in a spirituality which, like that of the Fathers, is deeply rooted in Scripture and awakens a thirst to constantly delve deeper into the word.

The Priest as Preacher of the Word

In his apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, Pope John Paul II affirmed the priority of preaching in priestly ministry:

The priest is *first of all a minister of the word of God*. He is consecrated and sent forth to proclaim the good news of the kingdom to all, calling every person to the obedience of faith and leading believers to

4. This percentage is calculated on the basis of the exact counts provided on the web site of Felix Just, S.J., <http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Statistics.htm>. The readings from the Office of course augment that percentage, but not by an enormously significant amount.

an ever increasing knowledge of and communion in the mystery of God, as revealed and communicated to us in Christ.⁵

This strong assertion echoes the teaching of Vatican Council II: “Since no one can be saved who does not first believe (cf. Mk 16:16), priests, as co-workers with their bishops, have the primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel of God to all.”⁶ Although the summit of priestly ministry is the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist,⁷ it is preaching the word of God that draws people to Christ in the first place and enables them to receive the full saving benefit of the sacraments.

These recent magisterial affirmations are a much-needed corrective to the propensity to undervalue the role of preaching and the prophetic dimension of the priesthood in general. Ever since the Reformation, with its sacramental minimalism and its rallying cry of *Sola scriptura*, Catholics have responded by emphasizing the objective efficacy of the sacraments—rightly so—but also by minimizing the place of the word of God. Whereas Protestant services are often centered on lengthy sermons, Catholics tend to view the lectionary readings and homily as mere lead-ins to the real action. A good homily is regarded as a nice bonus, but not particularly important or necessary. But Vatican II restored the centrality of the Liturgy of the Word and reaffirmed the irreplaceable role of the homily.⁸ “The Church . . . unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s Word and of Christ’s Body.”⁹

This emphasis on the proclamation of the word is rooted in Scripture itself. The Gospel accounts of Jesus’ choice of the twelve, for instance, are instructive. Mark records this episode in its simplest form: “He appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons” (Mark 3:14–15; cf. Matt 10:5–8; Luke 9:2–5). The primary duty of those whom Christ appoints to leadership is “to be with him,” signifying a life of prayer and intimate spiritual friendship with Christ (cf. Acts 6:4). Upon being sent forth, their first duty is to preach. Only then are they to cast out demons, which broadly understood encompasses the whole ministry of deliverance from sin and sanctification. The preaching is what awakens faith and disposes people to receive Christ’s gift of salvation. The same order prevails in Mark’s follow-up account of the sending out of the twelve: “So they went off and preached repentance. They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them” (Mark 6:12–13; cf. Luke 9:6). This pattern of first word, then sacrament, reoccurs in the appearance of the risen Lord to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.¹⁰ Jesus first interprets

5. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* 26; emphasis added. Benedict XVI repeats this statement in *Verbum Domini* 80.

6. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 4. *Lumen Gentium* 25 says even more emphatically of bishops, “Among the principal duties of bishops the preaching of the Gospel occupies an eminent place. For bishops are preachers of the faith, who lead new disciples to Christ, and they are authentic teachers. . . .”

7. Cf. *ibid.*, 5.

8. *Ibid.*, 4; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 52.

9. Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum* 21.

10. It is also an Old Testament pattern. See, e.g. Exod 24:1–11; Neh 8:1–12.

for the disciples “what referred to him in all the Scriptures,” with the result that their hearts burned within them; only then are they adequately prepared for his self-manifestation in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:27, 30–32). The pattern continues in the early Church. Immediately upon the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost, Peter is newly empowered as a preacher who opens up the meaning of the Scriptures. He delivers a stirring sermon in which he shows how Jesus’ paschal mystery and the outpouring of the Spirit are the fulfillment of all God’s promises in Scripture. The immediate effect is repentance and faith; then three thousand are baptized (Acts 2:37, 41). Later the same sequence is repeated in Philip’s evangelization of the Ethiopian eunuch, beginning with the interpretation of Scripture, followed by the eunuch’s baptism (Acts 8:27–39).

Throughout Acts and in the letters of Paul we find a similar emphasis on the priority of preaching. In Luke’s account of the appointment of the Seven, the apostles respond to the need for oversight of the daily food distribution with the observation, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables” (Acts 6:2). Their foremost duty, as they see it, is to preach. Their solution is to appoint others to administer the care of the needy, leaving themselves free for “prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). In Acts “the word” typically refers to the preaching of the gospel, especially to those who have not yet heard it (e.g., 4:4, 31; 8:4; 10:44).

In 1 Corinthians Paul insists that although he baptizes, his primary commission from Christ is to proclaim the word: “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor 1:17).¹¹ Likewise the main duties urged upon Timothy as a newly appointed pastor are to “attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching” (1 Tim 4:13; cf. 4:16). Even in those texts in which Paul employs cultic terminology to describe his apostolic ministry—texts that form part of the foundation for the Catholic theology of the priesthood—strikingly, he applies that terminology primarily to preaching.¹² He asks the Corinthians, “Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Cor 9:13–14). Paul takes the ministry of the Levites and priests at the Jerusalem temple as an image of his own ministry, not in relation to the sacraments but in relation to proclaiming the gospel.

In Romans Paul further explains why his preaching is actually a form of cultic ministry. He speaks of “the grace given me by God to be a minister [*leitourgos*] of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service [*hierougeō*] of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:15–16). As Albert Vanhoye comments on this text, “Paul is then viewing

11. See also these texts, including in the late Pauline literature, that describe his apostleship primary in terms of preaching: Rom 1:15; 15:18–19; 1 Cor 9:16–18; Eph 3:8–10; Col 1:23; 1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11.

12. However, he also applies such terminology to the celebration of the Eucharist in 1 Cor 10:16–22 (cf. 1 Cor 11:23–29).

himself as a celebrant, one who offers.”¹³ And what he offers is evangelized Gentiles! Those who have come to faith in Christ and are now living holy lives, thanks to his preaching, are an acceptable offering to God. Paul “in no way likens himself to the Old Testament priests, for he is referring to a totally different idea of sacrifice. It is no longer a matter of putting the corpse of an animal on the fire of the altar and of ‘causing smoke to rise’; it is a matter of sanctifying living people by communicating to them the fire of the Holy Spirit, and that is done by means of evangelization.”¹⁴ In a similar vein Joseph Fitzmyer notes that as a cultic minister, “Paul offers his evangelization of the Gentiles to God as a form of worship. . . . Paul implies that the preaching of the word of God is a liturgical act in itself.”¹⁵

None of these texts, of course, represents a denial of the sacramental dimension of priestly ministry. They do, however, serve to underscore the indispensability of vibrant preaching—preaching that, like Peter’s at Pentecost, interprets Scripture in the anointing of the Holy Spirit, so the hearers are brought to “life-giving repentance” (Acts 11:18) and faith in the One who makes himself available to them in the sacraments. There is in fact often a direct correlation between what is preached and what people experience. Tepid or banal preaching leads to perfunctory, impersonal reception of the sacraments. On the other hand, fervent preaching that breaks open the Scriptures makes the sacraments come alive in a personal and existential way. Picking up on Paul’s cultic imagery, we might say that the preacher at the ambo—or even in the public square—is purifying hearts and enkindling a flame of devotion in the listeners, whose lives will then be placed on the altar in and with Christ as a pleasing sacrifice to God. Seminarians, then, must be formed in a vision of priesthood that has the prophetic office at its heart, so they will realize they cannot afford to neglect the ministry of the word. Although priests vary in their natural aptitude for preaching, what counts is not so much aptitude as their own intimate familiarity with Christ through prayer and *lectio divina*. St. John Vianney, for instance, was by all accounts not a skilled orator, yet he would barely begin to preach before people would begin weeping in contrition for sin and making a beeline for the confessional.

The Rediscovery of Biblical Preaching

A second key to forming priests as lifelong students of the word of God is to teach and model preaching that is truly biblical, that draws on the deep wellsprings of the word rather than merely skimming its surface. A glance at virtually any patristic or medieval homily will reveal that it is virtually saturated with Scripture. Those who preached lived and breathed the word of God; like Timothy they “have known the holy Scriptures from childhood” (2 Tim 3:15). Their preaching continually drew hidden treasure from Scripture and enriched the hearers with it. The first rule of understanding the Scriptures is, as St. Augustine said, to commit them to memory.¹⁶

13. Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, trans. J. Bernard Orchard (Petersham, MA: St Bede’s, 1986), 269.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 711.

16. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* II.9.14.

Today, however, many priests have been taught a form of preaching that draws only minimally on the sacred texts. In this regard it is illuminating to compare the U.S. bishops' 1982 instruction on preaching, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, with the new instruction promulgated three decades later, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*.¹⁷ According to the earlier document, "the preacher does not so much attempt to explain the Scriptures as to interpret the human situation through the Scriptures. In other words, the goal of the liturgical preacher is not to interpret a text of the Bible . . . as much as to draw on the texts of the Bible as they are presented in the lectionary to interpret people's lives."¹⁸ That is, the homilist is to use Scripture to interpret contemporary experience rather than interpreting Scripture itself. This de-emphasis on preaching Scripture seems to reflect an assumption that Scripture is just one mode in which God speaks, on a par with other modes including daily human experience.¹⁹ The task of the homily, then, is to bring these different modes of revelation into dialogue, rather than to call forth obedient faith in response to the supreme authority of God's word.

Preaching the Mystery of Faith, in contrast, was published two years after Benedict XVI's *Verbum Domini* and with the benefit of its robust insistence on the unique status of Scripture, which contains the word of God "in an altogether singular way."²⁰ *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* affirms that the homilist's task is indeed to interpret Scripture, especially in light of Christ's paschal mystery.²¹ The document also notes that "the preaching of the Sunday homily should typically involve the bringing together, in mutual illumination, of the Old Testament and the New Testament."²² The homilist must, in other words, be able to explain the Scriptures as a single book that speaks of Christ and is fulfilled in him.²³

What kind of priest is well-equipped to preach in this manner, and how can seminaries form this kind of priest? As recent magisterial teaching has repeatedly emphasized, he must first and foremost be deeply familiar with the content of the Scriptures, as should all Catholics.²⁴ "Those aspiring to the ministerial priesthood are called to a profound personal relationship with God's word, particularly in *lectio divina*, so that this relationship will in turn nurture their vocation."²⁵ The place of the word of God in their lives must be a hardy daily diet, not one or two hors d'oeuvres now and then. They must develop a voracious hunger, like that of Jeremiah who devoured the word, and of Ezekiel whom the Lord commanded, "eat this scroll . . . take into your heart all my words that I speak to you; hear them well" (Ezek 3:1, 10).

17. See Mary Healy, "Verbum Domini and the Renewal of Biblical Preaching," in *Verbum Domini and the Complementarity of Exegesis and Faith*, ed. Scott Carl (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 109–122.

18. *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, 20; emphasis in the original.

19. Cf. *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, 10.

20. *Verbum Domini* 17.

21. *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, 18–19.

22. *Ibid.*, 16.

23. Cf. CCC 134.

24. Cf. *Dei Verbum* 25; *Pastores Dabo Vobis* 26.

25. *Verbum Domini* 82.

This means that the primary emphasis in seminary Scripture courses should be on learning the content of the Bible: its stories, principal characters, key texts, theological themes, and its grand narrative, the history of salvation. Often this knowledge is presupposed or regarded as too basic; seminarians are taught the rudiments of biblical scholarship without having learned in any depth what Scripture actually says. They learn who the “Jahwist” and “Elohist” are, but not Eldad and Medad, or Joab, or Jael, or Abigail, or Prisca, or Silas. It is also crucial for Scripture courses to provide a “roadmap” that will enable students to understand a given biblical text within the overall context of salvation history and the biblical canon; such a panoramic perspective will enormously increase the effectiveness of the *lectio divina* they will do on their own. Scripture professors should also impart a sense of the delight and excitement to be found in discovering the hidden gems in Scripture, the subtle interconnections between seemingly disparate passages.

Seminarians should be taught to revere God’s word, believe it, and live in obedience to it. As Pope Benedict exhorted, “The preacher ‘should be the first to hear the word of God which he proclaims,’ since, as Saint Augustine says: ‘He is undoubtedly barren who preaches outwardly the word of God without hearing it inwardly.’”²⁶ Much of the anemia in Christian life today can be traced to an undermining of confidence that Scripture reliably communicates truth about God, his saving deeds in history, and his will for human beings. As the serpent tempted Eve by sowing doubt in God’s word (“Did God really say...?”), so modern critical biblical scholarship has, often unwittingly, sown doubt in God’s word (“Did Jesus really say . . . ? Did that really happen?”). Seminary formation, then, needs to inculcate a prudent, balanced, and properly *critical* approach to critical scholarship that draws from its insights while rejecting its problematic assumptions.²⁷ Seminarians need to witness firsthand in their professors that those truly believe the word live by it, and those who live by it preach and teach it with a uniquely convincing power.

If seminary professors are conscious of the specifically ecclesial purpose of their work they will avoid teaching Scripture in a manner designed for university courses. Their goal is not first and foremost to educate scholars who will contribute to high-level biblical research, but pastors who will preach and teach the word to ordinary people. Seminarians do need to learn the most important critical theories regarding the prehistory of the biblical text, but only to the degree necessary for effective ministry. Moreover, they need to be shown the pitfalls of the hermeneutic of suspicion and learn why a hermeneutic of faith is indispensable for biblical interpretation, as Benedict XVI insisted.²⁸ They need to see what exegesis illumined by faith looks like. In some cases, this will require an unlearning of certain methodological approaches they have previously been taught.

26. *Verbum Domini* 59.

27. For a penetrating analysis of these problematic assumptions, see Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today,” in *Opening Up the Scriptures: Joseph Ratzinger and the Foundations of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. José Granados et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–29.

28. *Verbum Domini* 45.

Seminarians need to be given practical tools to equip them for lifelong study on their own. They should learn how to analyze a text, study a biblical theme, look up the original meaning of Greek and Hebrew terms, and consult cross-references and different translations. They should know how to use commentaries, biblical dictionaries, lexicons, concordances, and online resources. And they should be taught how to handle the most common biblical objections they will face among parishioners: Why did God command genocide? Why did God allow polygamy? Why does James seem to contradict Paul on faith and works? Where do you find purgatory, or priesthood, or the Immaculate Conception, in the Bible?

Finally, seminary Scripture courses need to teach what tradition calls the “spiritual sense”—a hidden spiritual significance to the words and realities of Scripture that goes beyond what the human authors intended. Despite the rejection of the spiritual sense by modern biblical scholarship, it remains part of the foundation of Christian faith. The Church’s lectionary cycle presupposes it: on Sundays, feast days, and most weekdays in the special seasons, the first reading is selected to coordinate with the Gospel so as to display the New Testament hidden in the Old, and the Old revealed in the New.²⁹ As Cantalamessa notes, “The Church has lived and lives by the spiritual interpretation of the Bible; cut off this canal which nourishes the devout life, zeal, and faith, and everything dries up and withers.”³⁰

The Rediscovery of Biblical Spirituality

This leads us to a third key to forming priests as lifelong students of the word of God: the rediscovery of an authentically biblical spirituality. As Hans Urs von Balthasar observed, Christian history since the scholastic period has been characterized by a widening split between theology and spirituality, between doctrine and life.³¹ In the writings of the Fathers we can observe a profound unity between the two. When they explained the Christian life, it was in form of an exposition of doctrine, founded on Scripture; when they expounded doctrine, it was a “word of life.” But later, with the incorporation of Aristotelian philosophical concepts into theology, it became easier to see theology as a theoretical science, separate from lived experience. Increasingly, theology became dry, abstract, and speculative — theology “at the desk” rather than “on the knees.” Spirituality, having become unmoored from theology, became more narrowly subjective and individualistic. It began to concentrate on the psychological investigation of mystical phenomena and paid less attention to the objective ground of these experiences in Christ and his paschal mystery, communicated to us in Scripture and the sacraments. As von Balthasar put it:

The Fathers found straightaway the appropriate dogmatic clothing for their very personal experience; everything becomes objective, and all

29. Augustine penned this famous dictum in *Quaest. in Hept.* 2.73 (PL 34, 623); cf. *Dei Verbum* 16.

30. Raniero Cantalamessa, *The Mystery of God’s Word*, trans. Alan Neame (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994), 85.

31. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” in *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A. V. Littledale (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 181–209.

the subjective conditions, experiences, fears, strivings, the “shock” in a word, were made to serve a fuller understanding of the content of revelation, or orchestrate its great themes. Every form of spirituality, of mysticism was seen as serving a function in the Church.³²

Modern spirituality, on the other hand, is less connected to the content of revelation:

Where the main emphasis is transposed to an inner experience, to its degrees, laws, sequences, variations, dogmatic theology is relegated to the background. A close connection with the doctrinal teachings on God, the creation and the redemption ceases to be evident.³³

Theology became, as it were, bones without flesh; and spirituality, flesh without bones.

Part of the work of priestly formation today, as well as of theology and spirituality in general, is to seek to overcome this split and impart a spirituality that is deeply grounded in the word of God. For the Fathers and medievals, spirituality was nothing other than a progressively deepening and life-transforming appropriation of the mystery of Christ disclosed to us through the Scriptures.³⁴ Christ and his paschal mystery are present throughout all salvation history: first in the Old Testament as type, then in the New Testament as the event at the center of history, and finally as relived in the Church and all her members. Spiritual growth occurs as we come to know Christ in the saving events mediated by Scripture and, in the process, are progressively transformed into his image by the Spirit (2 Cor 3:15-18). In short, as Henri de Lubac argues, “the mystical or spiritual understanding of Scripture and the mystical or spiritual life are, in the end, one and the same.”³⁵

This understanding is rooted in the traditional notion of the fourfold senses of Scripture. First there is the historical, or literal, sense, which communicates the events of salvation history. Hidden under the letter is the spiritual sense, signifying the mystery of Christ in three ways. The allegorical or christological sense refers to Old Testament realities as figures of Christ and his paschal mystery. The tropological or moral sense refers to both Old and New Testament realities as figures of our life as members of Christ’s body. Finally, the anagogical or eschatological sense refers to these same realities as figures of our ultimate destiny and that of the whole cosmos. These are not so much three “meanings” of the text as three ways in which the mystery of Christ is realized. The literal sense is his coming in prophecy; the allegorical signifies his coming in the flesh; the moral his coming in the life of believer; the anagogical his coming in glory. The senses are, then, “a single reality: the mystery of

32. *Ibid.*, 190.

33. *Ibid.*, 191.

34. See William F. Murphy, “Henri de Lubac’s Mystical Tropology,” *Communio* 27 (2000), 171.

35. De Lubac, “Mysticism and Mystery,” in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 58.

Christ lived at various levels.”³⁶ De Lubac notes, “We must never seek the spiritual meaning behind the letter, but within it, just as we do not find the Father behind the Son but in and through him. The letter is the sacrament of the Spirit.”³⁷

The spiritual sense was not an invention of the Fathers but is rooted in the New Testament and in the teachings of Jesus himself. In the Gospels Jesus continually presents himself as the fulfillment of the Scriptures, the one to whom the law and prophets pointed as shadow and type to reality. He is the new Moses (John 6:32-35), the new David (Mark 2:23-28), the new Solomon (Matt 12:42; Mark 12:35-37; John 2:19), the new Jonah (Matt 12:39-41), the temple (John 2:21), the true bread from heaven (John 6:51), the bronze serpent lifted up for the healing of those who gazed on it (John 3:14), the suffering servant (Mark 10:45). He says of the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 61, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). He tells his disciples after the resurrection, “everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). As de Lubac observes, biblical fulfillment not some tacked-on embroidery to Jesus’ ministry, but is within the very texture of its fabric.³⁸

That Christ was truly present in the old covenant is not to say that the spiritual sense could have been discerned before he came in the flesh. The figures can only be appreciated in retrospect, like a tapestry of which only the knots and loose threads of the reverse side were visible, suddenly turned over to reveal a magnificent image. As Bishop Mariano Magrassi put it:

The incarnation and passion of Christ effects “a real change in Scripture, which the ancients compare to the eucharistic consecration. They love to see Scripture as a loaf of bread in Christ’s hands: ‘The Lord Jesus took the loaves of Scripture in his hands. . . .’ In his very act of offering himself to the Father in sacrifice, the bread is consecrated and changed into him.”³⁹

God’s plan, Paul wrote, was “to recapitulate [*anakephalaiōsasthai*] all things in him” (Eph 1:10): all history finds its ultimate intelligibility and meaning in him. Thus the book of Revelation presents him as the Lamb who alone can take the scroll, representing all salvation history as revealed in Scripture, and break open its seals (Rev 5:1-10).

Following Christ’s ascension, the mystery of his life, death and resurrection, prefigured in the Scriptures, now becomes “postfigured,” or relived, in the members of his body. Luke shows this in a particular way in the Acts of the Apostles. He narrates the martyrdom of Stephen, for instance, as a kind of replay of the passion of Christ: like Jesus, Stephen is full of the Holy Spirit (6:5; 7:55), and performs signs

36. Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*, trans. Edward Hagman (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 9.

37. De Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. Luke O’Neill (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 14.

38. *Ibid.*, 11.

39. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 52, quoting Rupert, *Commentary on Jobn*, VI (PL 169, 443d).

and wonders, arousing bitter opposition (6:8); he undergoes a transfiguration (6:15), indicts the leaders of Israel for their hard-heartedness (7:51), is cast out of the city (7:58), begs forgiveness for his murderers (7:60), and at the moment of death echoes the words of Jesus on the cross, but now addressed to Jesus himself: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (7:59). Peter, likewise, strikingly follows the pattern of Jesus’ passion and resurrection in his rescue from imprisonment in Acts 12: he is imprisoned at Passover with the involvement of a Herod (12:1–3); there is a “laying on of hands” and a “handing over” (12:1, 4); he is guarded by soldiers, unclothed (12:6, 8); he “rises” (12:7); there is an appearance of an angel and an occurrence of bright light (12:7); he has an ability to pass through obstacles (12:10); is first seen by a woman (12:13); is thought to be a spirit (12:15); comes to the apostles who are gathered together in an upper room and are unable to believe for joy (12:14–15); and after his appearance he departs (12:17). In a similar way the arrest and trial of Paul at the end of Acts is presented as not just an imitation but a reliving of the life of Jesus. The post-figurement does not end with the apostolic Church. In the early second century, St. Ignatius wrote on his way to martyrdom, “I am God’s grain, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ . . . Then I shall truly be a disciple of Christ.”⁴⁰ He understood his whole existence in terms of Christ’s paschal mystery, to which he would now be conformed in the most intimate way possible. Similarly, a few decades later, witnesses to the martyrdom of Polycarp saw his death as a most profound share in the Eucharistic mystery. As the saintly bishop was being burned at the stake they smelled a fragrant odor, “not like flesh burning but like bread baking.”⁴¹

The work of the Holy Spirit, then, is to reproduce the life of Jesus in his disciples, each in a unique and unrepeatable way—a work that continues throughout the whole history of the Church. As the Catechism teaches, “Christ enables us to *live in him* all that he himself lived, and *he lives it in us* . . . ‘For it is the plan of the Son of God to make us and the whole Church partake in his mysteries and to extend them to and continue them in us and in his whole Church.’”⁴² De Lubac explains:

That means a daily re-enactment of what happened once, historically, in the past. Each day, in the depths of our being, Israel leaves Egypt, each day it is nourished with the manna, each day it fulfills the Law, each day it must engage in combat, each day the promises that were made to this people in a carnal way are realized spiritually in us. . . . Each day the Lord comes, each day he approaches Jerusalem.⁴³

Once the spiritual sense is understood in this way, it follows that there is an inseparable connection between biblical interpretation and the personal transformation

40. *Letter to the Romans* 4.

41. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 15.2.

42. CCC 521, quoting St. John Eudes.

43. De Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale*, vol. II, 138; translation from the French by George Montague in *Understanding the Bible: A Basic Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 54.

of the interpreter: “Exegesis is not technique; it is mysticism.”⁴⁴ For this reason de Lubac argues that biblical interpretation can never be a purely objective science.⁴⁵ On the contrary:

The Christian mystery is not something to be curiously contemplated like a pure object of science, but is something which must be interiorized and lived. It finds its own fullness in being fulfilled within souls. . . . Still more fundamentally, the entire process of spiritual understanding is, in its principal, identical to the process of conversion. It is its luminous aspect.⁴⁶

In *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict strongly reaffirms this correlation between biblical interpretation and personal transformation:

An authentic process of interpretation is never purely an intellectual process but also a lived one, demanding full engagement in the life of the Church, which is life “according to the Spirit” (Gal 5:16). . . . There is an inner drama in this process, since the passage that takes place in the power of the Spirit inevitably engages each person’s freedom. Saint Paul lived this passage to the full in his own life. In his words: “*the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*” (2 Cor 3:6), he expressed in radical terms the significance of this process of transcending the letter and coming to understand it only in terms of the whole.⁴⁷

If seminaries form students in such a profound personal engagement with the word of God, the result will be priests who are filled with zeal to plunge ever deeper into the Scriptures, who manifest in their own spiritual lives the vitality that comes from being planted near the source of living waters, and who preach in a way that sets the hearts of the hearers ablaze as they encounter Christ, the living Word.⁴⁸ ■

44. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 52.

45. De Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 23. See also D’Ambrosio, “The Spiritual Sense in de Lubac’s Hermeneutics of Tradition, *Letter & Spirit* 1 (2005), 147–57.

46. *Ibid.*, 20–21.

47. *Verbum Domini* 38.

48. Editor’s Note: this article was previously published in *The Priest and Theological Study: Toward a More Generous Definition of Reason*. Edited by James Keating. Omaha (Omaha: Institute for Priestly Formation, 2015).