

# LENTEN LETTER 2019

 BY MOST REVEREND JOHN O. BARRES 

## DEAR FRIENDS:

As we begin our prayer, fasting and almsgiving for the needs of the poor and the suffering of the world in this Lenten season 2019, we recommit ourselves to repentance, conversion and holiness individually and as a Church.

We remember in a focused way this Lent the survivors of clergy sexual abuse and all forms of abuse and we pray for the purification, reform and sanctification of the Church.

In *Rejoice and Be Glad*, Pope Francis says:

*“Do not be afraid of holiness. It will take away none of your energy, vitality or joy. (32)...He [The Lord] wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence. (1)...Holiness is the most attractive face of the Church. (9)...the Church needs passionate missionaries, enthusiastic about sharing true life. The saints surprise us, they confound us, because by their lives they urge us to abandon a dull and dreary mediocrity.” (138)*

One of the ways we commit ourselves to this radiant, natural and humble holiness is by expanding the breadth and depth of our daily engagement with the inspired Sacred Scriptures.

We are called to live the words of Psalm 119: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

The saints of every decade and century inspire us since “the most profound interpretation of Scripture comes precisely from those who let themselves be shaped by the word of God through listening, reading, and assiduous meditation.” (Pope Benedict XVI, *The Word of the Lord* 48)

Could each one of us individually and together, united in communion as a Church, take one step with the Holy Spirit this Lent to deepen our love for the inspired Sacred Scriptures?

In his Apostolic Exhortation *The Word of the Lord* (2010), Pope Benedict XVI gives us an excellent process of praying individual biblical passages, a process of *lectio divina* or sacred reading of the text that includes reading, meditating, praying, contemplating and living the biblical text. We need to believe with confidence and a spirit of adventure that the Holy Spirit is present in the text and that the Holy Spirit’s tongues of flame are connecting the text to our souls transforming us in mysterious and profound ways.

I would like to analyze and comment on the steps that Pope Benedict XVI proposes to us.

### POPE BENEDICT ON READING A BIBLICAL TEXT:

*“It opens with the reading (lectio) of a text which leads to a desire to understand its true content: What does the biblical text say in itself? Without this, there is always a risk that the text will become a pretext for never moving beyond our own ideas.” (87)*

### BISHOP BARRES COMMENT:

Mortimer Adler wrote a book entitled, “*How to Read a Book*” in which he analyzes how to read different types of books. For instance, reading a daily newspaper is a different style of reading than reading philosophy or reading a classic novel.

As we see in *The Word of the Lord* and *Jesus of Nazareth I-III*, Pope Benedict XVI advocates both a slow and analytical reading of the Scriptures but also a slow, contemplative reading that savors and lingers over the text.

There are also times when we might decide to read, for instance, the entire Gospel of Luke to understand the narrative flow and strategy. Our reading of a biblical text needs to be prayerful, attentive and receptive.

We realize that there are times we will be distracted or perhaps even bored. Regardless, this reading will always be spiritually nourishing in ways we cannot fully fathom.

We need to be consistent and committed. It is important that we are as open and objective as possible about the text so that the Holy Spirit can enlighten, illumine and liberate us from the cocoon of our own ego and limited perspective.

Cardinal Thomas Collins, the Archbishop of Toronto, suggests that we begin our *lectio divina* with the prayer of the young Samuel in the Temple: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”<sup>1</sup> (1 Samuel 3:9)

Establishing a listening and receptive stance from the beginning makes a big difference in the way we read the text.





Cardinal Collins writes:

*“Never speed-read the word of God (or any really important text), rushing along quickly to extract the meaning. No, the divine reading of the Bible is prayerful, and occurs at a measured pace; it is a matter of savoring the word of God, repeating the word of God, praying the word of God. When we read aloud, we are using our eyes, our mouths, our ears, our mind and memory to prepare a way for the word of God to enter our hearts...In lectio divina we seek not to master or to grasp the sacred text, but rather, prayerfully and silently, to come into the presence of God through it. We seek to be humbly attentive to God’s Holy Word, to savor it, and to let it enter into our hearts as much as into our heads, so that it may transform us.”*

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— Cardinal Thomas Collins

#### POPE BENEDICT ON MEDITATING ON THE BIBLICAL TEXT:

*“Next comes meditation (meditatio) which asks: What does the biblical text say to us? Here, each person, individually but also a member of the community, must let himself or herself be moved and challenged.” (87)*

#### BISHOP BARRES COMMENT:

In our first attentive reading of the text, the Holy Spirit inserts the plow into our mind, heart and imagination. It begins the process and prepares us for what is to come.

Having “warmed up” with the text in the initial reading, we then meditate over the text. The Holy Spirit takes us deeper into the text through this meditation.

We receive the word meditatively and it sinks deeper and deeper into our souls, but we simultaneously realize that as we meditate individually we are receiving the text from the Holy Spirit as a Church, as the Body of Christ.

The People of God receiving the Sacred Scriptures are like an orchestra, each person playing a critical individual role in a larger symphony. Our individual ecclesial missions are activated and ignited when we receive the Word of God communally and individually.

In his commentary on the Road to Emmaus in *The Word of the Lord* 55, Pope Benedict XVI writes:

*“Word and Eucharist are so deeply bound together that we cannot understand one without the other: the Word of God sacramentally takes flesh in the event of the Eucharist. The Eucharist opens us to an understanding of Scripture, just as Scripture for its part illumines and explains the mystery of the Eucharist.”*

This is such a critical point for a Catholic praying the Sacred Scriptures. The more biblical we are in our Catholic faith the more Eucharistic we are. The more Eucharistic we are the more biblical we are. The more Biblical and Eucharistic we are, the more we receive the Word of God as a Church.

#### POPE BENEDICT ON PRAYING THE BIBLICAL TEXT:

*“Following this comes prayer (oratio), which asks the question: What do we say to the Lord in response to his word? Prayer, as petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and praise, is the primary way by which the word transforms us.” (87)*

#### BISHOP BARRES COMMENT:

After the second, more meditative reading, the match is lit and we converse heart to heart with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The biblical text should lift us in a spirit of adoration, praise and thanksgiving.

We may bring many anxieties, worries, concerns to the biblical text and to the prayer and yet we make an act of faith that the best investment we can make in those problems and worries is to let them go at that moment and adore, thank and praise God.

Adoration, praise and thanksgiving have a way of giving the soul peace, perspective and illumination in dealing with the whirlpool of daily problems and worries.

Father Jean Jacques Olier (1608-1657), founder of the Sulpicians and a member of the 17th Century French School of Spirituality, taught that we can pray a biblical passage by considering Christ in my mind (how does the passage impact my thought patterns and daily decisions with the mind of Christ?), Christ in my heart (how does the biblical passage impact my emotional life and every relationship in my life with the Heart of Christ?), and Christ in my hands (how does the biblical passage translate into my daily actions so that they express the actions of Christ?).

Cardinal Collins connects Christ in my mind with knowing Christ. He connects Christ in my heart with loving Christ. He connects Christ in my hands with serving Christ.

<sup>1</sup>See Cardinal Thomas Collins’ *Pathway to our Hearts: A Simple Approach to Lectio Divina with the Sermon on the Mount* (Notre Dame Indiana: Ave Maria Press), especially the Introduction, ix-xx.





## POPE BENEDICT ON CONTEMPLATING THE BIBLICAL TEXT:

*"Finally, lectio divina concludes with contemplation (contemplatio), during which we take up, as a gift from God, his own way of seeing and judging reality, and ask ourselves what conversion of mind, heart, and life is the Lord asking of us?..." (87)*

## BISHOP BARRES COMMENT:

After an initial reading, after meditation on the text, after conversation with Father, Son and Holy Spirit grounded in the text, we move to contemplative silence over the text.

As Americans, we often equate productivity and effectiveness with hyperactivity and workaholism.

The great saints and prayer mystics of the Catholic Church have a completely different approach and philosophy.

They teach us century after century that contemplative silence over biblical texts leads to effective action and effective evangelization.

Pope Benedict emphasizes the relationship between the Word of God and silence:

*"The word can only be spoken and heard in silence, outward and inward. Ours is not an age which fosters recollection; at times one has the impression that people are afraid of detaching themselves, even for*

*a moment, from the mass media. For this reason, it is necessary nowadays that the People of God be educated in the value of silence. Rediscovering the centrality of God's word in the life of the Church also means rediscovering a sense of recollection and inner repose. The great patristic tradition teaches us that the mysteries of Christ all involve silence. Only in silence can the Word of God find a home in us, as it did in Mary, woman of the word and, inseparably, woman of silence."* (66)

**"CONTEMPLATIVES ARE THE TRUE MISSIONARIES AND ALONE CAN BE THE TRUE SPIRITUAL TEACHERS."**

— *Father Gaston Courtois*

## POPE BENEDICT ON LIVING THE BIBLICAL TEXT:

*"The word of God appears here as a criterion for discernment: it is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). We do well also to remember that the process of lectio divina is not concluded until it arrives at action (actio), which moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others in charity."* (87)

## BISHOP BARRES COMMENT:

Pope Benedict teaches us that this process of *lectio divina* purifies, refines and directs our everyday actions with the Fire of the Holy Spirit and makes us sensitive to the power of the small unseen deed of charity and self-sacrifice.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Rejoice and Be Glad*, Pope Francis reminds us biblically that holiness is found in the small details of every day. He writes:

*"Let us not forget that Jesus asked his disciples to pay attention to details.*

*The little detail that wine was running out at a party.*

*The little detail that one sheep was missing.*

*The little detail of noticing the widow who offered her two small coins.*

*The little detail of having spare oil for the lamps, should the bridegroom delay.*

*The little detail of asking the disciples how many loaves of bread they had.*

*The little detail of having a fire burning and a fish cooking as he waited for the disciples at daybreak."* (144)

Our *lectio divina* of the Sacred Scriptures opens our souls to focus on these little details, and so we not only grow in holiness, but we reflect the face of Christ.

The Word of God makes us realists who recognize that the Word of God is the foundation of all things. (10)

As your bishop and servant, I invite you during this Lenten Season 2019 and beyond, to discover or rediscover the power of the Word of God by reading, meditating, praying, contemplating and living the inspired Sacred Scriptures.

In the end, as Father Gaston Courtois points out: "Contemplatives are the true missionaries and alone can be the true spiritual teachers."

Thank you all for your passion and daily dedication to the inspired Sacred Scriptures.

Thank you for being the contemplatives, the missionaries, the spiritual teachers that are the agents and instruments of *dramatic missionary growth* on Long Island and beyond. †

Sincerely in Christ,

*+ John O. Barres*

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