

Pastoral Letter for Sunday of the Word of God 2023

Dear Bible readers, dear brothers and sisters in the Catholic diocese of Stockholm!

When the Word of God is proclaimed in the Mass it acquires a special weight, yes, an almost sacramental impact. The Eucharist gives us the full reality of Jesus. The Word of God reinforces our openness and willingness to receive everything God wants to give us. Every time we participate in the Holy Mass we can obtain new spiritual insights and inspiration. We can become more transformed in the encounter with God's eternal Word, who comes to us both in communion and in the words of Scripture. God "who is rich in mercy" (Eph 2: 4) desires so much to manifest to us his grace, that he becomes man in Jesus Christ and continues to speak to us through his Word and give us his grace in the Sacrament.

We receive this reality, which is infinitely great and overwhelming, every time the Eucharist is celebrated. It surpasses everything we can understand and take in. God's grace exceeds all our expectations. That is why we need to learn to be still in prayer and wonder before the Word of God. We Catholics have sometimes neglected to sit down in peace and quiet and ponder the Word of God in the Bible. Those words are inspired by the Spirit, and the Spirit can help us, the holy people of God, to receive the message of Scripture, addressed to all of us as a community and to each one of us in a fully personal way. We are all unique creatures created in the image of God and called to become more and more like Him. Therefore we need to deepen in his words and listen to his message in a very personal way. This typically Catholic - and twofold - way of reading the Bible is extremely important. God speaks to his whole people, the Church, where we receive the same message that applies to everyone, always and everywhere. At the same time we receive it as a personal message to each of us. "Come and follow me" (Matthew 4:19), Jesus tells the whole Church and each one of us. He wants to touch what is deepest within us. Through his Word, he desires to redeem, sanctify and transform us and make us more and more Godlike.

In order to receive the Word of God at this deep level we need the motherly help and teaching of the Church, while at the same time we entrust ourselves to Jesus. He is the Bridegroom of the Church who constantly gives himself to her, his Bride, and through her to each one of us. The Church wants to interpret and help us understand God's Word in depth. We always read the Word of God in the Church, with the Church and for the Church. We are not separate individuals but members of the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church. We have received our "share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book" (Rev 22:19). We embrace the universal message of God in Scripture together with all the members of the People of God. But each one does so as the unique individual that he or she is.

This twofold dimension marks us out as Catholic readers of the Bible. We need both the teaching of the Church and our own deeply personal self-surrender and openness to receive God's Word in a way that can transform our lives. Then, through the power of the Spirit, we are enabled to proclaim his message to the world around us (cf. Rom 8: 15-16). For that reason, our diocese has published the Catholic Study Bible, which

can help all believers to encounter the Bible's message and read it in and with the Church, so that we can pass it on to all we meet. We need help to understand and take to ourselves the Word of God based on the Church's tradition of twenty centuries. Together with all the saints, all the learned teachers of the Church and all the humble believers throughout the ages, we have to listen attentively and receive the Word of God. That way we can be transformed by what we read and become ever more faithful Christians, burning in our desire to serve God and our neighbour.

In our hectic and noisy society, we all need silence and tranquillity in order to find peace in the presence of God. Our need for the life-giving power of the Word of God is just as great. Therefore, we need more than ever to learn *lectio divina*, that is, to contemplate God's Word in prayer and self-surrender, in wonder and gratitude for everything God wishes to give us through his Word. We ought to develop a more biblically-rooted piety in order to grow into an ever deeper union with "the Word that became flesh" (John 1:14) in Jesus Christ, who continues to speak to us in words and sacraments. By opening our heart for the message of the Gospel, we can also become a more evangelizing Church here in Sweden.

We have to embrace the message of the whole Bible, both the Old and the New Testament. Thus we understand in a deeper way the history of salvation that already has its humble beginning when God creates the world. Step by step, we then see how God calls Abraham, our father in faith (cf. Heb 11:8), makes a covenant with him and leads Israel as the people he has chosen. This preparation for the great miracle of the Incarnation shows us how God patiently and lovingly wants to educate all of humanity, so that it can receive him when he comes in human form in Jesus Christ.

The Church wants to help us understand God's way of working in the midst of human history, where light and darkness are constantly in close combat. In this way, it becomes a little easier for us to see that God is with us here and now in our own history and in the history of the whole world. Good and evil, light and darkness always struggle against one another. When we realize that the history of salvation continues through all times, it gives us hope even at difficult and dark moments. Reading the Bible with the eyes of faith, hope and love helps us to look at contemporary history in God's light. Now that God has spoken once and for all through his Son who has become man, he has said all that he wanted to say and all we need to know. If we learn to listen to him in Scripture, we can also recognize his voice in our own situation. Then we realize that he will always be an infinitely loving God who can never abandon us. Whatever happens, he in his providence is always faithful to his holy people and to each one of us. And so, with complete trust and with all our hearts, we can say, like the Virgin Mary, "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38) to God who in Jesus Christ gives himself to us in words and sacraments.

With my prayers and my blessing,

+ Anders Arborelius ocd

Stockholm, 27 December 2022, Feast of St. John the Evangelist