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The use of Sacred Scripture in the writings of Saint Josemaria

By Scott Hahn. In a certain sense we can fully understand the accomplishments of St. Josemaría, or the graces he received, when we come to understand his use of the Scriptures.

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St. Josemaría, or the graces he received, when we come to understand his use of the Scriptures. For, in Opus Dei, he worked out a thoroughly biblical spirituality; and he himself saw the institution as built on solidly scriptural foundations. In perhaps the most powerful precis of his spirituality, the homily “Passionately Loving the World,” St. Josemaría repeatedly claims the Bible as his primary witness: *“This doctrine of Sacred Scripture, as you know, is to be found in the very core of the spirit of Opus Dei”* Conversations, nos. 116 and 114). *“This I have been teaching all the time, using words from Holy Scripture”* (no. 52).

Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the Bible always served as St. Josemaría’s primary referential language. Though he was steeped in the teachings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, though he was

fluent in scholastic theology, and though he kept current with trends in contemporary theology, it was to Scripture that he returned again and again in his preaching and writing, and it was to Scripture that he directed his spiritual children in *Opus Dei*.

He saw clearly the unity of the two testaments, the Old and the New. The Old Testament oracles did not lose relevance for St. Josemaría just because they had been fulfilled in the New. Rather, they shone with a new and more brilliant light. He did not hesitate to hold up the patriarchs and prophets of Israel as spiritual exemplars for Christians today:

When you receive Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist, thank Him from the bottom of your heart for being so good as to be with you.

Have you ever stopped to consider that it took centuries and centuries

before the Messiah came? All those patriarchs and prophets praying together with the whole people of Israel: Come, Lord, the land is parched! If only your loving expectation were like this. The Forge, no. 991.

He quoted frequently from both the Old and New Testaments, but especially from the Gospels, to which Tradition has assigned a pre-eminent place (see Dei Verbum, 18). Perhaps no phrases appear so often in his writings and homilies as those that invoke the sacred page: “as the Gospel tells us”; “as the Gospel advises ...,” “Sacred Scripture tells us ...,” “the Gospels relate ...,” “Remember the Gospel story ...”

According to Bishop Alvaro del Portillo — who was St. Josemaría’s most loyal son, confessor, and successor in the direction of Opus Dei: “I was myself always impressed

with the facility with which he could cite from memory exact phrases from the Holy Bible. Even during everyday conversations, he would often take a starting point from some pertinent text in order to inspire us to a more profound prayer. He lived on the word of God.”

(...)

The Power to Transform

Though his actual reading took only five minutes per day, we must not confine St. Josemaría’s meditation on Scripture to those few moments. He also prayed the Scriptures in his daily Mass and in his recitation of the Divine Office. He frequently used biblical commentaries of the Fathers of the Church for spiritual reading. Indeed, he insisted that a Christian’s personal meditation on Scripture must feed his mental prayer as well as the spontaneous prayer that fills his entire day. *“For we do need to*

know it well, to have it in our heart and mind, so that at any time, without any book, we can close our eyes and contemplate [Christ's] life, watching it like a movie. In this way the words and actions of our Lord will come to mind in all the different circumstances of our life”

Christ Is Passing By, no. 89.

With the reading of Scripture, then, comes the grace of transformation, of conversion. Reading the Bible is not a passive act, but an active seeking and finding. “If we do this without holding back, Christ’s words will enter deep into our soul and will really change us. For ‘the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of the soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart’ (Heb 4:12)” Christ Is Passing By, no. 89.

(...)

The Place of the Bible

St. Josemaría's most profound encounters with Sacred Scripture came not in his study or even in his oratory pew, but in the liturgy. Like the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, he saw the Mass as the encounter par excellence with Jesus Christ in “bread and word” (see, e.g., Christ Is Passing By, no. 116, 118, 122;

The Forge, no. 437). The Holy Mass, within which is found the Liturgy of the Word, is, for St. Josemaría, the “root and center” of interior life.

His homilies — which are saturated with quotations and allusions from both testaments of the Bible — always find their focus in the liturgical season, and specifically in the readings of the day. Indeed, he saw the Mass as the supernatural

habitat of his homilies: *“You have just been listening to the solemn reading of the two texts of Sacred Scripture for the Mass of the twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost. Having heard the Word of God you are already in the right atmosphere for the words I want to address to you: words of a priest, spoken to a large family of the children of God in his Holy Church. Words, therefore, which are intended to be supernatural, proclaiming the greatness of God and his mercies towards men; words to prepare you for today’s great celebration of the Eucharist”* Conversations, no. 112.

Like the Fathers of the Church and the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, St. Josemaría looked upon the Mass as a particularly graced moment for receiving the word of God. The inspirations received in the Liturgy of the Word should be profound and lasting: *“We now listen to the word of Scripture, the epistle*

and the Gospel — light from the Holy Spirit, who speaks through human voices so as to make our intellect come to know and contemplate, to strengthen our will and make our desire for action effective” Christ Is Passing By, no. 89.

The Virtuous Interpreter

Incanonizing Josemaría Escrivá, the Church has held him up as worthy of imitation. There can be no doubt that such imitation must include intensive study of the Scriptures, meditative reading of the Scriptures, and disciplined prayer of the Scriptures. His own daily program witnessed to this. The “norms of piety“ he followed — and which he bequeathed to his children in *Opus Dei* — are saturated in biblical quotations.

What is clearly central for him, however, is the encounter with Jesus Christ, the identification with Jesus

Christ, to the point of becoming “ipse Christus,” Christ himself. This goal must be attained through certain determinate means, among them the meditative reading of the Gospels. Thus, one cannot understand or live the vocation to Opus Dei without at least aspiring to a high degree of biblical fluency.

Though he lived most of his life before the Second Vatican Council, St. Josemaría anticipated much of its teaching — certainly, at least, its emphasis on the universal call to holiness and apostolate, which had been a hallmark of Opus Dei since 1928. I believe, however, that he was especially attuned to the Church’s doctrines on Sacred Scripture — its truth, authority, inspiration, and inerrancy — which found such robust expression in the council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum.

As many laymen tend to see their wives' best qualities described in the "virtuous woman" of Proverbs 31, so I tend to see St. Josemaría, who is a spiritual father to me, in the words of Dei Verbum 25. There, the Council Fathers offer their vision of the ideal priest. As I conclude, I would be so bold as to adapt their word to describe St. Josemaría and so many of the priests who have followed him in

Opus Dei and in the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross.

They "hold fast to Sacred Scriptures through diligent sacred reading and careful study."

They take care "so that none of them will become an empty preacher of the word of God outwardly, who is not a listener to it inwardly."

They "share the abundant wealth of the divine word with the faithful

committed to them, especially in the sacred liturgy.”

They “learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the ‘excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil 3:8).”

They “gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instruction.”

And they “remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together”; for, in the words of St. Ambrose, “we speak to him when we pray; we hear him when we read the divine saying.”

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