

## The People's Book

- *Word of God Sunday*
- *January 26, 2020*
- *Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

Pope Francis has promulgated that this Sunday each year be “The Word of God Sunday”. He did so asking that this Sunday be “given over entirely to the word of God” so that we might better understand the richness of the scriptures in our lives and in the liturgy. He calls the Bible “the people’s book” and issued his decree on the feast of St. Jerome on the 1600 anniversary of the death of that great biblical scholar-saint, who wrote in his time “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”

Pope Francis chose this annual Sunday at this time of the year because it follows the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and comes in the same week as The International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Thus the pope is indicating how the scriptures are shared with and are a source of unity for all Christians in the ecumenical movement and that we share the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures with the Jewish people and hence are united with them through this “people’s book”, given to us by God. We are asked to focus on the place of the Scriptures, the Bible, in our lives on this Word of God Sunday.

I grew up in an era in the Catholic Church in which we did not read the Bible. We had a huge Bible in our family—as most Catholic families did—but it was never opened or read from. Its principal purpose was that on its first page there were lines for listing the births and deaths of family members. Period! It was definitely not “the people’s book”. In the Catholic grade school we only read stories about the people in the Bible or stories—not in the Bible—about the boy Jesus. In school what we read were the lives of the saints. They were safe. Putting the Bible in the hands of Catholics was thought to be dangerous—in terms of how they would interpret it if left to themselves. That’s what Protestants did. Catholics could not be trusted to do so. So it was a shut book; opened only by the priests—probably not even by the nuns—and only the priests could relay what the Bible meant. I don’t believe I even had a Bible, not even a New Testament, till I entered the Jesuits.

By the way, the effect of Catholics not personally having or knowing the Scriptures—except as explained to them by officials—caused a greater focus on the saints, on devotions, on shrines, on medals, on indulgences, on the rosary, on Mary. You have to be inspired by something, and if you don’t have the Scriptures as the foundation and source of your inspiration, you will find it elsewhere. Don’t get me wrong, these are all good and helpful things. And you can take too far insisting on the Scriptures rather than on these devotions. I did so. One morning when I was at my parents’ house, my Mom—about 85 years old at the time—came back from church all excited and thrillingly whispered to me: “Steve, look at this magazine; it shows that Our Lady has appeared to people in upstate New York!” I proclaimed, and not in a whisper, “Oh Mom, none of this is important; don’t bother yourself with this stuff; all you need is what Jesus himself said and did in the gospels!” My Mom drew back from me almost in horror and exclaimed, “Imagine, my own son a priest, and Our Lady appears and he doesn’t even believe!” She really

put me in my place. It was not a good place; people need to be respected for their own faith, even a Mom from whom I got my faith, no matter how educated or theologically advanced a Jesuit I might be or think I am.

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts of our era is the gift of the restoration of the Scriptures, the Bible, “the people’s book” to our liturgies, to our lives, to our educations, to our prayer. We can apply what is said in the readings of this Sunday to this gift of our times: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” The Scriptures are the light by which we can walk, not simply as a book, or as a text, but as the inspired word of God for our dialogue with God.

We believe that the whole of the Scriptures are inspired in two ways. First, the Holy Spirit inspired the authors to write in a very human and culturally conditioned way the word of God to his people. You can’t miss what God is saying to us if you give the Scriptures as a whole a chance. You can find this voice of God in no other place in as assured a way. That’s the first way it is inspired by the Holy Spirit, as revelation for our journey and our salvation. The second way it is inspired is that when we read the Scriptures, read them reflectively, deeply, prayerfully, regularly, patiently, we are inspired by that same Holy Spirit to find light in them for our lives, to hear the word of God to us, to enter into a dialogue of God with us and we with God. These are the two ways the Scriptures are inspired: in the authors who wrote them and in us who read and pray them. It is the same Holy Spirit in both cases.

Jesus himself heard the word of God to him in the Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. In them he heard and learned who he was, what God was about in and through him. It is evident everywhere in our New Testament that Jesus reflected on and prayed through the Hebrew Scriptures. No other place was as central to his self-understanding and his discernment of his mission. We too should reverence these Scriptures as great a treasure as he did. We cannot understand Jesus or the New Testament without knowing and praying the Hebrew Scriptures.

I often like to realize that Jesus was not a Catholic! Sorry, it’s true. That came later. Most certainly he was not a Jesuit nor would he likely have become one! Nor in a certain sense was Jesus a Christian! That too came later. That was for us. Jesus pointed not to himself but always to the Father, to God. He was a Jew who belonged to God, listened to and heard God, depended totally on the Father, made God known, became our way of knowing and hearing God. “No one knows the Father except the Son, and those to whom he reveals him.” The whole of the Hebrew Scriptures and what Jesus revealed about God in the New Testament should have as central a place in our faith, our self-understanding, and our life as the Scriptures did in his.

At this point I hear Pope Francis whispering to me, putting me in my place as well as Mom did. He does this through his words in the decree establishing his annual “Word of God Sunday”, quote: “Those of us who are preachers should not give long, pedantic homilies or wander off into unrelated topics.” Touché!

So let me come back from wandering. It is the Risen Jesus who is with us in this assembly, in his word, supposedly in this homily, and in this Eucharist. It is worth noting that the first thing Jesus, upon rising from the dead, did for disciples huddled in fear in an upper room was, quote, “He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures”, or again on that first day of his

resurrection to those walking without hope to Emmaus, quote, “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures.” It was for this that the Risen Jesus poured out upon his disciples and upon us today his Holy Spirit.

Thank you, Pope Francis, for making this Sunday “The Word of God Sunday”. We needed it.