

The Saints and the Bible

In the Bible, God unfolds his wonderful plan for human beings. He wants to bring us into his divine family, adopting us as his sons and daughters, uniting us to himself, and making us holy by giving us the Holy Spirit. To help us along the way, the church, God's community of earth, has officially identified some people who have responded more fully than others to this divine plan. These men and women have loved God and others in a consistently extraordinary way, and we call them "saints." The church gives them to us as exemplars of the Christian life, so that by imitating them we too might become saints.

Exerting sheer human effort, however, does not make us saints. That's the exclusive work of the Holy Spirit, who draws us to Christ, claims us, transforms us, teaches us, guides us, corrects us, and enables us to do all things in love. We become saints by doing the right things in response to the Spirit. The church provides us direction and opportunities we need for growth in its teaching, liturgy, and practice.

Among these provisions for our holiness, the Bible holds a special place of importance. The saints tell us in their writings, for example, that in Scripture they found enlightenment for their minds and nourishment for their souls. Many also say that they met God in the Bible, for it is the Word of God and he is present in its pages. . . .

The saints have approached the Bible in a wide variety of ways, all of them instructive and spiritually stimulating for us. Here is a sampler of the saints' use of Scripture.

Saints Study Scripture

Regular Bible study is a basic means of growth, and saints have majored in it. All have avidly read Scripture. Monks like St. Bernard of Clairvaux and nuns like St. Teresa of Avila listened to the proclamation of the Word daily during Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours. Some like St. Jerome, St. Fulgentius of Ruspe, and St. Augustine studied the Bible professionally, preparing new translations, writing commentaries, and so making it more accessible for others. Scripture study also undergirded the writings of women saints like Jane de Chantal and Edith Stein. If we really want to grow in Christ, we will imitate the saints and make Bible study a part of our daily routine.

Saints Memorize Scripture

Before the 1500s, when Bibles were scarce, saints committed Scripture to memory. St. Dominic, for example, held large portions of the Bible in his memory and used it as ready

reference when he preached. Even when the invention of printing in the sixteenth century made more Bibles available, many saints continued the practice because it helped them mature in Christ. Memorizing Scripture is spiritually pragmatic. What better raw material could the Holy Spirit have to work with when he wants to inspire our thoughts?

Saints Pray Scripture

The Bible is a source of Christian prayer, for there we meet the Word himself and can speak to God with his own inspired words. A preeminent example is Mary's Magnificat (see Lk 1:46-55). The Virgin drew from Scripture for every line of this prayer that celebrated her divine pregnancy. Many saints prayed the Psalms and other Bible texts several times a day at the Liturgy of the Hours. Some saints have prayed a single text so consistently that it became their life theme, as . . . in the case of St. Theresa of the Sacred Heart and St. Camillus de Lellis.

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Saints Use Scripture in Spiritual Warfare

Imitating Jesus' example in the desert (see Mt 4:1-11), saints have used God's Word to resist the devil. With Scripture, St. Anthony of Egypt sent demonic hordes scurrying through the desert. St. Lutgarde, whose knowledge of the Bible was somewhat limited because she did not understand Latin, nonetheless dismissed diabolical tormentors with verses from the Psalms. Quoting Scripture makes devils flee because the Bible contains God's own Word in human words. So like the saints, in times of trial or temptation, we can turn to the Bible for help.

Saints Seek Guidance in Scripture

Saints have looked to the Bible for answers to questions that stumped them. In its pages they sought resolutions to dilemmas that seemed to block their way. When St. Thérèse of Lisieux, for example, was puzzled about her role in the body of Christ, she explored St. Paul's letters for direction. Her study pointed her to the simple path of service that she happily followed to sainthood. Experiences like St. Thérèse's show us

that we can count on Scripture to guide us safely because we are not merely consulting an author who has some good ideas about life, but the Author of life himself.

Saints Proclaim Scripture

God designed the Bible to communicate the truth to human beings, and saints have employed diverse means to spread his Word. Some gifted preachers like St. John Chrysostom and St. Vincent Ferrer held thousands spellbound with their exposition of Bible texts. Others like St. Clare of Assisi often simply shared Scripture one-on-one. In conversation and sermons, in letters and textbooks, in amphitheatres, on the street, and in homes, saints have announced the good news in the ways that best suited their character and their culture. Following their example, knowledge of Scripture will help us draw others to Christ and the church.

Saints Apply Scripture

Saints do not read Scripture merely out of intellectual curiosity, or even just for inspiration. Above all, they are doers of the Word. When they think they have grasped the kernel of God's intent in a text, they strive to put it into practice.

One line of Scripture sometimes triggers a dramatic turn-around as it did for St. Anthony, St. Augustine, and St. Alipius. Or a poignant verse might set a saint on a course of life. Jesus' words "I was hungry and you never gave me food" (Mt 25:42) caused St. Joan Delanoue to devote herself to care for destitute orphans. Or a saint may pray a particular text to help him get through daily nuisances, as St. John Cassian did with the verse from Psalm 70, "Come to my help, O God. Lord hurry to my rescue."

Like the saints, we should read Scripture in order to acquire an ever-increasing understanding of God's Word. Like them, we should also pray Scripture in order to allow the Holy Spirit to take us into a deeper union with God. And finally like all the saints, we should become faithful doers of the Word, obeying what God says to us as we read the Bible.

Check back regularly for excerpts from the writings of the saints on Scripture and its role in their lives with additional commentary by Bert Ghezzi.