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Neil Xavier O'Donoghue

## Redeemably Awful: A People Ignorant of Christ

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Neil Xavier O'Donoghue

St. Jerome famously quipped, “ignorance of the scripture is ignorance of Christ.” Jerome has been accused of hyperbole in other instances, but the urgent pastoral question facing us is whether we ought to take this statement at face value. If we are honest, this means that the majority of Catholics today, including many of those who are reading this article, are ignorant of Christ (did you physically open a bible and read from it in the last week?). Fifty years after Vatican II, the Bible remains a closed book for most Catholics. There are many reasons for this, and a blame game would only serve to add fuel to the fire of Catholic guilt. Our effort would be much better spent in remedying the situation.

If we contrast the attitude of Catholics to our Orthodox Jewish brethren, we see a different world. The Jews are famous for studying the Torah (the first five books of our Old Testament). Many Orthodox Jewish men spend hours each day studying it at yeshivas. They teach their children the saying “*Bitul torah*” as part of their catechesis, this can be literally translated as “annulling the Torah.” In this view any other human activity annuls the Torah, as it wastes time that could be devoted to Torah study. Some economists have seriously posed questions about the future viability of the State of Israel because too many of the ultra-Orthodox Jews spend most of their days studying the Torah.<sup>1</sup> I, for one, can honestly say that I have absolutely no fear that the Irish economy will collapse because Irish Catholics are spending too much time reading their bibles!

Although the Temple was originally central to the spirituality of the People of Israel, this was to change. During the period of the Babylonian Exile, the Temple had been destroyed and the people discovered the consolation of the Scriptures. This relationship with the Scriptures was to deepen after the destruction of the Second

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1 David M. Halbfinger, “As Vote Nears, Israelis Ponder How Jewish the Nation Should Be,” in *New York Times*, 13 September 2019, Section A, Page 1.

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Neil Xavier O'Donoghue is a Lecturer in Systematic Theology at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

## THE FURROW

Temple in 70 AD. The first Christians had a similar experience. The disciples on the way to Emmaus exclaimed, “were not our hearts burning within us as he talked to us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?” (Lk 24:32).

While no one except the most wealthy actually owned a Bible, its texts were familiar to Christians during the first centuries.<sup>2</sup> Church decoration was highly influenced by the Bible, but many churches were not simply a poor person’s Bible, as many of the iconographical projects needed a wide knowledge of scripture to interpret. The clergy, religious and the educated elite were steeped in the knowledge of the Scripture and this formed the basis of preaching and teaching for the first millennium.

Yet throughout the Church’s history, nearly all of the renewal movements were inspired by a renewed appreciation of the Word of God. In the 1200’s members of the new mendicant Orders of Francis and Dominic went throughout the world preaching in a style that was strongly Biblical in style and content. But as the centuries past, the laity became less familiar with the Word of God and by the end of the Middle Ages Scripture no longer resonated with many people. This erosion of Biblical literacy is symptomatic in the spiritual practice whereby the 150 *Aves* of the rosary were to replace the 150 Psalms of the Divine Office for most of the faithful.

Perhaps one of the biggest tragedies of the Reformation was that many in the Catholic Church began to mistrust the Bible itself. The Church authorities, while never banning the Bible, thought that it was a dangerous book. If people were to be exposed to it, they could become infected with heresy as Luther and the other Reformers had. In turn, on the popular level, Catholics came to see the Bible as a Protestant book (while, in a parallel sense, Christians of the Reformation traditions were deprived of the Church’s liturgical and sacramental heritage).

This suspicion of the Bible among Catholics was to continue until the twentieth century. It is hard to believe today that many of the biographers of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux who lived at the end of the nineteenth century, claim that she never had actual access to a complete Bible. One of the greatest saints, who has been declared

2 Obviously, the idea of people owning and reading their own Bible is anachronistic. For most of the history of Christianity the vast majority of people were illiterate. Indeed, the idea of owning a book was an unimaginable luxury. By one recent calculation the *Book of Kells* (produced sometime around the year 800) needed a combined herd of 2,604 cattle, which would have needed 9,579 acres of farmland simply to produce the vellum used in the production of the Gospel Book. This calculation assumes that a full year’s yield of vellum was dedicated to the project. For more details on this calculation see Denis Casey, “How Many Cows Did it Take to Make the Book of Kells?” in Rachel Moss, Felicity O’Mahony & Jane Maxwell, eds., *An Insular Odyssey: Manuscript Culture in Early Christian Ireland and Beyond* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 76–85.

a Doctor of the Church, and had a deep love of the sections of Scripture that she had access to, lived in an age when even a consecrated religious was not trusted with a Bible!<sup>3</sup>

#### CATHOLIC BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

The twentieth century was to see a rebirth of Catholic biblical scholarship. Already in 1893, Pope Leo XIII published the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (on the study of holy Scripture). While it was to be given a progressively more negative interpretation, the letter did, in fact, signal an initial opening to a renewed Biblical study. The World Wars were moments of a special spiritual awakening in the Catholic Church. During the hardship and scandals of war, many within the Church saw the need for a more robust spirituality. It is no coincidence that in 1943 towards the end of World War II Pope Pius XII published the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (on the most opportune way to promote biblical studies). Here Pius explicitly gave the chaos unleashed by the war as a reason for a *renewed* appreciation of the role of the Bible in the Church:

“When a cruel war heaps ruins upon ruins and slaughter upon slaughter, when, owing to the most bitter hatred stirred up among the nations, we perceive with greatest sorrow that in not a few has been extinguished the sense not only of Christian moderation and charity, but also of humanity itself. Who can heal these mortal wounds of the human family if not He, to Whom the Prince of the Apostles, full of confidence and love, addresses these words: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” *DAS* 56.

After the war, helped by this encyclical, a Catholic openness to Scripture was to continue. This openness was shared by those involved in the ecumenical movement and the liturgical movement. For centuries the Word of God had been proclaimed in Latin during the Eucharistic celebration. The selection of Biblical readings proclaimed between the Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council were very limited. The Old Testament was virtually ignored. A normal practicing Catholic would have heard readings from only 10 of the 46 books in the Old Testament over the course of a year and only Genesis and Isaiah were proclaimed more than

3 John Russell, “Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and Scripture,” in Keith J. Egan and Craig E. Morrison, eds., *Master of the Sacred Page: Essays and Articles in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm.* (Washington D.C. The Carmelite Institute, 1997), 337-38.

## THE FURROW

once.<sup>4</sup> Since the end of the nineteenth century, with the advent of universal literacy and cheaper printing techniques, people had followed along in their hand missals. Now some priests began to actually read the vernacular translation of the readings (or at least the Gospel) before the sermon!

### VATICAN II AND BEYOND

Vatican II was to promote the use of the Scripture even further. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* recommended that “the treasures of the bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s Word. In this way a more representative portion of the holy scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years” (51). Then *Dei Verbum*, writing about divine revelation, made the important theological point that “the Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body” (21).

After the Council a new *Lectionary for Mass* was prepared by a team of experts in liturgy and biblical studies. The decision was made to have a three-year cycle of readings for Sunday Masses and a two-year cycle of readings for weekday celebrations. The “richer fare” of Scripture is clearly evident in these books with much more scripture being proclaimed. On Sundays a third reading was added and the Old Testament was brought back into the Eucharistic liturgy after centuries of near abandonment. These new lectionaries are one of the success stories of contemporary liturgy. In fact, a separate ecumenical edition of the Roman Catholic lectionary was prepared and adopted by many of the main-line Protestant denominations and today Christians of many denominations, Catholics included, often hear the same scripture readings on Sundays in their respective churches.

### ONGOING CHALLENGES

The lectionary presents Scripture to the Eucharistic assembly. However, we must ask ourselves if this presentation is correctly made or received. While the Lectionary is an excellent book, it was not designed to be the *only* exposure to the Scriptures that the practicing Catholic will have. Indeed, it presupposes a prior knowledge of the Bible. We need to ask ourselves, how well we know the Bible? Do we have a relationship with it? The *General*

4 Martin Connell, *Hear the Word of the Lord: The Lectionary in Catholic Ritual* (Chicago, IL: LTP, 2015), 53.

*Introduction to the Lectionary* (2nd ed. 1981) makes the point that “Christ is always present in his word, as he carries out the mystery of salvation, sanctifies humanity and offers the Father perfect worship. ... The word of God constantly proclaimed in the Liturgy is always, then, a living and effective word through the power of the Holy Spirit. It expresses the Father’s love that never fails in its effectiveness toward us.” The Word of God is effective, but are we inclined to listen? Do we have the necessary biblical literacy to engage with the sacred text? Catholic Scripture scholars may have reached the pinnacle of academic study of Scripture, but how many practicing Catholics are familiar with the Bible? Recent years have seen a decline of the devotional practices that marked the Ireland of the 1950’s. This is not a particular problem *per se*, but the hope was that other spiritual practices, such as the prayerful reading of the Bible, would have replaced the earlier devotions.<sup>5</sup> Yet, apart from some particular spiritual oases this has not happened. There is no formal biblical formation in most parishes and few of our young people receive any sort of a biblical formation in their primary or secondary education.

Pope Francis in a letter he published last September for the sixteen hundredth anniversary of the death of St. Jerome, encouraged all Catholics to develop a “living and tender love” with the Word of God. In this letter Pope Francis quoted Pope Benedict XVI who made the following point about the sacramental nature of the Word of God in his 2010 letter *Verbum Domini*. “The [sacramental nature] of the word can be understood by analogy with the real presence of Christ under the appearances of the consecrated bread and wine... Saint Jerome speaks of the way we ought to approach both the Eucharist and the word of God: ‘We are reading the sacred Scriptures. For me, the Gospel is the body of Christ; for me, the holy Scriptures are his teaching. And when he says: *whoever does not eat my flesh and drink my blood*, even though these words can also be understood of the [Eucharistic] Mystery, Christ’s body and blood are really the word of Scripture, God’s teaching.’”

#### COVID EXPERIENCE

Perhaps we should reflect on our experience during the COVID lockdown when most people were unable to attend the Eucharistic celebration in their parishes. We could ask how many Catholics nourished themselves by praying the *Liturgy of the Hours* or reading the Bible when the churches were locked? Did families, friends or neighbours get together to partake of the Table of the Word together?

5 Vincent Twomey, *The End of Irish Catholicism?* (Dublin: Veritas, 2003), 51-62.

## THE FURROW

Indeed, a particular change appeared in the way most celebrants celebrated the Eucharist during the lockdown. Nearly everyone began including a “prayer of spiritual communion” in transmitted liturgies after the celebrant himself had received. A particular devotional prayer attributed to St. Alphonsus Liguori was the most common of these. This prays that “since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, come spiritually into my soul so that I may unite myself wholly to you now and forever.” Pope Francis himself prayed this prayer in his televised celebrations. Yet doesn’t this prayer *fail* to give the Word of God its proper consideration? It was simply impossible for most of the world’s Catholics to receive Communion at this time and surely God understood this. If people were physically unable to receive Sacramental Communion, why did we need to add this prayer to the liturgy? Wasn’t it enough for people to nourish themselves from the table of the Word? If we really believed, as the last two popes have authoritatively taught, that “Christ’s body and blood are really the word of Scripture,” then why was this prayer added to the liturgy? The Word of God that was proclaimed should have been enough.

In this article, which hopefully encourages reflection on this vital aspect of Christian life, I hope that we can renew our commitment to promote knowledge of the Word of God and to come to love it ourselves. The late Cardinal Carlo Martini once shared a formative experience he had when he was ten or eleven. “I began to ask myself,” he said, “if people keep insisting that the Bible is so important, why then do we not read it?” Little by little he began to read and meditate on it and it “gave me a way of reasoning, thinking, reflecting, understanding, which recharges me continuously and which comforts, consoles and enlightens me.”<sup>6</sup>

### **I’ll let Pope Francis have the final word!**

Dear Young Friends

So you are holding something divine in your hands: a book that is like fire! A book through which God speaks. So keep in mind: the Bible is not something to be put on a bookshelf but, rather, to be kept on hand, so you can read from it often, every day, both alone and together. If you were to see my Bible, you might not think that it was particularly impressive. “What?! That is the Pope’s Bible! Such an old, worn-out book!” You could give me a new one as a present, one that cost a thousand dollars, but I would not want it. I love my old Bible, which has been with me for half of my life. It witnessed my priestly jubilee and has been sprinkled by my tears. It is my most precious treasure. My life depends on it. I would not give it up for anything in the world.

6 Gerard O’Connell, “A Pastor’s Vision,” *The Tablet*, July 10, 1993, page 876.