

A Book for Ordinary Times

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

I found it nestled on the bookshelves, unremarkably stacked with other books and slightly dusty, with pages a bit crumpled and yellowed with age. I guessed from its date and the fact that it was written in Italian that this book had belonged to my great-grandmother. It was her Bible. Other than a few sepia photographs, this is all I have that once was hers.

My great grandmother entered the world while the Civil War raged. She left it while World War II engulfed the globe. The fact that only her tattered Bible has endured so long tells me how important it was to her and how sacred it was to the generations who cherished it ever since. Its condition also tells me that, through the lights and shadows of her long-ago life, she actually read it.

I find myself thinking of this as we prepare for the inaugural celebration of the “Sunday of the Word of God” on January 26. Last year, Pope Francis declared that this special day “devoted to the celebration, study and dissemination” of God’s Word would henceforth be celebrated on the Third Sunday of Ordinary Time.

It seems such a simple, even mundane, idea. Of course Scripture is important. Of course much of what we know of God is discovered through its pages. Of course the Bible is the best-selling book in human history, translated through the centuries into more languages than I can imagine. Of course a significant part of every Mass is devoted to the Liturgy of the Word. Yet, sometimes something may be known and yet not appreciated. This new celebration is an opportunity to appreciate more fully the Word of God and its place in our lives.

I find it particularly telling that Pope Francis directed that this celebration be held in Ordinary Time. Our great feasts and special seasons have many traditions of their own. But the decision to place the Sunday of the Word of God in Ordinary Time may be a way of saying that our celebration of God’s Word is not to be confined to a special time set apart. Rather, it should become part of the year round fabric of our ordinary times. Indeed, Pope Francis made that point when he expressed his hope that this celebration would help all “to strive daily to embody and bear witness to its teaching” by living lives that are “constantly marked by this decisive relationship with the living word.”

My own bookshelves hold many copies of Holy Scripture. There is the child’s version whose colorful pictures once captured my imagination. There is the paperback version replete with the unfortunate stick figure drawings that were inexplicably popular in the 1970s. There are the gilt-edged Bibles I received as gifts on special occasions in my life, and the scholarly editions with annotations and footnotes that are in my office for academic work. Yet, none of this matters nearly as much as my great-grandmother’s solitary, well-worn little book.

The Sunday of the Word of God is, first, a reminder of the importance of reading scripture. As Pope Francis said, “without the Scriptures the events of the mission of Jesus and of his Church in this world would remain incomprehensible.” But, reading alone is not enough.

This special Sunday is also an invitation to prayer and meditation on that which is read. Pope Francis observed that such meditation is “both bitter and sweet.” In this is the truth that the Word of God both challenges and comforts as it simultaneously answers the questions and questions the answers of our everyday lives.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the Sunday of the Word of God is an invitation to live out that which is read and prayed on. Otherwise, sacred Scripture is, at best, a beautiful work of literature, a narrative of a historical time, an object of scholarly interest, or, perhaps, a mere book of philosophical life lessons. Unless it is lived and taken to heart, it is not fully an encounter with God Himself.

This new celebration of the Sunday of the Word of God is not a celebration of a specific event or a precise moment in the history of salvation. Instead, the call to recognize the way God did and continuously does speak to us in Scripture lies at the heart of this new celebration. It is a celebration for ordinary people like my great-grandmother who know the value of encountering God in this particular way. The world is, thankfully, home to many such people who read, pray and live out the Word of God. I am blessed to know many of them and they may not need a new celebration such as this.

But, for me, I welcome this new Sunday of the Word of God. It is an invitation to discover and then keep rediscovering the great gift that is sacred Scripture. It is a challenge to live the great commands that are sacred Scripture. And, it is an opportunity to be grateful for what Pope Francis called “the book of the Lord’s people” -- the greatest of books for ordinary times.

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