

## SPIRITUAL READING FOR YOUR INTERIOR LIFE

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Let us begin our talk with a Hail Mary. Hail Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

This class is a class on the importance of doctrinal formation. Specifically, my goal is to persuade you, at the end of the talk, to embrace a lifestyle where there is room for reading and meditation on Sacred Scripture or other spiritual reading, like the lives of the saints. And classics, other spiritual classics, that can help us grow in our interior life and even cultural reading because, as St. Justin Martyr, the great apologist, would say, "In- there are great works of literature that contain seeds of the Word that can help us see where Our Lord God has actually given us something true, good, beautiful, noble, in creation, in nature, and in culture."

St. Josemaria stated, and he was a firm believer in this, that "spiritual reading has made many saints." And it is true. Many times there are saints that have made a very deep turn around in their lives, a conversion, because they read something that set them off in a different course in their life. And because of what they read, we can think of St. Ignatius of Loyola or St. Edith Stein, how she read St. Teresa of Avila, or St. Augustine himself, how he read the books of the Platonists, as he- as he says, or- or Cicero, *the Hortensius*, when he mentions in his *Confessions* that we think of all these people who have made amazing strides in their spiritual lives because of something they have read. Well, in order to do this, we need to create a culture of silence and interiority.

As an outline of this talk, I would like to take two statements related to John the Baptist. Now that we are going to celebrate Christmas soon, which is really the feast of the Word Incarnate, the Word coming to us in the flesh, it probably makes sense to look at the precursor of the Word, John the Baptist, in order to see how we can prepare ourselves to be active listeners of the Word in our hearts. These two statements that I will comment on about John the Baptist can be summarized as follows: one is an audio presentation and the other is kind of a visual presentation, and I say this quote-unquote because the first is a statement of John the Baptist about himself. He says, "I am the voice crying out in the desert." That's the audio part. But then there is a visual part which is actually a statement made by Jesus about John the Baptist, and that statement, which we will comment on later, is that John the Baptist was a burning and shining lamp. So, we have two images, one is an audio and the other is a visual. Let's see if we can digest a little bit of all these- all the concepts contained in these two statements.

The first one is what John the Baptist says of himself. He is the voice crying out in the wilderness or in the desert. Let's focus on the word desert, on the image of desert. Desert is a place where there is no food. In fact, Jesus himself was in the desert for forty days and forty nights. And at the end of which he was deeply hungry. And he yearned to eat something, to satisfy his- his appetite. And that's when the devil appeared to him and tempted him by offering rocks that he could turn into bread. And Our Lord said these words, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." The desert is a place where there is no food, but if we meditate upon the Word, our Word becomes food and we assimilate the Word by putting it into practice.

It is not a mystery, it is not a secret that, right now, we are living in a kind of desert in society, a desert where there is no real word to feed on. We have, yes, a lot of information, an abundance of information, think of all the information that we have on the internet available to us at our fingertips, on our phones, immediately. And yet, somehow, we intuit that we are lacking in wisdom because we still do not have the answers that we really need about our existential concerns. Somehow we are drowned out, still, with worries about deeper issues in our lives, not just informative issues that we can satisfy with information, with just a fact, but what we need now is a word of hope. And that is why we need to think about how we can actually transform this desert of ours of society into an oasis where people can find direction in their lives.

Think of an analogy - if you have a car and you can go anywhere - at first sight, you may think you're- you're free, but you're not free, really, if you don't have a goal, if you don't have somewhere to go. You may think that you can go anywhere, you're free - you can turn here, turn left there; wherever you want, you can just keep turning left or keep turning right, or keep changing up, you know, the streets that you go down on. But at some point, you will ask yourself, where am I going? Why am I doing this? And it is that kind of truth that actually sets you free. As Our Lord said in John 8:32, "The truth will set you free." Otherwise, we're not really free to do whatever we want if we have no ultimate end. Right now we are ignorant of this ultimate end many times, and that's why we can liken our society to a desert where there is no ultimate truths. We have this experience of relativism where everything is fine as long as I am okay with it and I- you have your truth and I have my truth and we should not impose on each other's truths.

Well, that is a fallacy because if we have no truth then we are really not free, you know. It's like that bumper sticker that said *I am lost but making great time*. It doesn't make any sense. If we're lost, how could we be making great time? We need a light, we need guidance, we need truth in order to truly be free. St. Peter, in his first letter says to the early Christians, "Be ready to give to the world a *logos*- a reason for your hope." We have to be ready to give a reason for our hope. What is this *logos*? What it- what is this word, or reason, or meaning that we need to give to the world? It really is a *logos* about the ultimate realities: life after death, the truth about the family, the truth about sexuality, for instance, a beautiful gift that are Our Lord has given us which is so often misused but it is an extraordinary gift, the truth about where material things fit in our lives, and so on. This is what we need to give to the world. We need to teach them how to use material things, we need to teach them about what comes after death, otherwise they live without hope.

And we're only going to get these truths, which are not just informative truths, but as Pope Benedict Emeritus would say, and he said often, they are performative, they do something in our lives. They- they feed us with hope, love, and with forgiveness. These things make a difference in our life. We are going to give people not just informative truths but performative truths because we're going to change their lives. That's why we need to first and foremost meditate and read and have a space for silence in this- in- in this desert of ours. We need to actually bring the Word in so that we can transform the desert into an oasis of truth and charity.

When Pope Benedict was here in the United States in Washington, he gave a speech to Catholic educators where he talked about the concept, which I had never heard before, which he may have coined then for that occasion, which he called *intellectual charity*. We need to have intellectual charity with our children and with anybody we teach - whether you're a parent, or a teacher, or a priest, or a counselor, or simply a Christian - we need to have intellectual charity with everyone which means, instead of giving something and instead of giving money to the poor or whatever, to really teach others the ultimate truths about where they're going, because this is what they're lacking most.

"I am the voice crying out in the desert." We have taken a look at this word *desert*. Let us now ask why John the Baptist is crying out. Why does he feel the need to cry out in the desert as the voice? Well, he feels the need to cry out because St. Thomas would say for three reasons: one, because people are far away. We can think that when someone is far away, you got to yell at them or cry out at them because they can't hear you. And this is figuratively true in- in society. People are far away- far away from the faith, far away from the truth. Think of St. Augustine, what he said when he was kind of dispersed in seeking happiness in things of the world and pleasurable things and infatuating himself with himself. He said, "I was so far away, Lord, and you were so close to me." Now, physically that cannot be. Either both are far away from each other or both are close. But spiritually, it could be true that God is within us, within our hearts wherein St. Augustine discovered we are looking for him, but we're looking for something, for happiness, in something that is outside and we could be far away from God and he could be very close to us, within us. We have discovered that- that interiority so that we can come back to ourselves, find ourselves, and find God thereby.

Another reason why John the Baptist feels the need to cry out loudly is because people are deaf, we can think, as St. Thomas would interpret. And why are people deaf? Because there's a lot of noise, there's a lot of interference. They're here to listen to the Word and this could be interpreted as a lot of people are totally given to creature comforts. There's a lot of noise - literally noise - the music they listen to - could be- almost be noise, but they find it difficult to look up. It's- as Ven. Fulton Sheen said, "They are kind of drugged up" like the- like those people, the soldiers next to the crucifixion, at the shadow of the crucifixion, they are kind of drugged up with their material concerns, you know, in throwing dice for their- their spoils of their exit- of the execution and they're just concerned about who's going to get the tunic. But, and the event- the ironies of the greatest event in human history is happening right then and there, very close to them and they don't notice because they are somehow deafened by the- by the love of the world. The Word is somehow

drowned out by the thorns and thistles if we make reference to the parable of the sower that Our Lord himself talked about.

How do we remedy this? Well, St. Josemaria talked about fostering silence. You have this- this custom of living the nighttime of silence that, after the examination of conscience at night, before going to bed, he would remain in silence. He would not take phone calls, he would not listen to music, he would not read the newspaper. He would hardly talk to people because he was getting into the Mass the next day that he was going to celebrate and he would, you know, be very interior in- in living the nighttime. As he- as he got ready for bed, he would- he would be saying many aspirations, kind of living this- the intensity of love. He would also do this for three hours, especially in the afternoon, identifying or trying to identify himself with Jesus on the Cross. And he wouldn't take phone calls or try to be distracted, you know, it- in the afternoon so that he would work more intensely. He called it a three hours in the afternoon of work, the work time of silence.

He fostered thinking time. He would also be kind of fond of- of activities that- that can be compatible with a contemplative spirit. Every now and then he would take a walk, a weekly walk, or- or an excursion just to contemplate - whether it be in nature or wherever - and we need to find those moments in our lives where we can have that- that's- those moments of silence when we can enjoy each other's company and- and also to simply just contemplate at the beach or in nature, or in a church - praying, moments of silence. I'm sure that we can also find great music that can actually help us contemplate and, you know, artists could probably be very- could be challenged to create music that helps people, their audience, to actually go to God, to look up, to lift up the spirit.

Well, another reason why John the Baptist feels the need to cry out is because the message is urgent. When you have an urgent message - let's say you win the lottery - you- or an amazing reality that- that has just taken place in your life - a baby is born and you- you feel the need to communicate it with urgency and you- you feel the need to cry out and that is exactly what the Holy Father, Pope Francis is talking about, the joy of the Gospel and it compels us to go out to the peripheries and- and tell everyone the good news because we cannot keep it to ourselves like the disciples going back to Emmaus. After they found Jesus in the breaking of the bread, they go back that very night to Jerusalem because they cannot wait any longer, even if it's dark, even if there's robbers and bandits on the road or potholes or whatever, they- there are no obstacles to this message of hope. And they feel the need to go out immediately and tell everyone that they have found the Lord.

Even if we're shy, when we win the lottery, even if we're shy, we want to communicate it, and that's why our personality is not an obstacle, whatever it may be. St. Josemaria have talked about apostolate being the overflow of our life within. But of course, again, this presupposes that there's a life within, there is something within us that- that is, you know, begins with this time of silence, this thinking time. And we feed that thinking time with words of hope. And that's why reading is so important because there's so many people who have had experience of the divine of God that they can transmit to us and they have left written

precisely so that we too can share in the joy that they have received themselves or they have encountered as they went along their journey.

“I am the voice crying out in the desert.” Well, we’ve taken a look at these two words - desert and why John the Baptist crying out. But why does he call himself a voice? Let’s take a look at this. “John calls himself the voice,” and St. Thomas Aquinas says, “rightly so because he is a voice and not a word.” He’s not the word - Jesus is the Word, John is the voice. St. Augustine has a beautiful homily precisely with this theme that John is the voice and Jesus is the Word. John is the voice for the Word; he carries the Word; he’s a bearer of the Word; he delivers the Word and then disappears because the voice finishes its mission when it- when it just dies out and the message is delivered, you know. In an interlocutor, when the- when the- when the message has been delivered, the sentence stops, there’s silence after that, but the word remains in the interlocutor - the word remains, the message has been communicated. And this, too, is very interesting for John’s humility. When we deliver the message, like St. John, he disappears. That’s why he said it’s so appropriate for him to say, “May he, the Word, increase and I decrease, I just want to deliver the message.”

We have to be bearers of the Word and for this we have to be in touch with the Word. We have to meditate upon Scripture, very deeply and carefully, and put it into practice because otherwise we run the risk of being voice- a voice without a word, and that’s just noise, that’s just noise. It’s- it’s- there’s no power to that voice if there’s no meaning in it, and there won’t be meaning in it if we don’t actually incarnate and put it into practice. Our words will be divinely powerful, just like Jesus’ words were very powerful, and on several occasions, people around Jesus were so impressed at his Word, some people said, you know, that he had words that no one else had- had said before. And they were so impressed that then, you know. In Matthew it says, “and it came to pass when Jesus had finished these- those words that the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one having authority and not as their scribes and pharisees.” If we don’t put the Word into practice, we’ll be noise, we’ll be just voice, but no Word within us.

If you remember, also, the temple guards that went to arrest Jesus in John Chapter 7, they- they go to arrest him under the orders of the Pharisees and the chief priests, and they come back empty-handed. And the- the- the Pharisees and the chief priests ask them why they did not bring Jesus in chains? The attendants answered, “Never has man spoken as this man.” And the Pharisees answered them, “Have you also been led astray? Has any one of the rulers believed in him or any one of the Pharisees?” But this crowd, which does not know the law, is accursed. The Pharisees have our death to the Word *a priori*, and they do not want to listen to the Word. But these guards who were not even, you know, they were not Scholars of the law by any stretch of the imagination, they simply take it at face value, and his words somehow have a very powerful effect because they see the whole package. They see that he puts his words into practice, and that they’re words of hope, of grace, of love, of mercy. For us, this is a call; this is a definite call to put into practice everything that we do, everything that we say.

St. Gregory the Great says the following in his pastoral rule: “Those who by reason of their jobs must say lofty things are obliged for that very reason to practice those very same things. By reason of their jobs,

whether it be that we are parent, a teacher, a minister, a priest, a Christian, that is our job.” We must say lofty- if we are compelled so say lofty things because of that place we hold in the history of salvation, we are obliged to that very reason to practice those very same things that we are- that we are talking about. Otherwise, we will be hypocrites. We will be empty words, we will be noise. That’s why St. Thomas Aquinas would say that, and I think the Dominican order actually is taking this as their kind of motto for preaching, we have to give those things to others that we have contemplated. And only those things that we have contemplated, made our own, really possess, can we give to others.

Think of what contemplation means - contemplation is not just thinking about things but actually putting them into practice in a way that- that we provide a specific contribution in order to put those words of the Gospel into practice, that- in a way that only we can, and in a unique way, and therefore, they are our own, our own way of living the Gospel, a unique way of living the Gospel, a unique way of- of responding to God’s call.

There’s a sign in a church I saw outside, it said, “Preach the Gospel always; when necessary, use words.” I found that very interesting because it is a- it really is the statement of coherence of life, unity of life. In other words, we are always preaching the Gospel with our lives. We are living words, and every now and then we’ll use words, you know, vocal words to actually explain what we, you know, what we do. We’re- why we are doing it. If we act this way, we will have, as St. Josemaria said, the piety of children, because we will put the message into practice, the message of Christ into practice, and we will have the doctrine of theologians - piety of children, the doctrine of theologians.

Well, let us now move to our second statement, this time it is made by Christ about John the Baptist. So, this is our visual part. It is not longer a- an audit- an audio metaphor, it is now a visual metaphor. It is about a lamp. He says, “John the Baptist was a burning and shining lamp.” What does this mean? Now, St. Thomas Aquinas actually comments on this, and he says, “It’s very appropriate for John the Baptist to be called a lamp because he’s not the light and he himself said, I am not, or it is revealed that John was not the light but he came to bear witness to the light.” In the prologue of St. John, he comes to bear witness to the- to the light, but not be the light himself. He doesn’t take credit; this is a testament to his humility. And a lamp, he says, also burns, disappears. Again, John the Baptist, if he’s going to shine, he knows that it’s not about him, it’s about Christ - let Christ shine.

St. Josemaria would say, “do and disappear so that only Jesus is made visible.” We have to do work, and then disappear, not take credit for anything because everything really belongs to God. And St. Dominic says that it is rightly said by Jesus that John the Baptist, the burning and shining lamp, in that order, because if we are going to shine with truth, if we’re going to communicate all these truths that we assimilate, especially through our reading or contemplation or meditation and putting it into practice, that first and foremost we have to burn with charity. And that’s what John the Baptist does, he burns with charity before he shines with truth. In- in helping people, in guiding people, we cannot just simply give them doctrine, because if we do that, you know, if we tell them this is the truth, the truth may be cold and it may not be something

that they see themselves as capable of actually living up to it - it may be something so far away, so foreign to them because they are imbued in- in a different lifestyle, so far from the faith, that if we just simply tell them the truth about their lives, it really becomes a cold thing and they may think we are brilliant, they may think we shine, but- but we don't, we don't really provide the warmth. It's better to actually love them first, to be very accepting of the person first, to befriend them, to really accept them for who they are as children of God and then slowly take him up an inclined plane and shine with truth. And they will actually see it with our lives because they will see what we and why we do things. They will ask us things. They will ask us for that *logos*, for the reason for our hope and that's when we will have to tell them why we do the things we do, why we believe the things we believe, and the greatest witness we will give is the witness of our lives, not- not of our arguments, not of our, you know, our great, brilliant insights and what not. We have to be, as Jesus describes John the Baptist, that burning and shining lamp.

Let us now conclude, and again, some practical insight here, because if this talk remains simply a commentary on Scripture, it is- it just remains theoretical. We have to do something about our lives. The first practical thing I would mention is that we need to set some time for spiritual reading. St. Josemaria recommended 10 - 15 minutes. Where do we get spiritual reading from? Well, the lives of saints, the Fathers of the Church, the Magisterium of the Church, there are many Classics than- that are well known. In fact, if you go to the St. Josemaria Institute page, you can find the list of books that are recommended for spiritual reading. St. Josemaria also recommended Biblical reading. And he did 5 - 10 minutes of spiritual reading, of Biblical reading, or New Testament reading and also Old Testament reading, but primarily the New Testament is something that is easily accessible to us because that's how we are to interpret the Old Testament in light of the New. In fact, that's what Jesus does for the disciples, going back to Emmaus, he interprets Moses and the prophets in light of what Christ had to suffer and go through, his passion, death, and resurrection - that's how we have to read the Bible, always with his new light of Christ.

When, recently they found an envelope with one hundred top passages frequently meditated upon by St. Josemaria. He just put all these slips of paper with passages that he had written out, and he- the thing on the envelope said these are frequently meditated upon by him; think that you and I could probably also have a list of passages from the Bible- Scripture that we frequently take to our prayer, you know. What is your top hundred list? What does it look like? Do you have one? You know, what is your favorite parable? What was your favorite miracle? What is your favorite passage in Scripture?

Those things are something that, you know, we can actually also do. So, not only set time aside in our day, 15 - 20 minutes, perhaps, for spiritual reading and Biblical reading, but also, taking notes is something that we have to get used to doing, taking notes. St. Josemaria would write down everything that struck him, you know, that these are the- these words are so powerful that I have to write them down and- and then he would put them in order in that shoe box type of filing system so that he could actually draw from them. When he was dry in his prayer, it's kind of like filling the reservoir because you never know, when your fervent, you have insights and sometimes the Holy Spirit allows dryness in our soul. And that's when we

have to take all these notes that we have taken, that have moved us, and they will move us again when we consider them in our prayer.

Think of what Our Lord says of every scribe instructed, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a household who brings forth from his storeroom, from his treasure, things new and old.” And this is literally our treasure box, you know, these passages from Scripture, these passages from other lives of saints that we can also treasure and meditate on so that when other people need our help, we have the right medicine for them. We know what Our Lord has said on certain occasions or we draw new insight from them. So, keep a file- a file cabinet, a little file box, or a notebook, or- or I use, personally, I use Evernote, which is online and you can tag as many topics as possible on any one note that you want, anything, even share them with other people electronically.

A third goal to draw some insight that we can put into practice that day from our spiritual reading or from our Biblical reading - what are you going to put into practice that day, maybe repeat an aspiration that has struck you from the Gospel or from your reading or some insight that you want to put into practice that other saints have put into practice or other spiritual authors have recommended.

These three things: making time, taking notes, putting them into practice. If we do this, we will be living words that transmit the Gospel. Like John the Baptist transmitted, he was crying out in the desert, he was the voice crying out in the desert, in the burning and shining lamp that did a lot of good for so many people. As the Book of Wisdom says, “A multitude of wise men is the salvation of the world.” We will be that bunch of people who are filled with wisdom, with the true- with the true wisdom of the Holy Spirit if we desire instruction, because the Book of Wisdom also says, the beginning of Wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction and that begins with meditation on Scripture and also how the lives of saints have been affected by the Word of God and how they have thanked God, left it in writing for us to also benefit from - a great act of charity on their part, an act of intellectual charity, as Pope Benedict would say.

Let us turn to Mary, who is the mother of the Word Incarnate. As the Fathers of the Church said, before she conceived of the Word in her womb, she conceived the Word in her intellect, in her mind and heart. She had to say yes. And that word that came was a word of hope, word from the angel to- ultimately from God delivered by the angel. That message was something she understood, she contemplated, she kept in her heart. She said yes to- she responded to it, and then it became incarnate. And that Word that was purely divine looked like her when she incarnated it, it took her own features. Jesus looked like Mary physically, but spiritually, she looked like him. So this word was conceived in her mind first, in her womb second, and then it was a force that drove her in haste to share it- to share this Living Word in an act of great charity with her cousin, Elizabeth - that is the paradigm of what we ought to do as well when we read and meditate upon the life of Christ and the life of those people who have continued to live the life of Christ in their own lives, the saints. First we study, then we put into practice, then we give it to others in an act of great charity.

Hail Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.



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