

Passionately Loving the Word: The Use of Sacred Scripture in the Writings of Saint Josemaria

By Scott Hahn

The world knows Josemaría Escrivá (1902-75) best as the founder of Opus Dei and the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. Members of the Catholic Church know him best for his personal holiness and intercessory power, and so, on October 6, 2002, Pope John Paul II canonized Josemaría Escrivá, declaring him worthy all over the world of public veneration and imitation.

In a certain sense we can fully understand the accomplishments of St. Josemaría, or the graces he received, when we come to understand his use of the Scriptures. For, in Opus Dei, he worked out a thoroughly biblical spirituality; and he himself saw the institution as built on solidly scriptural foundations. In perhaps the most powerful precis of his spirituality, the homily "Passionately Loving the World," St. Josemaría repeatedly claims the Bible as his primary witness: "This doctrine of Sacred Scripture, as you know, is to be found in the very core of the spirit of Opus Dei" (Conversations, nos. 116 and 114). "This I have been teaching all the time, using words from Holy Scripture" (no. 52).

Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the Bible always served as St. Josemaría's primary referential language. Though he was steeped in the teachings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, though he was fluent in scholastic theology, and though he kept current with trends in contemporary theology, it was to Scripture that he returned again and again in his preaching and writing, and it was to Scripture that he directed his spiritual children in Opus Dei.

He saw clearly the unity of the two testaments, the Old and the New. The Old Testament oracles did not lose relevance for St. Josemaría just because they had been fulfilled in the New. Rather, they shone with a new and more brilliant light. He did not hesitate to hold up the patriarchs and prophets of Israel as spiritual exemplars for Christians today:

When you receive Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist, thank Him from the bottom of your heart for being so good as to be with you.

Have you ever stopped to consider that it took centuries and centuries before the Messiah came? All those patriarchs and prophets praying together with the whole people of Israel: Come, Lord, the land is parched!

If only your loving expectation were like this. (The Forge, no. 991)

He quoted frequently from both the Old and New Testaments, but especially from the Gospels, to which Tradition has assigned a pre-eminent place (see *Dei Verbum* 18). Perhaps no phrases appear so often in his writings and homilies as those that invoke the sacred page: “as the Gospel tells us”; “as the Gospel advises ...,” “Sacred Scripture tells us ...,” “the Gospels relate ...,” “Remember the Gospel story ...”

According to Bishop Álvaro del Portillo – who was St. Josemaría’s most loyal son, confessor, and successor in the direction of Opus Dei: “I was myself always impressed with the facility with which he could cite from memory exact phrases from the Holy Bible. Even during everyday conversations, he would often take a starting point from some pertinent text in order to inspire us to a more profound prayer. He lived on the word of God.”¹

Scripture as a Measure

The founding of Opus Dei took place on October 2, 1928, when St. Josemaría “saw” the Work of God (as yet unnamed) as a way of sanctification in daily work and in the fulfillment of the Christian’s ordinary duties.

What did Opus Dei look like at that moment? We do not know the visual details, but we can glimpse the Work incarnate in the later writings of the founder. There, he spoke of the Scriptures as a reliable measure of his way of life, which was “as old as the Gospel but, like the Gospel, ever new” (*In love with the Church*, no. 26). At the beginning of his seminal work, *The Way*, he wrote: “How I wish your bearing and conversation were such that, on seeing or hearing you, people would say: This man reads the life of Jesus Christ” (*The Way*, no. 2). Conversely, in discussing those who do not live Christian charity, St. Josemaría said, “They seem not to have read the Gospel” (*Furrow*, no. 26).

His own reading of the Gospel and of Scripture in general, was illuminated by his particular foundational charism, which led him to develop ideas that had been passed over in previous theology. He is notable for his novel or renewed emphasis on certain notions found in the Scriptures: the universal call to holiness, for example, and the sanctification of ordinary life. Again and again,

he was drawn to contemplate the Gospels' tantalizing allusions to Jesus' thirty years of hidden life. Even in these relative silences he found a model for the "hidden life" of ordinary people working in the world

Study of the Scripture, then, was essential to his personal spirituality and to the program he developed for members of Opus Dei. He assumed that Scripture not only enabled readers to know Jesus, but also empowered them to imitate him. "In our own life we must reproduce Christ's life. We need to come to know him by reading and meditating on Scripture" (Christ Is Passing By, no. 14).

His Method

St. Josemaría practiced and preached a particular way to approach the Scriptures in prayer. His way is intensive rather than exhaustive. Bishop del Portillo recalled that the founder: "gave constant proof of an extraordinary veneration for Sacred Scripture. The Holy Bible, together with the tradition of the Church, was the source from which he ceaselessly drew for his personal prayer and preaching. Every day he read some pages – about a chapter – of Scripture, generally from the New Testament."²

This practice of daily study of the New Testament – about five minutes' time – St. Josemaría prescribed to all those whom he directed. He urged them, when they read, to enter imaginatively into the biblical scenes, assuming the role of one of the characters or a bystander. "I advised you to read the New Testament and to enter into each scene and take part in it, as one more of the characters. The minutes you spend in this way each day enable you to incarnate the Gospel, reflect it in your life and help others to reflect it" (Furrow, no. 672; see also Friends of God, no. 222).

Elsewhere, he developed the idea further, again emphasizing the imaginative effort as an almost sensory experience:

Make it a habit to mingle with the characters who appear in the New Testament. Capture the flavor of those moving scenes where the Master performs works that are both divine and human, and tells us, with human and divine touches, the wonderful story of his pardon for us and his enduring Love for his children. Those foretastes of Heaven are renewed today, for the Gospel is always true: we can feel, we can sense, we can even say we touch God's protection with our own hands" (Friends of God, no. 216).

The Power to Transform

Though his actual reading took only five minutes per day, we must not confine St. Josemaría's meditation on Scripture to those few moments. He also prayed the Scriptures in his daily Mass and in his recitation of the Divine Office. He frequently used biblical commentaries of the Fathers of the Church for spiritual reading. Indeed, he insisted that a Christian's personal meditation on Scripture must feed his mental prayer as well as the spontaneous prayer that fills his entire day. "For we do need to know it well, to have it in our heart and mind, so that at any time, without any book, we can close our eyes and contemplate [Christ's] life, watching it like a movie. In this way the words and actions of our Lord will come to mind in all the different circumstances of our life" (Christ Is Passing By, no. 89).

With the reading of Scripture, then, comes the grace of transformation, of conversion. Reading the Bible is not a passive act, but an active seeking and finding. "If we do this without holding back, Christ's words will enter deep into our soul and will really change us. For 'the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of the soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (Heb 4:12)" (Christ Is Passing By, no. 89).

Divine Filiation and the Revealed Word

At the heart of Opus Dei is a single idea. Said St. Josemaría: "divine filiation is the basis of the spirit of Opus Dei. All men are children of God" (Christ Is Passing By, no. 64). St. Josemaría experienced his own divine sonship mystically, one day in 1931, while riding a streetcar in Madrid. At that moment, he felt "in an explicit, clear, definitive way, the reality" of being a child of God, and he left the streetcar babbling "Abba, Pater! Abba, Pater!" (cf. Gal 4:6).³

That experience had a profound influence on his subsequent thinking, preaching, writing, and prayer. All Christian doctrine, he believed, can and should be considered in light of this truth. But we find a most powerful example of God's fatherly care when we contemplate that Salvation history is the story of God's fatherly plan for bestowing divine sonship on all men.

Many Fathers of the Church, most notably St. John Chrysostom, spoke of God's revelation in terms of "accommodation" and "condescension," which Chrysostom understood as fatherly actions. In order to reveal himself, God

accommodates himself to man, just as a human father stoops down to look his children in the eye. As a human father will sometimes resort to “baby talk,” God sometimes communicates by condescension – that is, he speaks as humans would speak, in the language of humans, as if he had the same passions and weaknesses. Thus, in Scripture, we read of God “repenting” his decisions, when surely God is never in need of repentance.

Yet human fathers do not only stoop down to their children’s level. They also raise their children up to function on an adult level. In a similar way, God also, at times, communicates by elevation – that is, he lifts his children up to a divine level, endowing merely human words with divine power (as in the case of the prophets).

Relying on God’s fatherly care, St. Josemaría trusted the word of Scripture as he would trust the words of his father. His filial confidence is exemplary of the timeless Christian belief that “the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author. ... Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.” (Dei Verbum 11).

Bishop del Portillo recalled that St. Josemaría exuded confidence in the divine origin of the holy Scriptures, not only when he preached and wrote, but also in his everyday conversation. “One sign of his reverence for Sacred Scripture was his habit of introducing his quotations with the words ‘The Holy Spirit says ...’ It was not just a manner of speaking; it was a heartfelt act of faith which helped us really feel the eternal validity of, and the solid weight of truth behind, expressions which might otherwise have sounded overly familiar.”⁴

Literal and Spiritual Senses

St. Josemaría placed tremendous emphasis on the imaginative assimilation of small details of the Gospel narratives. No word was superfluous for him; no detail so small as to lack significance. In his view, the Holy Spirit did not waste words.

Yet his care for the literal-historical sense did not render him blind to the Scripture’s “spiritual sense”. For the Church has traditionally interpreted the

biblical texts as both literally true and as spiritual signs of Christ, of heaven, or of moral truths (see Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 115-117). Indeed, though St. Josemaría never himself employed the terminology of “literal exegesis” or “spiritual exegesis,” he stands as one of the great spiritual exegetes of his time. I agree with Cardinal Parente, who observed that St. Josemaría’s commentaries on Sacred Scripture reflected a “profundity and immediacy often superior even to that found in the works of the Fathers of the Church.”⁵

Here, I could multiply examples. Consider this compact teaching from *The Way*: “Like the good sons of Noah, throw the mantle of charity over the defects you see in your father, the Priest” (no. 75). St. Josemaría evokes the scene of Noah’s shameful drunkenness (Gen 9:20-23) and draws out a stunning moral teaching for contemporary life in the Church. This is spiritual exegesis at its most concise and incisive. In a single line, we learn from our Old Testament ancestors why we should never spread scandal about the clergy, whom in faith we call “Father”.

We see another striking example of the founder’s spiritual exegesis when he compares the sins of Christians to the biblical Esau’s willingness to exchange his birthright for a bowl of lentils (Gen 25:29-34). For a moment’s pleasure, such Christians are willing to alienate themselves from God and even forsake heaven altogether. (He uses this image of Esau in several places. See, e.g., *Friends of God*, no. 13.)

St. Josemaría did not hesitate to actualize the biblical text by applying it to contemporary life, and here he stands in the line of great exegetes from Sts. Augustine and John Chrysostom to St. Anthony of Padua and Jacques Bossuet. Scholars call this extensive interpretation the “accommodated spiritual sense.”

Still, none of these spiritual insights supersedes the literal-historical truth of the biblical text, which St. Josemaría revered. In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, “All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal.”⁶

Thus, to lay a firm foundation, St. Josemaría made careful studies of what biblical science had to say about the cultural milieu of ancient Israel and the Roman Empire in the time of Jesus. His preaching on Christ’s passion, for example, shows that he was familiar with historical scholarship on Roman methods of crucifixion. His homilies on St. Joseph display a keen interest not only in philology, but also in the customs of ancient Jewish family life and labor.

Occasionally, St. Josemaría received extraordinary, divine illuminations revealing a particular spiritual sense of a biblical text. He reported that, on the feast of the Transfiguration in 1931, while saying Mass:

“When I raised the host there was another voice, without the sound of speech. A voice, perfectly clear as always, said, Et ego, si exaltatus fuero a terra, omnia traham ad me ipsum! [“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself” I Jn 12:32]. ‘And here is what I mean by this: I am not saying it in the sense in which it is said in Scripture. I say it to you meaning that you should put me at the pinnacle of all human activities, so that in every place in the world there will be Christians with a dedication that is personal and totally free – Christians who will be other Christs.’”⁷

This sudden insight had a profound influence on the subsequent development of Opus Dei. Surely, it came from God. But here as always, grace builds on nature and perfects it. What St. Josemaría describes is clearly an instance of infused contemplation – but one that is firmly based on a sustained and disciplined life of biblical meditation.

I can think of few anecdotes that so perfectly illustrate a principle sketched out by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in its 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*: “it is above all through the liturgy that Christians come into contact with Scripture ... In principle, the liturgy, and especially the sacramental liturgy, the high point of which is the eucharistic celebration, brings about the most perfect actualization of the biblical texts ... Christ is then ‘present in his word, because it is he himself who speaks when sacred Scripture is read in the Church’ (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7). Written text thus becomes living word.”⁸

Text and Context

St. Josemaría studied the Scriptures earnestly. He knew, however, that the Bible was not a self-evident or self-interpreting text. And, though God sometimes gave him supernatural lights, the founder knew that these were extraordinary phenomena – certainly not the usual way of coming to understand a text.

If he could not rely on his own lights, nor depend exclusively on mystical phenomena, where did he habitually turn in the ordinary course of his biblical studies? He looked to the Church and her living tradition, to which the ancient

Fathers are “always timely witnesses” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 688). A cursory glance at any volume of his homilies will reveal his intimate familiarity with the works of St. Jerome, St. Basil, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas.

St. Josemaría tested all his scriptural insights – even those he believed to be divinely inspired – against the witness of the Fathers and the papal and conciliar magisterium. For he well knew the dangers that lurked in an over-reliance on private interpretation of the Scriptures. Indeed, he found a clear warning on the matter – in the pages of the Scriptures! On the first Sunday of Lent, 1952, he reflected on the subtle ways Satan tempted Jesus in the desert:

It’s worth thinking about the method Satan uses with our Lord Jesus Christ: he argues with texts from the sacred books, twisting and distorting their meaning in a blasphemous way. Jesus doesn’t let himself be deceived: the Word made flesh knows well the divine word, written for the salvation of men – not their confusion and downfall.

So, we can conclude that anyone who is united to Jesus Christ through Love will never be deceived by manipulation of the holy Scripture, for he knows that it is typical of the devil to try to confuse the Christian conscience, juggling with the very words of eternal wisdom, trying to turn light into darkness. (Christ is Passing By, no. 63)

We may conclude from the current Babel of conflicting biblical interpretations that Satan’s methods have not changed much over the millennia. Amid such confusion, St. Josemaría stands out as a model of intelligent yet childlike faith. While many Christian exegetes spent the twentieth century retreating into agnosticism and irrelevance, St. Josemaría thrived on a complete and critically informed confidence in the Bible and in the Church as its infallible interpreter.

We can see, touch, and study his legacy in the Navarre Bible project, which he inspired. Initiated in the early 1970s at the University of Navarre in Spain, the Navarre Bible offers a reliable and beautiful translation of the Scriptures, supplemented by ample quotations from the Church councils, Fathers, and Doctors. This project has done much to enable non-theologians and non-ecclesiastics to enjoy the Bible as St. Josemaría did, and to be enriched by it as he was.

The Place of the Bible

St. Josemaría's most profound encounters with Sacred Scripture came not in his study or even in his oratory pew, but in the liturgy. Like the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, he saw the Mass as the encounter par excellence with Jesus Christ in "bread and word" (see, e.g., *Christ Is Passing By*, nn. 116, 118, 122; *The Forge*, no. 437). The Holy Mass, within which is found the Liturgy of the Word, is, for St. Josemaría, the "root and center" of interior life.

His homilies — which are saturated with quotations and allusions from both testaments of the Bible — always find their focus in the liturgical season, and specifically in the readings of the day. Indeed, he saw the Mass as the supernatural habitat of his homilies: "You have just been listening to the solemn reading of the two texts of Sacred Scripture for the Mass of the twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost. Having heard the Word of God you are already in the right atmosphere for the words I want to address to you: words of a priest, spoken to a large family of the children of God in his Holy Church. Words, therefore, which are intended to be supernatural, proclaiming the greatness of God and his mercies towards men; words to prepare you for today's great celebration of the Eucharist" (*Conversations*, no. 112).

Like the Fathers of the Church and the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, St. Josemaría looked upon the Mass as a particularly graced moment for receiving the word of God. The inspirations received in the Liturgy of the Word should be profound and lasting: "We now listen to the word of Scripture, the epistle and the Gospel — light from the Holy Spirit, who speaks through human voices so as to make our intellect come to know and contemplate, to strengthen our will and make our desire for action effective" (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 89).

The Virtuous Interpreter

In canonizing Josemaría Escrivá, the Church has held him up as worthy of imitation. There can be no doubt that such imitation must include intensive study of the Scriptures, meditative reading of the Scriptures, and disciplined prayer of the Scriptures. His own daily program witnessed to this. The "norms of piety" he followed — and which he bequeathed to his children in *Opus Dei* — are saturated in biblical quotations.

What is clearly central for him, however, is the encounter with Jesus Christ, the identification with Jesus Christ, to the point of becoming "ipse Christus," Christ himself. This goal must be attained through certain determinate means, among them the meditative reading of the Gospels. Thus, one cannot

understand or live the vocation to Opus Dei without at least aspiring to a high degree of biblical fluency.

Though he lived most of his life before the Second Vatican Council, St. Josemaría anticipated much of its teaching – certainly, at least, its emphasis on the universal call to holiness and apostolate, which had been a hallmark of Opus Dei since 1928. I believe, however, that he was especially attuned to the Church’s doctrines on Sacred Scripture – its truth, authority, inspiration, and inerrancy – which found such robust expression in the council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum.

As many laymen tend to see their wives’ best qualities described in the “virtuous woman” of Proverbs 31, so I tend to see St. Josemaría, who is a spiritual father to me, in the words of Dei Verbum 25. There, the Council Fathers offer their vision of the ideal priest. As I conclude, I would be so bold as to adapt their word to describe St. Josemaría and so many of the priests who have followed him in Opus Dei and in the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross.

They “hold fast to Sacred Scriptures through diligent sacred reading and careful study.”

They take care “so that none of them will become an empty preacher of the word of God outwardly, who is not a listener to it inwardly.”

They “share the abundant wealth of the divine word with the faithful committed to them, especially in the sacred liturgy.”

They “learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the ‘excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil 3:8).”

They “gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instruction.”

And they “remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together”; for, in the words of St. Ambrose, “we speak to him when we pray; we hear him when we read the divine saying.”