



Homily to Introduce the Pastoral Letter 'Living in the Word of God'

St. Joseph Basilica, Edmonton

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When I visit our Catholic schools, I usually have an opportunity to field questions from the students. In the elementary grades, the children seem to have a fascination with my age. When they ask me how old I am, I usually have a little fun. I begin by informing them that I was born in the mid-1900's. That invariably elicits a gasp. Then I mention that, at that point in ancient history, there were no personal computers or smartphones (wide-eyed disbelief). They wonder if I had TV growing up (!), so I explain that televisions were just beginning to move from black and white to colour screens; there was a grand total of two channels to choose from, and I was the remote control as I got up out of my chair and walked all the way across the room to change the channel manually (mouths agape in astonishment). I can't wait to get their reaction when I tell them we used "rabbit ears" for reception.

Communication modalities have, indeed, changed. We live now in a world of ever-expanding possibility: TV, radio, Internet, social media platforms, emails, texts, magazines and newspapers. They present us with a dizzying multiplicity of voices bombarding us minute by minute and competing for our attention. From amongst it all we make choices: we stay with a certain Internet site, we remain tuned in to a favourite television series, we follow particular Twitter personalities. The longer we remain tuned in, the more that particular voice or message will exercise its influence upon us and form our mindset, our way of thinking.

This raises what in my estimation are some of the most important questions that we need to be posing: to whom am I listening? Whose messages, ideas or opinions am I allowing to influence my thinking and hence my way of living? Why? The one to whom I listen is the one to whom I give my trust. Are the sources trustworthy? On what basis do I make this assessment?

I'd like to invite everyone in the Archdiocese to a particular form of very focused and attentive listening. Specifically, I'm inviting all of us to focus, to tune in, to the one voice we know we can trust, to the one message that is certain to lead us to what is truly for our good. The voice is that of God, and his message is that which He has given to the world in the Gospel concerning his Son, Jesus Christ. I'd like us to undertake this listening by making a deliberate effort to read the Bible every day. My invitation is being sent out by means of a pastoral letter that I've written and addressed to the whole Archdiocese. It was released last Thursday, September 14th. Entitled "*Living in the Word of God*," it spells out what it means to make God's Word the centre and foundation of our lives.

We are accustomed to hearing passages from the Bible every time we come to Mass. Are we in the habit of reading the Bible every day? It is precisely this habit that I am encouraging each and every one of us to cultivate. The reason is simple: when we read Sacred Scripture, God speaks to us. His Word is the clear light that guides our steps (*Psalms 119: 105*); it is the sure compass that helps us navigate the paths of our earthly journey towards eternal life. The reason is also urgent: too many voices today are offering falsehoods that seduce us away from the love of God and from fidelity to Him. The temptation to listen to these voices and allow them to impact the way we think and act is very strong. By living daily in the Word of God, standing firm by faith in the truth it proclaims, we become inoculated

against the cancer of falsehood that is always ready to take hold, and which can metastasize in our current communications environment with astonishing rapidity. The Bible is not just another book. As we read and ponder Sacred Scripture, God draws near and speaks. His Word is alive; in it we actually encounter the God who has become one of us in Jesus. When we allow His Word to take root in us, our lives find their true horizon and clear direction. To live apart from that Word is to wander in darkness; that is not God's will for us, His beloved children.

How do we do this? What does it mean, precisely, to live in the Word of God, to make it the very foundation of our lives? The pastoral letter answers these questions by highlighting a very simple instruction from Jesus. When people at one point told the Lord that his mother and brothers were waiting to see him, he famously answered that the members of his family are "those who hear the word of God and do it" (*Luke 8:20-21*). This is how we live in God's Word: we listen carefully to what God asks of us and then we put His Word into practice.

This formula for living in the Word of God, while rather easy to say, can be enormously challenging to execute. Just consider, for example, the biblical texts we heard this morning. In the Gospel passage, Jesus teaches Peter - and us - that our willingness to forgive those who hurt us must be without limit. When betrayal has been deep, that can seem like an impossible command. St. Paul reminds us that we live for the Lord and not for ourselves. In our culture of self-absorption, the call to surrender my desires to the will of God is a summons very hard to accept. Sirach teaches that wrath and anger can have no place in the heart of God's people. At a time when vitriol and name-calling are marking a great deal of human interaction, one might wonder if the divine Word could ever be put into practice.

Yet, we know there is no other way to life and happiness than to listen to and follow Christ, however difficult that may be at times. He who is the Way to eternal life speaks the words that lead us to this destiny. His words are clear: to follow me to eternal life, to be my disciple, you must hear the Word of God and do it.

So, let's do this. Let's live in the Word of God by deliberately seeking to hear what God says to us in Christ and by resolutely putting that Word into practice on a daily basis. And, let's do this together. The pastoral letter will spell out what this means, what we can do, and how we can support one another throughout the Archdiocese. The initiatives that are detailed in the letter will unfold over the next five years, but are meant to cultivate a habit that will last a lifetime.

There are many words coming at us today, that is true. Yet amidst the changing reality of communications media, there is one unchanging word that alone remains always worthy of our trust, that alone unlocks the key to life's meaning and direction: God's Word, given to us in Sacred Scripture. It is the only Word that matters. Let's resolve to hear it with thanksgiving and, with joy, put it into practice.

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