

One of the most reported news stories of the past six months has been the unrelenting drought afflicting an ever greater portion of the American heartland. In state after state, the lack of rainfall has taken its costly toll. Lakes, reservoirs and rivers have shrunk to record low levels, wells have dried up, livestock has died of thirst and verdant cropland has turned to a virtual desert under the blazing sun. The health and livelihood of millions of people have been threatened and the cost to the national economy is now reckoned to be in the billions of dollars. All of this because of a lack of such a simple but so essential thing as water. Without water there is no physical life on earth.

Our Lord speaks of water in the Gospel also, but a different kind of water – water that is essential, not necessarily for physical life, but for the life of the soul. We recall his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well in that marvellous scene preserved for us in the Gospel of John, chapter 4. At the Samaritan woman's question "*Where then, can you get this living water*", Jesus answers "*the water I shall give will become in you a spring of living water welling up to eternal life.*"

Over the centuries, theologians have seen in these words of Jesus an allusion to the Holy Eucharist, which he would later institute at the Last Supper. But they have also seen an allusion to Holy Scripture itself, the printed Word of God, which spiritually refreshes, rejuvenates, and 'wells up' in everyone who drinks from its pages. Because, just as life on earth is impossible without physical water, a true spiritual life is impossible without spiritual water – Holy Scripture.

Thus, it is no accident that the Word of God is the first of the six components mentioned in His Beatitude Sviatoslav's Pastoral Letter as being vital elements in the life of a Vibrant Parish. And this is why I want to spend some time in this month's issue of *The Sower* in speaking about the reading of Holy Scripture, or, as it is known in Latin, *lectio divina* – sacred reading.

Most, if not all of us, own a Bible. In some homes the family bible is displayed prominently in the living room. This is good but it is not enough. The Bible should not be treated solely as a family heirloom, or

museum artifact, which is admired from a distance but never touched. The best bible is one that has been opened frequently, that has been marked up with a highlighter, has notes written in the margins, is frayed around the edges and looks as if it might have even been dropped a few times! In other words a Bible is useless unless it has been read. And we should be reading the Bible, at least for a few minutes, every day.

How do we begin? Before we even pick up the Bible we must determine an appropriate time and place for sacred reading – *lectio divina* – in our daily schedule and try to stick with it so that it becomes a habit with us, a normal part of our day.

For some of us the best time could be in the morning upon awakening or just after breakfast before the preoccupations of the day begin. For others it could be during a break at midday, an oasis of calm in the middle of a hectic day. For still others, the best time could be in the relaxing hour before bedtime, when daily cares fade into the background.

The place we do sacred reading is just as important as the time. It should be a quiet place, perhaps a favourite easy chair in a nook of our living room where outside distractions can be kept to a minimum, a place where we feel peaceful and comfortable and which is conducive to quiet reading and reflection. The important thing is that, as much as we are able to, we should do our sacred reading at the same time and in the same place every day so that it becomes part of our daily routine.

Once we pick up the Bible and settle down to read we must be aware that sacred reading is unlike any other reading we do. It's not like reading a novel or a telephone book or a newspaper, because, in this 'ordinary' type of reading we actively seek something from the page in front of us, be it information or entertainment.

In sacred reading we are not the seekers, rather, we remain passive. We simply place ourselves before the Word of God in the sacred text and wait (and hope) for God to speak to us. We should acquire the same attitude as the prophet Samuel of whom we read in the Old Testament. If we recall, one evening when Samuel had lain down for the night, he heard the voice of God calling him and he answered him, "Speak, Lord,

for your servant is listening”. (1Sm 3:9) This should be our attitude when we do sacred reading.

In sacred reading we seek not to master or to grasp the sacred text, but rather, prayerfully and silently, to come into the presence of God through it. We seek to be humbly attentive to God’s Holy Word, to savour it, and to let it enter into our hearts as much as into our heads, so that it may transform us. Sacred reading is a true encounter with the living God through the medium of his inspired word. Such an encounter cannot be done on the run. Sacred reading is not speed reading!

Cardinal Thomas Collins, the Archbishop of Toronto, in his excellent book on *lectio divina* entitled *Pathway To Our Hearts*, suggests a way of practising sacred reading:

“Prepare by asking the Lord to make a pathway straight into your heart, so that his word will come to you. It is impossible to hear his gentle voice when your mind is roaring with distractions....we must ask the Lord to speak, and then be willing to listen.

The second stage is to read the scriptural passage through, slowly. It should just be a brief passage, maybe ten or twenty verses. You can’t do more than that because it should be just a slow gentle chewing of the word of God. Try one of the Mass readings for the day (Gospel or Epistle) – and then when we come to church, we do not come to the readings cold, but will have prayerfully encountered the Lord even before we show up. Read the passage through, one verse at a time, silently pausing and pondering each verse. Ask yourself, what does it say to my head to teach me about the Lord, to my heart to draw me to love the Lord, and to my hands to serve the Lord? Head, heart, hands. ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’

Just slowly go through verse by verse, preferably reading each aloud, following each by periods of silence. Consider what you think about this particular verse, what God is saying to you today through it. Encounter Jesus in whatever way the Lord speaks to your heart. Read the verse again; then go on to the next verse followed by a little silence, a little time to think. Continue through the passage like this, piece by piece. It won’t take too long. And then at the end, read the whole of it

again, followed by a little silence; and then end with a short prayer such as the Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be and the Sign of the Cross.

After this time of prayerful *lectio divina*, we have to return again to the busy freeway of life. Pray that through the experience of sacred reading, the Lord will illuminate our minds with heavenly wisdom, inflame our hearts with love, and empower us to do something: head, heart and hands.”

All of us have the capability and the grace to become masters in the art of sacred reading; it is not reserved only to monks and nuns. There are special challenges to be faced however, especially in our modern age of instant gratification. A common obstacle to fruitful sacred reading is impatience, a desire for instant inspiration. If we desire to receive lofty insights from every line of text, our expectations are doomed to disappointment. Remember that we are listening and not demanding. God works at his own pace and time.

Distractions that crowd our mind are another common frustration encountered by those who practice sacred reading. One exasperated person once said, “*Whenever I pray, my head is like a tree full of monkeys just chattering away*”. But that’s just the way it is so often when we pray or when we attempt sacred reading.

These obstacles can be gradually overcome through patience and perseverance. Don’t give up too easily. Be determined. Just repeat, “Come Holy Spirit. Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” Gently let go of all those things that are barriers.

The fruits of the sacred reading of Holy Scripture are many and long-lasting. Sacred reading can be that key that opens the door by which God manifests himself to us, who search for him. It can be transforming and life changing because continual exposure to the power of the word of God cannot but transform us into better, more faith-filled Christians. Gradually, day-by-day, if we are faithful to the practice of sacred reading, the word will become flesh in our daily life and we will always be aware of God’s loving presence at each moment of the day. How can this not positively affect what we do, what we say and what we think?

One scripture scholar has noted that, “*Sacred reading happens in an atmosphere of ‘wasting time’*”. Indeed, when we take time out to read the Bible, it can seem to others and even to us that our time could be better utilized in doing something more ‘useful’. Our society has programed us to produce, to demand, to rush from one thing to another. But sometimes the most useful and the most important thing is simply to sit at the feet of the Lord and listen.

We all remember the story of Martha and Mary, which we find in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Martha admonishes Mary because she is sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to him rather than helping in the kitchen. But Jesus gently rebukes Martha saying, “*It is Mary who has chosen the better part, which is not to be taken from her*”. (Lk. 10:42)

May we all strive to steal at least a bit of time out of each busy day to choose the ‘better part’, and become like Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus, being renewed, refreshed, and rejuvenated by his word.