Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s Center for Discernment
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09.26.08: Some Advice concerning the Difficulties of Reading Holy Scripture

Our interpretation of Holy Scriptures in the process of discernment is a rather complex and in some ways a highly personal affair. There are times when certain passages are wholly self-evident in their meaning and speak ever so clearly to us at that most intimate and personal level wherein God dwells. Then there are those passages that appear to be inexplicable, a mystery and even sometimes contradictory. There are passages which haunt us, and, when rightly regarded (namely treated reverently, that is without arrogance or presumption on our part, the latter of which we avoid when we take Scriptures seriously and do not dismiss troublesome passages by appealing, for example, to some historical fact or cultural practice of the time), again, when rightly regarded often reveal to us more than we care to know about ourselves, opening our vista to the Word in ways unforseen and at times painfully so. Other times, some Scriptures simply stand in our way, refusing to move and are mute, demanding of us consistent attention and contemplation, sometimes over the course of many years, even decades perhaps. Finally, even those Scriptures which seemed so self-evident to us at first, can and usually do, over the years, reveal unsuspected depths, and these as we grow in our faith and hope in, and love of, God.

What, then, should one do in these situations? Given the personal nature of discernment, I think it might be more appropriate to share with you the things that I have learned over the years when faced with these circumstances. And so, years of reflection and contemplation have taught me not to presume that I have understood adequately the depths and riches contained in any passage of Holy Scripture. I presume instead that the texts will speak to me in a further and deeper way than they currently do when the occasion arises and the need is great. As I have grown in maturity, in my understanding of the many and varied contributions made by the arts and sciences to the whole of the Western intellectual tradition and to our faith, in my practice of the moral and theological virtues, in the solidification of my character, in my roles as husband, father, advisor, friend, lover, citizen, and professor, and in the proper comportment of my person to both the Creator of all, and the futility to which creation itself has been made subject by the sin of Adam, I have become increasingly humbled before this marvelous text, this life-giving Word that comes from the heart and the mind of the Father. I have learned thus to be patient in the process of my own discernment, taking my lead from the example of Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus, a patience which has served to center my mind and heart correctly, a patience without which I would have been lost in the maelstrom of this world a long time ago. I have learned, furthermore, the vital importance of the community within which I pray, work, read and study, the friends and colleagues that I have, and especially the wife with whom I have been blessed, without which, again, I would not be anywhere near the man that I am today in mind, heart and spirit. All of this culminates in my growing and deepening appreciation and joy, to the point that they cannot be expressed adequately or justly: I am overwhelmed by the love and graciousness of God to his unworthy servant, and continue to be so even in those situations where the Scriptures stand as the occasion for personal doubt, self-recrimination, pain and just plain hard work. Once again, these lessons are expressed ever more so beautifully by the psalms (4 and 134) and reading (Deuteronomy 6:4-7) from Sunday’s Night Prayer (in the volume we are currently using — Volume IV — pages 1233-1235). I can think of no better words to have upon my lips and in my heart as I pass into sleep, and I can think of no better way for me at this time to approach the Word of God contained in Holy Scripture.

To this reflection, I have attached a piece I wrote several years ago describing how I came to grips with a Scripture that had haunted me for years, namely Matthew 7:6 “Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you.”

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