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Addresses

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In his book *A New Song for the Lord*, Pope Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Ratzinger) shared the following reflection, "The fact that God's words, something that God has said and is saying to us, are accessible in the world is truly the most exciting news I can imagine at all. [But] we are too dulled through everyday use to grasp the awesomeness of this statement." (Benedict XVI, *A New Song for the Lord*, 169).

Many things make the news. From the stock market to the sports field, many of us eagerly follow the daily headlines. But too few of us think of God's Word as exciting or newsworthy enough to be sought out every day. And therefore too *many* of us miss the most newsworthy event in life – the experience of God, the creator of the universe, speaking to us through His Word. But it is exactly the Word of God that is so needed for renewal, in our personal lives and in the culture around us.

Renewal is usually the fruit of some type of *recovery*. Today we hear a lot of talk about economic *recovery*. We understand -- some of us from unhappy experience -- the need for data *recovery* when a computer crashes. Or when someone is ill, we pray for a speedy *recovery*. In all these cases, we seek a *recovery* of something valuable that was lost.

So too, over the centuries, when God's people strayed from Him, renewal was needed. Time and again, in the history of the Chosen People and God's Church, renewal has come about by the recovery of God's Word. God's Word has the power to change hearts and history. And by recalling such periods of renewal in salvation history we can learn important lessons for our own day.

Josiah

In the Old Testament, the most dramatic example of renewal through God's Word is the story of Josiah, which is found toward the end of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. Josiah was perhaps the greatest of the Davidic Kings of Judah; a man who, amazingly, is too little known by Christians today. The story of Josiah is a story of the renewal of God's people through the recovery of God's Word, at a time in which the leaders and the majority of God's people had assimilated to the worst elements of the pagan culture surrounding them.

Josiah's grandfather was King Manasseh, whose 55 years of leadership over Israel marked one of the darkest periods for the people of God. Scripture tells us that Manasseh "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" which not only included pagan idolatry but also child sacrifice. He offered up even his own sons in sacrifice in the valley of Hinnom, and since the word in Hebrew for valley is "Ge" it was known as the valley of Ge-henna, a name that the New Testament uses as the metaphor for hell.

It's sobering that God's own people could so degraded by a pagan culture that they would sacrifice their own children. But obviously we don't need to look far to find modern parallels. Manasseh's son Amon continued the sins of his father, and was murdered by his own servants after only two years of rule. That left Amon's son, Josiah, as the ruler of Israel at the very young age of eight years old. Josiah had everything going against him, a culture that had imbibed for almost two generations the worst of pagan culture, a family that was far from the Lord, and immense responsibilities and almost limitless power handed to him at a very young age.

Yet, Scripture tells us that "while he was yet a boy, he began to seek the God of David his father" (2

Chron 34:3). Here's the first lesson that I want to highlight. To renew the Church and the world we need to begin with ourselves. It's tempting to see the moral problems of the wider culture and want to begin there, outside ourselves, focused on others. But all authentic reform begins within our own hearts.

Josiah purged the pagan altars from Jerusalem and the rest of Israel. Much of the Temple had been abandoned by his forbearers. Some of it had been adapted for various pagan cults. Josiah ordered that the Temple be cleansed and renovated. While cleaning out the Temple, the high priest Hilkiah discovered the "book of the law" (2 Kgs 22:8), referring to God's Word, specifically Deuteronomy and perhaps the rest of the Pentateuch. When the book was read to the king and the people, it was the first hearing of the Torah for that generation. In other words, things had become so perverse that Israel had completely lost the Word of God, this last copy being found in the nearly abandoned Temple.

When the "book of the law" was read, Josiah responded with humility and penance, and rent his clothes (2 Kgs 22:11). The people were moved by his example. They renewed the covenant and turned away from the paganism they had accepted. Josiah's reforms succeeded. He destroyed the pagan shrines in the valley of Hinnom, "that no one might burn his son or his daughter as an offering to Molech" (2 Kgs 23:10), he restored the Temple and its worship, and by his leadership the rift between God and His people was healed.

Renewal happened because Josiah recovered God's Word and made it available to *everyone*, as Scripture says he read Scripture to "all the people, both small and great" (2 Kgs 23:2). This is why in our own day Vatican II said that "The Church forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful . . . to learn the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ, by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures." (CCC, 133; DV 25). We need to remember the lesson of Josiah's witness; that is, that we need to hear God's Word, not just one day a week but everyday, until it soaks deeply into our souls. This is what Josiah did, and any personal and ecclesial renewal requires that each of us recover the daily practice of praying with and hearing God's Word.

Another key lesson to draw from Josiah is the need for hope in the midst of darkness. The culture of Josiah's day had capitulated to the worst forms of paganism. His personal pursuit of holiness flew in the face of his own family's wickedness. The Temple of Jerusalem itself had been converted into a pagan shrine, and all of this profanity had gone on for more than a generation. The God of Israel was abandoned so completely that the book of the Torah was lost.

To put it simply, Josiah found himself in a black time. Yet, as Ben Sira observes, "He set his heart upon the Lord; in the days of wicked men he strengthened godliness" (Sirach 49:3). Josiah did all this "in the days of wicked men." In other words, Josiah refused to despair in the face of the overwhelming task of reforming God's people. Instead he put his trust in the Lord and pressed on against the odds. Thus the Old Testament can say that "The memory of Josiah is like a blending of incense prepared by the art of the perfumer; it is sweet as honey to every mouth, and like music at a banquet of wine" (Sirach 49:1). The sweetness of honey is typically compared to God's Word, as is seen in Psalm 19 (Psalm 19:10), but since Josiah imbibed God's Word so deeply into his heart the memory of him retains the flavor of God's sweet Word. Our lives too must be infused with the sweet fragrance God's Word and the bright hope that it brings us in the midst of our own dark times!

Ezra

The Old Testament recalls a similar great renewal in the time of the priest Ezra, who led the Jewish exiles back from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. The return from exile was a bleak time for the Jews. They remained under the political control of the Persian Kingdom, and back home the Samaritans and others in the land opposed their plans for rebuilding Jerusalem and its Temple. Indeed, those who returned were largely impoverished from the Babylonian captivity and had few resources for the daunting task of rebuilding Jerusalem and Judah, which had been completely destroyed by the Babylonians. Intermarriage had become a problem, and a perplexing one from Ezra's perspective because it illustrated the people's lack of religious commitment, even after all they had suffered in the Babylonian captivity.

As the remnant of exiles gathered in Jerusalem Ezra read, as Josiah did generations before, the "book of the law of Moses" to all the assembly "both men and women and all who could hear with understanding" (Nehemiah 8:2). Once again, the reading of God's Word precipitated a renewal of God' people, and this Word was intended to be heard by *all* God's people, not just the professional

religious or experts.

I'd like to offer three lessons from Ezra's renewal of Israel through Scripture. The first lesson regards the kind of piety required to hear God's Word. When Ezra opened the book to read it, "all the people stood" in honor of God whose words were being spoken in their hearing (Nehemiah 8:5). The people's standing while hearing God's Word is much like our practice of standing during the reading of the Gospel, at the words of our Lord Jesus Christ. Both these acts of piety illustrate a vital point, that if we want to properly "hear" or "read" God's Word in Scripture we must do so with reverence. Augustine said that a sincere and humble piety is the precursor to understanding Scripture; we shouldn't forget this.

Second, when Ezra read the Word of God to the people he sent out leaders from the Levites who "helped the people to understand the law" and who "gave the sense so that the people understood the reading" (Nehemiah 8:7-8). God's Word, throughout Scripture, is always given within the context of the believing community. If we take Scripture out of its ecclesial context, the Church, we will not "understand" and catch the full "sense" of God's Word.

This recalls the story of Philip in the Acts of the Apostles which we recently read during the Easter season (Acts 8:26-40). On a road through Gaza, Philip encountered an Ethiopian eunuch, the treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia. As Philip approached the eunuch's chariot, Philip heard him reading from Isaiah, in the very place that spoke of the Lord's suffering servant. Philip asked the Ethiopian if he understood what he was reading (and it is worth noting that this official was reading the text in Hebrew while he was returning from a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem). The response of this court official was both honest and humble: "How can I, unless some one guides me?" (Acts 8:31). This was a favorite story of St. Jerome and many of the Church Fathers, who used the Ethiopian's answer to illustrate the need to have members of the Church, like Ezra's Levites, who can guide our reading of Scripture.

This doesn't mean you need an expert at your side in order to read Scripture. As Augustine says, the Bible's "plain language and simple style make it accessible to all" (Confessions 12.30). St. Gregory famously described Scripture as a river that has enough shallows that a lamb could cross and yet enough depth to submerge an elephant. In other words the plain sense of Scripture is open to all, but to grasp its depths we need good guides to help us navigate its riches.

This is why I strongly recommend that you find good and trustworthy guides for your study of Scripture. It's why the Denver Catholic Biblical School has teachers who have studied the Scriptures both academically and from the heart and mind of the Church. I think our Biblical School here is so successful because people find their "Philip" who can help open up the Bible and make it come alive for them. Look for these kinds of teachers, like the ones we have here at this conference, and learn the Word so that you too can help guide others. The Church desperately needs many such guides to bring about the recovery of Scripture.

The third lesson from Ezra's reform of Israel is that after he finished reading the Torah of Moses to the people, he summarized for them the narrative shape of Israel's Scriptures (Nehemiah 9). Starting with the call of Abraham, to the Exodus, through the time of the kings and prophets, and all they way down to his own present-day return from exile, Ezra grasped the story shaped contours of what we call salvation history. It is precisely the story of God that guides our own stories, and thus to discern the meaning of our moment in history and of our own lives means we must first grasp the plot of *God's* story.

The scholar Christopher Thompson described this point well when he commented on Augustine's famous insight that God has made us for himself:

The overriding motif of any narrative of Christian experience is the claim that 'God has made us for himself.' . . . This is the drama of the revelatory narratives: that I find in them, not confirmation of myself, but the very constitution of myself. I do not place the actions of God within the horizon of my story; rather, I place my story within the action of God.

(Christian Doctrine, Christina Identity: Augustine and the Narratives of Character, University Press of America, p. 99)

This means that we can't approach Scripture as if it were something that needs to be interpreted by us, but rather quite the opposite -- we need to let *Scripture interpret us, our lives, and our world.* To

read the world in light of Scripture, as opposed to Scripture in light of the world, is the hallmark of a Christian reading.

In short, if we can discern Scripture's story we can begin to see how the drama of that story continues today. The narrative thread of Scripture's story can then thread its way into our lives, weaving within us the text and texture of a life that is formed by God's Word. Augustine is right, God has made us for Himself, so any account of our own stories, our own lives, that does not make God the author and aim is just another idolatrous myth.

Francis of Assisi

In addition to examples in the Old Testament, other examples abound throughout salvation history of the Church being plunged into dark times where a few faithful souls rediscover the heart of Scripture and bring about the authentic reform that comes through the recovery of God's Word. As a Capuchin, I keep the example of St. Francis of Assisi near to my heart. Francis heard the Sermon on the Mount, not as God's Word in the past, not as a word to others, but he heard it as God's Word spoken to him personally.

This set Francis off on an adventure of recovery and renewal. Called to rebuild the Church in his day, Francis had a special devotion to Scripture. Indeed, it was the only book he would allow the early Franciscans to own and in his early movement any new members spent their first three years studying God's Word, so that they would be faithful heralds of God's good news. Scripture set Francis's heart aflame with the love of God, and with that fire he rekindled the faith and love of many who had strayed. This is our task today. As Francois Mauriac admonished, "The day on which you no longer burn, many others will die of cold." The best way to evangelize is to burn, like St. Francis did, for the love of God; and to sustain that kind of zeal you need constant contact with the fire of God's Word.

Second Vatican Council – Renewal in Our Own Day through God's Word

In our own day, the Second Vatican Council met to bring about a Catholic renewal in many areas, but one very particular focus was renewal of the Church through recovery of the Word of God. In every gathering of the council the assembly was led by a procession headed by the carrying of the Sacred Scriptures, adorned in a beautiful case. The Scriptures were then enthroned upon the altar in St. Peter's Basilica where the council gathered. The Word of God then, from the perspective of the bishops gathered from around the world, presided over the entire council. The point was that everything the Church teaches or does is in response to God's Word.

The Second Vatican Council produced many documents, but there were four that were given the title "constitutions" and thus were the primary areas of focus for the council. One of these four documents, entitled *Dei Verbum*, which means the Word of God, was on the subject of Scripture. One of the aims of the Council's constitution on the Word of God was to bring about a recovery of the primacy of Scripture in the life of the Church and all her children. This is illustrated in one of the famous lines from that document:

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of the life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body. (*Dei Verbum*, 21).

Here is one of the most profound statements of Vatican II: putting Scripture virtually on par with the Eucharist. And yet there is a profound parallel here, as the council recognized, for the Eucharist is the body of the Lord made flesh, and Scripture is the Word of the Lord made written. We must, as the Catholic Tradition makes clear, reverence both.

Just this past October Benedict XVI summoned bishops from around the world to discuss in a special synod how to better implement the renewal in Scripture that the council called for some four decades ago. Again, the aim of this synod was the recovery of Scripture in the life of the Church, which was the title for the synod and also the title for this conference. The Church is giving a clarion call to recover the ancient Christian practice of reading Scripture, of knowing God through His Word.

Conclusion

The Word of God listened to with obedience and lived with simplicity can still make news for those willing to hear, as it did in the days of Josiah, Ezra, and Francis. Indeed, it is precisely the recovery of God's Word that the Church is calling us to in our day, through the Second Vatican Council and the recent Synod on Scripture.

The Second Vatican Council concluded its Constitution on Divine Revelation with the words of the Apostle Paul to the Thessalonians, words especially fitting as we come to the end of the Holy Year dedicated to St. Paul, quoting: "that the Word of the Lord may speed on and triumph" (2 Thess. 3:1). *Dei Verbum* took these words of Paul as its closing prayer, in order that "we may hope for a new stimulus for the life of the Spirit from a growing reverence for the word of God, which "lasts forever" (Is. 40:8)." (DV, 26).

It's now our job to help the Church make the "Word of God" spread vigorously in our culture – a culture that desperately needs light to dispel its present darkness. So this is your task, beginning today: Be witnesses of the one, true, and loving God. Be faithful sons and daughters of the Church. And like Josiah, Ezra, and St. Francis, be disciples of the Word.