

**“Love the Holy Scriptures and Wisdom will love you”ⁱ
Some Insights from St. Jerome**

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

The year 2020 marks the 1600th anniversary of the death of one of the greatest minds in the Church’s history. Who is this man called St. Jerome? What can we learn from his wealth of biblical knowledge?

Eusebius Hieronymus (Jerome) was born in 345 AD at Stridon in Dalmatia in the northeast of Italy to a moderately wealthy family. Having received a very good early education in his locality, he proceeded to Rome, like most intelligent young persons at the time, to study rhetoric under the renowned grammarian, Aelius Donatus. Jerome’s greatest hunger, the quest for the ascetic life, led him from Rome to Antioch where he lived for a short time as a hermit in the desert of Chalcis. He was ordained a priest in Antioch. On his visit to Rome with his bishop, Paulinus, for the Church Council in 382, Pope Damasus discovered this rare gem and commissioned him to revise the Latin Psalms and the New Testament because of his biblical knowledge. Jerome soon retired to Bethlehem after the death of Pope Damasus, where he spent the last 34 years of his life in a monastery he had founded. He committed these years to assiduous study of the Bible and to writing. He is renowned and praised for his many Commentaries on Scriptures and for his masterpiece, the translation of the Latin Vulgate, which he could only undertake because of his laborious study of the oriental/biblical languages, namely, Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic.ⁱⁱ

From a Lover of Secular Writings to a Lover of Sacred Scriptures

Reading the Bible may be difficult for many Christians today. Compared to other books especially our favourite novels and classics, it may be dry and uninteresting. This was the same experience of St. Jerome.

Jerome had been an ardent lover of the Classical Latin writings (cf. Letter 53.7). It was difficult for him to let go of these books which he had brought with him from Rome to Bethlehem. His profound love for reading the Scriptures came as a result of a near death experience. “I was caught up in the spirit and dragged before the judgement seat of the Judge... Asked who and what I was I replied: “I am a Christian.” But He who presided said: “Thou liest, thou art a follower of Cicero and not of Christ. For ‘where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also... Yet for all that I began to cry and to bewail myself, saying: “Have mercy upon me, O Lord: have mercy upon me.... thenceforth I read the books of God with a zeal greater than I had previously given to the books of men” (22.30.) This experience was the turning point in the life of Jerome.

How then do we love the Scriptures like St. Jerome? This great saint would say, “Love to occupy your mind with the reading of scripture.” (130.7)

“Love Scriptures”

To love Scriptures, is to love Jesus, the Word of God made flesh (cf. Jn 1:14) and the greatest reward is that Jesus, who is also the Wisdom of God (cf. 1Cor 1:24) will pour out his love in return. This love is a great help to conquering personal weaknesses as Jerome teaches, “Direct both body and mind to the Lord, overcome wrath by patience, love the knowledge of scripture, and you will no longer love the sins of the flesh” (125.11). A knowledge of the Scriptures increases the love for it and the desire to immerse oneself deeper into it. Jerome writes, “What honey is sweeter than to know the wisdom of God? Others, if they will, may possess riches, drink from a jewelled cup, shine in silks, and try in vain to exhaust their wealth in the most varied pleasures. Our riches are to meditate in the law of the Lord day and night,

to knock at the closed door, to receive the ‘three loaves’ of the Trinity, and, when the Lord goes before us, to walk upon the water of the world” (30).

“Meditate on the law of the Lord day and night”

Jerome often invited his friends to “meditate on the law of the Lord day and night.” Although a quote from the book of Joshua (1:8), Jerome made this dictum his special guide. Meditating on the word of God meant reading and acting according to the Scriptures. Meditation has a twofold goal – prayer and action. While the first transforms the person, who has the “Scriptures in his hands and prays frequently” (cf. 79.9), the second transforms the people who benefit from the person who has meditated on the Scriptures.

“Learn by heart a portion of the Scripture.” (cf. 22.35)

Jerome insists on committing “a fixed number of lines” (54.11) to memory each day and never to “let the sacred volume be out of your hand” (52.7). In this way the scriptures will flow through our words and actions. In writing to Eustochium, Jerome advises her to wake up at night and recite some parts of the Scripture she had learnt by heart (22.37). If the scripture is our rule of life, we will be guided by it and live according to what God has laid down for us.

The emphasis on study of the Scriptures characterizes Jerome’s writings. He recommends the study of Scriptures for everyone in any state of life. He believes the mind must be willing to learn and study the word of God diligently in order to know the “difference between righteous ignorance and instructed righteousness” (53.3).

“Worse to be ignorant of my ignorance” (53.7)

St. Jerome points out that there is a great danger in claiming knowledge of the Scriptures when in fact one has not studied or do not understand it. He cites the example of the Ethiopian Eunuch who confessed his ignorance when Philip asked him what he was reading (Acts 8: 27-35). How then do we liberate ourselves from ignorance? Jerome counsels that, “If there is anything of which you are ignorant, if you have doubt about Scripture, ask one whose life commends him, whose age puts him above suspicion, whose reputation does not belie him” (22.29). Jerome knows that it is “difficult to understand the Holy Scriptures” (49.4) and that one cannot open the Holy Scriptures by him/herself (cf. 53.5) and so he proposes a solution.

“Have a guide to show you the way” (53.6)

The story of Philip, who helped the Ethiopian Eunuch, serves as a good example for Jerome to explain that there are those commissioned to teach the word of God. “Doing what Scriptures inculcate” (letter 48.15) requires both knowledge and the right guide. This is the role particularly of the clergy. Jerome insists that they (the clergy – priests and bishops) should know the scriptures, read them constantly and practice them (52.7) because they are the ones who teach others. Their “words ought to be seasoned by... reading of Scripture” (52.8). Jerome does not exclude anyone from the study of Scriptures, but his rule of thumb is that anyone who must teach the sacred book must be well trained in it (54.11).

“I cull these flowers from the holy scriptures” (130.9)

Jerome allowed the Scriptures to flow from his lips and his ink. He referred to scripture passages which he quoted so generously in his writings as flowers. This reveals a man who had soaked himself in the divine word such that it permeated every fabric of his being. Jerome invites us to love the Scriptures and allow it guide our lives.

He believed that “the word of God is a pearl and may be pierced on every side” (Letter 22.8). Thus, it should be employed in addressing various issues in life because it contains “countless divine answers” (22.10). A knowledge of Scriptures, for Jerome, can help in

resolving issues that border on every aspect of life, for instance, on the raising children in the way of God (107), grief (39), refuting errors (41.3; 41.4), and for fostering peace and reconciliation (82).

St. Jerome invites us to read the Holy Scriptures following the Sacred Tradition of the Church. The section on “Sacred Scriptures” (CCC 101-133) in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Divine Word, Vatican II) and *Verbum Domini* (Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI) offer great helps on how to approach the study of the Sacred Word today.

ⁱ P. SCHAFF – H. WACE (Eds.), “St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works”, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers VI*, W. H. FREMANTLE et al (Trans.) (New York 1893), Letter 130.20. All references in parenthesis refer to the letters taken from this book.

ⁱⁱ For further reading on the Life of St. Jerome and his Writings, cf. T. E. Page – E. Capps – W.H. D. Rouse (Eds.), *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, F. A. Wright (Trans.) (London 1933) vii-x; A. CAIN, *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 2009); P. SCHAFF – H. WACE (Eds.), “St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works”, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers VI*, W. H. FREMANTLE et al (Trans.) (New York 1893).