



God's Word is Living and Effective

*A Reflection on Father Simeon Leiva-Merikakis, O.C.S.O.'s Commentary
Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel according to
Saint Matthew and its Contribution to Contemplative Catholic Biblical Theology,
Scholarship, and Lectio Divina*



A Pastoral Letter from Bishop John O. Barres
to the People of God of the Diocese of Rockville Centre

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A Reflection on Father Simeon Leiva-Merikakis, O.C.S.O.'s Commentary Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew and its Contribution to Contemplative Catholic Biblical Theology, Scholarship, and Lectio Divina

"The written word of the evangelist: Is it not an incarnation of the spirit of Jesus's spoken word, breathed from his mouth of flesh on the roads of Palestine?"¹

Dear Friends:

I. Introduction²

In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church, *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI states, "there is no greater priority than this: to enable the people of our time once more to encounter God, the God who speaks to us and shares his love so that we might have life in abundance (Jn 10:10)."³ Sacred Scripture opens before us an avenue of encounter with the living God, for through the Scriptures the Lord "speaks to [us] as friends and lives among [us]."⁴ In his Exhortation, the Holy Father calls us to unearth the richness of the Scriptures so that "the Bible may not be simply a word from the past, but a living and timely word"⁵ that shapes us and molds us into saints⁶ who transform society in justice and truth.⁷ For through our daily encounter with Sacred Scripture, the Word of God himself, Jesus Christ, takes root in our lives and conforms us more closely to his own image and likeness.

The power of God's Word is known to us, and the appeal to mine the depth of Scripture resonates within. Indeed, we desire to understand and be formed by the Word of God, but a simple question remains: How? After all, study of the Bible can be confounding.

An answer rests in a recently completed set of Scripture meditations. Between 1996 and 2021, now-Father Simeon Leiva-Merikakis, O.C.S.O., a Trappist monk of Saint Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, published a four-volume set of meditations on the Gospel of Saint Matthew. Entitled *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word*, this remarkable commentary reflects the true spirit of Pope Benedict's call to encounter the

living God through Sacred Scripture and can be helpful as we seek to comprehend the Scriptures more deeply.

Though limited to one book of the Bible – the Gospel of Saint Matthew – the commentary is rich in content, opening vistas onto all of Scripture, and it is instructive on how to approach the Word of God. Therefore, in this pastoral letter, inspired by the publication of the fourth and final volume of Father Simeon's work,⁸ I wish to present to the faithful of Long Island and beyond key themes and insights from this commentary that will assist in our prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture, so that we, too, can encounter the living God in our day and age and "allow ourselves to be led by the

Holy Spirit to an ever greater love of the word of God."⁹

To that end, this letter will focus on three key themes which reveal the greatness of *Fire of Mercy* and its role in renewing our spiritual life through the prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture: (1) Qualities for approaching *lectio divina*; (2) the relationship between Sacred Scripture and the Eucharist; and (3) Father Simeon's contribution to Catholic biblical scholarship. However, let us first learn about the author himself, particularly about his life, work, and monastic vocation and explore more generally what biblical commentary is.



Father Simeon Leiva-Merikakis,
O.C.S.O.

II. Father Simeon (Erasmo) Leiva-Merikakis, O.C.S.O.: Overview of His Life and Work

Born in Cuba in 1946 to a Greek mother and Cuban father, Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis was immersed in language and culture from a young age. His family moved to the United States in his youth, and in time, he received a B.A. from the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, and then obtained a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature and Theology from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, where he wrote a dissertation on Hans Urs von Balthasar, a notable twentieth-century Swiss theologian. Leiva-Merikakis married and became

a father, and for many years, served as a Professor of Literature and Theology at the University of San Francisco, where, with Father Joseph Fessio, S.J., the founder of Ignatius Press, he helped develop the St. Ignatius Institute, a Catholic liberal arts program for undergraduate students that sought to restore the traditional Jesuit *ratio studiorum*.

Dr. Leiva-Merikakis taught courses at the university ranging from Greek literature and culture to ancient and medieval literature, to twentieth-century Catholic literature, in which figures such as Flannery O'Connor, Annie Dillard, Charles Péguy, Shusaku Endo, George Bernanos, and Evelyn Waugh were studied.¹⁰ A gifted linguist, with fluency in Spanish, Italian, German, Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, Leiva-Merikakis also translated theological works into English for Ignatius Press, including those of Balthasar and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. He served, too, as an official English translator of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

After a career in academia and developments in his personal life, Leiva-Merikakis entered Saint Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, in 2003 at the age of 56. There he took vows as a Trappist monk and received the religious name *Simeon*. He was ordained a priest in 2013, and after a period of ministry in Rome for the worldwide Trappist community, the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, he returned to the monastery in Spencer where he leads a life of prayer and work - *ora et labora*. He continues to write and lead retreats.

Father Simeon's unique biography, with his studies and gifts in language, literature, and theology prepared him to write *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word*. It is a true masterpiece of biblical commentary, capturing the depth of the Catholic biblical imagination and seamlessly weaving together linguistic, literary, philosophical, and theological themes into an eminently accessible and enjoyable work. Father Simeon's commentary is itself a piece of art that pleases the minds and hearts of his readers, inspiring each of us by its rhetorical beauty to dive more deeply into the mystery of the Word made flesh. He accomplishes such a remarkable task through his capacity to write as both a literary critic and spiritual theologian. From such an integration flows the Church's dogmatic, sacramental, exegetical, and theological beauty which Father Simeon threads together to provide the reader with a more intimate knowledge and love of the Lord Jesus and his Church through the sacred text.

In this way, *Fire of Mercy* echoes the spirit of the great Church Fathers who placed all their skills and talents at the service of the Gospel. Father Simeon, like Saint Augustine before him, utilizes his grasp of culture, art, science, and literature for the sole purpose of making known the liberating power of God's Word. *Fire of Mercy* frequently points readers to works of art, many of which are printed within the commentary, to help bring to life biblical scenes. The commentary also cites



literary figures, such as Flannery O'Connor, and spiritual masters, such as Saint John of the Cross.

Father Simeon's work reminds us that we, as biblically-minded Catholics, ought not fear culture or science, for the goodness found therein points ultimately toward Him who is goodness and truth incarnate. His approach to encountering Sacred Scripture opens to us the wonder of the biblical imagination, an imagination that is far more exhilarating than the flatness of a secular culture that has eclipsed biblical faith. In discovering the intimate link between culture and Scripture, we learn from *Fire of Mercy* how biblical faith shaped the minds and hearts of men and women across the centuries. Such an insight reminds us that any cultural, moral, or spiritual renewal of our age begins with a return to biblical faith.

III. What is a Biblical Commentary?

The Second Vatican Council reminds us since "sacred theology rests on the written word of God...together with sacred tradition" it follows that "the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology."¹¹ The importance of scriptural study emerges from the earliest days of Christianity. In fact, Saint Paul himself provides commentary on significant Old Testament events throughout his letters. For example, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle to the Gentiles writes, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ" (10:1-4).

Saint Paul teaches us how to read the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, for here the Apostle recognizes Christ's presence in the Exodus journey. Christ is the true source of living water, the true Rock that accompanies his Chosen People. Saint Paul's reading of the Exodus journey with a Christocentric key also teaches us about the different senses of Scripture. On the one hand, there is the literal sense which highlights the reality that the Israelites truly drank water which sprang forth from the rock in the desert (Ex 17:1-7). Yet, on the other hand, Saint Paul recognizes that there is also a spiritual sense which allows us "to acquire a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance in Christ."¹² For example, "the crossing of the Red Sea is a sign or type of Christ's victory and also of Christian Baptism."¹³ The literal and spiritual senses together allow us to encounter the living presence of Christ in Sacred Scripture.

The idea of a biblical commentary, that is, a series of insights and observations on passages of Sacred Scripture, arose among the Church Fathers who compiled treatises and preached sermons on almost every book of the Bible. The biblical commentaries of the

Church Fathers served an apologetic role in defending central tenets of the Christian faith. To do so, the Fathers followed Saint Paul in incorporating both the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture to highlight the harmony between the Old and New Testaments. Saint Jerome, Origen, Saint Irenaeus, Saint Clement of Alexandria, Didymus the Blind, Saint Ambrose, and Saint Augustine are among some of the many Church Fathers who composed biblical commentaries to arrive at a deeper understanding of the Faith. Saint Irenaeus, for example, in his treatise *Against Heresies*, demonstrates how the Virgin Mary's role in the Gospel of Saint Luke reverses what Eve forfeited in the Book of Genesis. Irenaeus thus describes the Virgin Mary as the "New Eve" who, through her obedience to the Angel Gabriel, untied the knot of disobedience sown by the virgin Eve.¹⁴

Over the centuries, biblical commentaries served not only apologetic ends, but also spiritual purposes in rousing the faithful to greater holiness and mission. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux stands among the great Doctors of the Church whose biblical commentaries continue to move the hearts of readers to greater knowledge and love of Sacred Scripture. His biblical commentary in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs* provides significant theological and spiritual insights on the meaning and nature of Christian charity and on the soul's relationship with God. Biblical commentaries were also prominent in the Scholastic Era. Indeed, medieval theologians were granted the title "Magister" or "Master" upon completion of a "biblical-centered program of study."¹⁵ Only upon reception of the title "Master of the Sacred Page" could theologians teach and provide commentaries on Sacred Scripture. Saint Thomas Aquinas is one such example of a "Master of the Sacred Page" whose biblical commentaries comprise "roughly a third of his overall corpus" of writing.¹⁶ As Jason Paone notes, "scriptural commentary was the primary task for which Thomas was trained, and when he completed his training, it was his official job description. The Bible was his textbook, and for the whole period of his tenure as a master (1256-1273), he taught no other text *ex professo* (by profession)."¹⁷

We might say Father Simeon's commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew is a continuation of the rich tradition of biblical commentaries that stretches back to the time of the Church Fathers. Indeed, *Fire of Mercy* utilizes the skill and rhetorical beauty of the Fathers, the precision of the Scholastics, and an awareness of the rhythm and pulse of the contemporary world.

IV. *Fire of Mercy* and the Renewal of *Lectio Divina*

In *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI called for a renewed appreciation of the practice of *lectio divina* by which the faithful could enter more deeply into a prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture.¹⁸ *Lectio divina*, literally translated as "divine reading," is a method of approaching Scripture "where the Word of God is so



read and meditated that it becomes a prayer..."¹⁹ As the noted French theologian Father Louis Bouyer wrote of Father Simeon's commentary, "at last [one] [dares] to offer Catholics a true *lectio divina*, a meditative reading of the divine Word that is at once rigorously critical and deeply moving."²⁰ Father Simeon's work elicits such high praise, for rather than employing his many skills to build a "fence which block[s] access to the Bible for all the uninitiated,"²¹ he instead makes accessible to the reader the Gospel's "integral feel and fullness."²² Father Simeon accomplishes this task through his extraordinary ability to allow the ordinary reader an encounter with "the many resonances of the original Greek text of sa."²³ Father Simeon's masterful command of ancient languages combined with his astonishing ability to communicate the substance of the original Greek to the uninitiated reader provide a glimpse into the dynamic spirit that gave birth to the commentary. As Father Simeon himself explains:

[A] certain awe took hold of me at the sight of the Greek words shimmering with their accents and breathings in the autumn morning...sunlight. The Greco-Latin New Testament on the table before me was a rather old book and, in a certain angle of light, you could actually see the three-dimensional quality of the letters on the page. The Greek words were almost palpably, though silently, exploding with urgent meaning, before my eyes and in my spirit. Without giving it much thought, I began to scribble down the drama being enacted by those letters on the page before me. I had the

sense of being no more than a dazzled witness.²⁴

Father Simeon approaches the sacred text, not in a spirit of domination and control, but in a spirit of contemplation and wonder, for the text itself is given to us as a gift in front of which we stand as "dazzled witness[es]."

We must note, however, that it is not merely Father Simeon's linguistic skill that makes his commentary a model of the *lectio divina* called for by Pope Benedict XVI in *Verbum Domini*. The greatness of Father Simeon's commentary emerges not only in his skill but even more so in the author's faith. Father Simeon's commentary moves the reader to prayerful reflection on the Word of God because he himself has been convicted and transformed by that same Word. Readers receive inspiration from Father Simeon's commentary because he reveals to them the dynamic power of Christ bursting forth through the sacred page. The commentary's true greatness arises in Father Simeon's ability to make Jesus Christ, the Word of God, known to the reader. It is for this goal alone that Father Simeon employs his linguistic, literary, and theological skills. As Father Simeon himself states: "In the end, the only purpose of my writing is to provoke prayer by staging an intense encounter between my readers and the enthralling presence of God in Christ Jesus."²⁵

Father Simeon helps the reader to encounter the "enthralling presence" of Christ through his approach of reading Sacred Scripture "with the heart." Father

Simeon calls this approach the “cordial reading” of Sacred Scripture.²⁶ This cordial approach differs from an overly scientific approach to biblical scholarship that, as Father Simeon argues,

tends to dissect the divine Word like a corpse, an exegesis that tends as well to squander the vital energy of the contemplative gaze by depriving it of its whole and living object and to banalize the sacred text by reducing it to the status of a document exclusively conditioned by the social, philosophical, and political situation of its time.²⁷

The cordial method of reading Sacred Scripture, however, “seeks to latch on to the impulse of life awaiting for us within the text...[for] we...put ourselves in a position of being illumined by the radiance of the text, of making ourselves available to its light, of being led by the hand of the Word on a pilgrimage through what the Fathers called the [paradise of the scriptures].”²⁸ Such an approach stands before Sacred Scripture in a position of gratitude and wonder, eliciting within the reader a spirit of contemplative receptivity to the movement of God’s grace. In this way, “[t]he Christian goes to the text of God’s written Word in an attitude of prayer like the Samaritan woman’s as she went to the well with her bucket: he follows the instinct of thirst and is drawn to the place of water there to discover instead Jesus in the scorching noonday solitude, that Jesus who, in the magnificent formulation of Irenaeus of Lyons, is *the fountain that thirsts to be drunk*.²⁹

While Father Simeon’s commentary is itself a reflection of his own practice of *lectio divina*, he also provides readers with nine “qualities” of developing the habit of prayerful reading of Scripture. For our own growth in this discipline of prayer, it is worth listing and highlighting them here.

According to Father Simeon, *lectio divina* should be:

1. *Leisurely*: “its rhythms flow from total open-endedness.” Father Simeon references here Josef Pieper’s *Leisure the Basis of Culture*. Leisure, he writes, “cultivates the human heart so as to activate its highest potencies.”³⁰
2. *Ruminative*: “For me ‘ruminating the word’ (a favorite monastic image) means, among other things, staying very close to the text itself, turning its individual words over and over in the ‘mouth’ of my intelligence and imagination, until all their potential for nourishment has been extracted.”³¹
3. *Cordial*: “*lectio* thrives on the freedom of the heart to follow its own instinct...the logic of the heart must be granted primacy...Thus, *lectio* is quite different from the historical-critical method, which, by imposing strict scientific principles of its own, necessarily excludes cordial freedom.”³²
4. *Contemplative*: “a listening heart, above all, and

a high receptivity of spirit and imagination that makes us permeable to transcendental realities.”³³

5. *Disinterested*: “without predetermined goals or functions, in the same way that the so-called ‘liberal arts’ are free because they are pursued for their own sake.”³⁴
6. *Provocative*: “The Word of God must never be a soothing narcotic. The living Word and our encounter with it should be a ‘pro-vocative’ experience in the sense that here God *calls us forth* imperiously out of our own comfort zones and offers us new life on his own conditions.”³⁵
7. *Ecclesial*: “An ecclesial reading must be above all, *Christocentric*, since the Church, like the bride of the Canticle and like John the Baptist, perceives the voice of her Bridegroom behind every word of Scripture, and she sees every word of Scripture as converging upon the living Word that Christ is.”³⁶
8. *Transbiblical*: “This word refers to the need for our *lectio* to ‘breathe’ freely by our allowing a tranquil free-association to occur between a particular text and many other texts that may be evoked by it in our minds.”³⁷ We need to be attentive to how the sacred author connects and references other biblical texts.
9. *Mystagogical*: “A mystagogical approach to the Word of God requires that the concerned person open himself up subjectively to the transformation by habitual contact with God’s fiery Word.”³⁸

Father Simeon’s nine “qualities” of approaching *lectio divina* reveal that a contemplative approach to reading Sacred Scripture in no way surrenders the academic rigor of biblical analysis. As he writes, “analysis and prayer need not contradict one another; the former in fact, can often be the warrant for the latter remaining rooted in the authentic object of faith.”³⁹

V. Sacred Scripture, the Liturgy and the Eucharist

Father Simeon’s commentary, in addition to assisting us in our prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture, also helps us grow in knowledge and love of the Catholic Mass and the Church’s liturgical tradition. This makes sense because to be on fire with the Word of God is to be on fire with love of the Catholic Mass, for at every Mass the Word of God is both proclaimed in the readings and made incarnate in the Eucharistic Mystery. As Father Simeon explains, “how could [the Scriptures] ever stand without [the Eucharist], since the Word must become flesh in the Eucharist and the Eucharist must grow out of the ground of the Word?”⁴⁰ Father Simeon’s commentary, therefore, often refers readers back to prayers, antiphons, and hymns from the

Sacred Liturgy. *Fire of Mercy* teaches us that our reading of Sacred Scripture never occurs in isolation, but rather, emerges from within the heart of the Church, that is, within the communion of faith as manifested in the Sacred Liturgy.

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in *Verbum Domini* that “the liturgy is the privileged setting in which God speaks to us in the midst of our lives.”⁴¹ The late pope teaches that “a faith-filled understanding of Sacred Scripture must always refer back to the liturgy, in which the word of God is celebrated as a timely and living word.”⁴² Thus, Pope Benedict explains that the Church “proclaims and listens to sacred Scripture following the rhythm of the liturgical year. This expansion of God’s word in time takes place above all in the Eucharistic celebration and in the Liturgy of the Hours.”⁴³ Father Simeon follows Father Louis Bouyer in affirming this intimate connection between Sacred Scripture, the liturgy, and the Eucharist. Bouyer makes the following observation:

The best contemporary biblical critics have realized that our Gospels were not written for solitary reading by an individual but rather for the liturgical celebration of a believing community. This is why the individual reader needs having the Gospel text restored to the context of praise and Eucharistic Presence where it belongs. By continually seeking the way in which every episode in the Gospel has a sacral, eucharistic orientation, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word* keeps the Gospel text from losing its original relevance and relief and from being flattened out into a network of “messages” and “propositions,” the epidemic habit of moralistic and rationalistic reduction we cannot seem to shake.⁴⁴

Indeed, “Word and Eucharist are so deeply bound together,” Pope Benedict writes,

that we cannot understand one without the other: the word of God sacramentally takes flesh in the event of the Eucharist. The Eucharist opens us to an understanding of Scripture, just as Scripture for its part illuminates and explains the mystery of the Eucharist. Unless we acknowledge the Lord’s real presence in the Eucharist, our understanding of Scripture remains imperfect.⁴⁵

Father Simeon, echoing the thought of Pope Benedict, states that,

wherever we may begin searching for illumination and life in God’s written Word, we will inevitably be led to the celebration of the Holy Eucharist as the unsurpassable fulfillment of every aspect of revelation. *The Word became flesh*, not in paper and ink, not ephemeral thought or pious reflection. Therefore the written word, by its very nature, structure, and rhythms, wants to take us to the intimate participation in the living Person of the Word that only the Eucharist can bestow.⁴⁶

Thus, “all prayer and all meditation on the meaning of Sacred Scripture,” Father Simeon explains, “including



VI. Father Simeon's Contribution to Catholic Biblical Scholarship

Finally, in this pastoral letter, I also wish to highlight the significant contribution of Father Simeon's commentary to twentieth and twenty-first century Catholic biblical scholarship. *Fire of Mercy* answers the Second Vatican Council's call for biblical scholars "to provide nourishment of the Scriptures for the people of God, to enlighten their minds, strengthen their wills, and set men's hearts on fire with the love of God."⁵¹ In this way, Father Simeon finds his place within the great arc of Catholic biblical scholarship, for he skillfully rises above the extremes of competing theories of biblical exegesis and enters into conversation with noted scholars and theologians of the past century. As we will discover, Father Simeon's contribution emerges within his skillful application of what Pope Benedict XVI would call "canonical exegesis," that is, the necessity of "reading the individual texts of the Bible in context of the whole."⁵² As Father Simeon writes, "the Bible is the complete inspired canon of God's one revealed Word, richly varied and endlessly complementary in its sources and genres and yet admirably unified and deeply harmonious in its internal correspondences and the homogeneity of its divine intent."⁵³

Father Simeon's appreciation for the unity of Sacred Scripture springs forth from what he calls the "logic of the heart," that is, the "cordial" reading of Sacred Scripture which is "also a logic of fire, because sparks of illumination and longing can fly off in every direction."⁵⁴ Thus, *Fire of Mercy* connects biblical passages that might not appear obvious on first reading, but when read again in light of the whole of Scripture unearth fundamental insights about God's revelation. For example, Father Simeon writes, "the truly astonishing connotations of Jesus' call for us radically *to be with him* (Mark 3:14) cannot be fathomed apart from God's manifest desire from the beginning 'to delight in the sons of men' (Prov 8:31) and dwell among his people, a desire that leaps up from almost every page of the Bible and is the foundational force that created both Israel and the Church."⁵⁵

Though the work is not able because of its scope to interact substantially with other contemporary biblical scholars, Father Simeon's commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew provides a transformative contribution to contemporary Catholic biblical scholarship insofar as it offers to the Church a robust, rigorous, and substantive examination of Sacred Scripture while retaining that "cordial" approach to exegesis. In other words, Father Simeon seeks to preserve a prayerful and mystical encounter with the Person of Jesus Christ in the Gospel without compromising his commentary's intellectual thrust.

As we have seen, according to Father Simeon, the cordial approach to lectio "is quite distinct from a study of Scripture according to the historical-critical



Saint Matthew and the Angel
(c. 1661) by Rembrandt
portrays the evangelist
composing his Gospel
under divine inspiration;
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

this commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, are but a preparation that enables us to enter the more thoroughly and effectively into the Eucharistic Mystery."⁴⁷ Father Simeon's commentary reflects this symbiotic relationship between Word and Eucharist, not simply through the commentary's frequent citations of prayers and antiphons from the Sacred Liturgy, but above all in his ability to manifest how "God's love [which is revealed] in the Word" has "become fulfilled in the Sacrifice and the Communion."⁴⁸ For the Scriptures reveal to us that from the beginning of creation God has longed to "share exhaustively all that he is" with us his beloved people. God's intense desire for such self-gift and union is fulfilled in the Holy Eucharist, the "Bread of Full Presence."⁴⁹ For "when the Lover happens to be the Creator of the universe, what he longs to give is nothing less than the fullness of his own torrential Trinitarian life, tenderly held out to us in the most delightful fare, en-fleshed in the person of Blessed Mary's Son, our Eucharistic Jesus."⁵⁰

method, which, by imposing strict scientific principles of its own, necessarily excludes cordial freedom.”⁵⁶ However, for Father Simeon, “This does not mean that a cordial approach to *lectio* is uncritical or anti-intellectual or that it can allow itself any fanciful extravagance. Quite simply, it aims at something different, unique, and vital that cannot be attained in any other way” for it “thrives on the freedom of the heart.”⁵⁷

This “freedom of the heart” allows the reader to see the inner unity and harmony of the Bible by drawing connections between the various books that illumine the whole. In other words, the Bible is not a collection of isolated and contradictory books. In this way, Father Simeon’s commentary takes on a truly Patristic character. For, as Father Simeon writes, such an approach to reading Scripture:

Characterized the *lectio* of all the Fathers of the Church...On any one page of Bernard of Clairvaux, for instance, there can be anywhere from five to twenty direct or indirect allusions to biblical texts other than the one he is specifically pondering. And yet these are not really “quotations” or “supporting texts;” they are more like instantaneous stems and boughs sprouting from a main branch.⁵⁸

“Bernard,” continues Father Simeon, “so internalized the whole of Scripture by a lifetime of assiduous *lectio* that what he offers in his writings is a seamless and magnificently nourishing text of his own. At first glance, you would not notice its transbiblical nature if it were not for the editorial footnotes and italics.”⁵⁹ Father Simeon’s transbiblical associations build on the evangelist’s own quotations and allusions to the Old Testament. The Patristic character of Father Simeon’s commentary also emerges in his pastoral sensitivity, that is, in his desire to “provoke prayer by staging an intense encounter between [his] readers and the enthralling presence of God in Jesus Christ.”⁶⁰ Such an encounter, Pope Benedict XVI notes, “is evident particularly in the Fathers of the Church.” “Saint Jerome,” Benedict writes,

in his great love for the word of God, often wondered: “How could one live without the knowledge of Scripture, by which we come to know Christ himself, who is the life of believers?” He knew well that the Bible is the means “by which God speaks daily to believers.” His advice to the Roman matron Leta about raising her daughter was this: “Be sure that she studies a passage of Scripture each day... Prayer should follow reading, and reading follow prayer...” Let us follow the example of this great saint who devoted his life to the study of the Bible and who gave the Church its Latin translation, the Vulgate, as well as the example of all those saints who made an encounter with Christ the center of their spiritual lives.⁶¹

Father Simeon fosters such an encounter with the living God in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew through his incorporation of Patristic thought. For example, Father Simeon utilizes an insight from Saint

Ambrose to underscore the spiritual significance of the disciples’ desire for Jesus to explain the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat (Mt 13:24-30). Father Simeon writes,

by this request [the disciples] confess that only the Word in person can grant access to God’s mysteries. They are hungry for the truth, for the light...The disciples realize that the very life of their souls depends on their going apart with Jesus in this manner, as St. Ambrose says: “Your Word gives me life” [Ps 118 (119):50]. This Word is the vital sustenance of our soul. The life of our soul grows as the dialogue with God grows in our soul, when we welcome, understand, and embrace the Word. We should, then, strive to put aside all else so as to gather up within God’s words and make them permeate our deepest being – feelings, concerns, thoughts, and actions.”⁶²

Father Simeon builds upon this insight from Saint Ambrose, stating that, “if we can be so bold as to insist through prayer that the Son manifest divine secrets to us, our boldness is only nourished by his own condescension, for we have heard him say to us: No longer do I call you servants...; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn 15:15).⁶³

Father Simeon here gives readers a spiritual lesson through wisdom handed down to us from one of the Fathers of the Church: to make bold our desire for Jesus to reveal to us the inner life of God. Here we see also the “transbiblical” or “canonical” exegetical approach at work, for both Saint Ambrose and Father Simeon connect this passage from Saint Matthew’s Gospel to other books of the Bible. In this way, they highlight the unity of faith and demonstrate how each passage from the Bible contains within itself a glimpse of the whole.

Father Simeon also employs this Patristic insight as a means for teaching readers about the life of prayer, encouraging us to be bold in our desire to see the inner life of God. We should not be shy in presenting this request in prayer, for Christ himself calls us his friends and reveals to us all that he has heard from his Father (Jn 15:15). We also discover in this example from *Fire of Mercy* that biblical exegesis should always maintain a pastoral focus. In other words, biblical scholarship should nourish prayer and instruct the faithful about Jesus. This pastoral dimension to Father Simeon’s biblical scholarship mirrors that of the Church Fathers who always concerned themselves with the Person of Jesus, with making known to their readers the inner life of God revealed to us in Sacred Scripture.⁶⁴

This exegetical approach, which Father Simeon describes as “transbiblical,” responds to the call of the Pontifical Biblical Commission for biblical scholars to recognize that “[a]lthough each book of the Bible was written with its own particular end in view and has its own specific meaning, it takes on a deeper meaning when it becomes part of the *canon* as a whole.”⁶⁵ Pope Benedict XVI undertakes such an approach, also known

The Calling of Saints Peter and Andrew (c. 1603-1606) by Caravaggio depicts the moment Christ calls the two brothers to discipleship (Matthew 4:18-20); Royal Collection, Hampton Court Palace, London.



as “canonical exegesis,” in his masterful biblical trilogy *Jesus of Nazareth*.⁶⁶ The Second Vatican Council, Benedict notes, already called for such a method of reading of Scripture in *Dei Verbum*.⁶⁷ As the Council states, “[S]ince Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out.”⁶⁸

A marvelous example of Father Simeon applying this transbiblical or canonical reading of Scripture is seen in his commentary on the calling of the first four disciples: Peter, Andrew, James, and John (Mt 4:18-22). Father Simeon connects their calling back to the Book of Genesis and forward to the Transfiguration. As Father Simeon writes:

The scene by the Sea of Galilee is reminiscent of the Lord walking about the Garden of Eden looking for Adam and Eve after our first parents had sinned. As he begins his redemptive mission, Jesus appears to be on the search to undo the rebellion that had been perpetuated in Eden. Human beings had sinned then, and it

must be human beings who obey now.⁶⁹

Thus, Father Simeon observes, “we have Jesus’ promise to remake Peter and Andrew, to re-create them on a wholly different plane of existence [from that of Adam and Eve], if they would but ‘come after him.’ What Adam and Eve had lost by their own choice Peter and Andrew may regain by their own choice, and the condition is precisely unconditional adherence and obedience to the incarnate Word.”⁷⁰ Our vocation, our own unique call to follow Jesus through a particular state in life, is thus always a moment of new life, a moment of re-creation.

Father Simeon continues, referring now to the calling of James and John as they were preparing their fishing nets, noting that “the presence of the Incarnate Word strolling by the Sea of Galilee suddenly transfigures the apparently banal scene and makes it yield the full treasure of divine predestination it contains. The humblest human task, if embraced with love, exhibits to the loving eyes of the Word the full imprint of divinity hidden deep within it.”⁷¹ “The Sea of Galilee,” Fa-

ther Simeon writes: “thus becomes a cosmic symbol: the fishermen working silently on its shores are an image of the Creator God of Genesis...The Lord Jesus is the consummate poet: he sees the depth of the eternal beauty and truth contained in the humble concreteness of busy hands, straining torsos, splashing waves.”⁷²

Another example of Father Simeon’s application of a cordial and canonical reading of Sacred Scripture can be found in his analysis of Peter’s denial of Jesus. Father Simeon writes,

[Peter’s] real *love* for Jesus impels him to be as close to his friend as possible in this dark time, but his equally real *fear* dictates supreme caution. Striving to pass *incognito* is his compromise between the two conflicting emotions battling in his heart. But God loves Peter too much to allow him to get away with this halfhearted arrangement; and so divine grace comes to chivvy Peter out of his mole-hole, in the form of two servant girls and some by-standers. When fear and love both coexist in our hearts, the fear must somehow be exorcised so that we may come to love with the full energy of our whole heart.⁷³

Father Simeon underscores God’s merciful love for Saint Peter by demonstrating how these women who question Peter’s relationship with Jesus serve not as temptations, but rather, as instruments for Peter to purify and strengthen his love for the Lord.

Father Simeon then utilizes a canonical or transbiblical reading of Scripture by linking this passage from Saint Matthew’s Gospel to an event in Saint John’s Gospel:

The maid’s charge does not, at first, seem to amount to much: Peter is guilty, she hints, simply of keeping company with Jesus. However, when we give such association the full weight it deserves in light of Jesus’ deepest intentions, then we grasp the seriousness of the accusation. ‘Abide in me, and I in you,’ says Jesus to the disciples in John. “As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me” (Jn 15:4). This is what the simple statement *to be with Jesus* truly means. Jesus’ explicit desire that the disciple should *be with him*, in fact, reveals a vocation to such an intensity of friendship, loyalty and interiorized imitation that it practically amounts to a call to self-identification between Master and disciple.⁷⁴

Here we discover again how reading individual passages of Scripture in light of the whole helps us discover deeper spiritual and theological insights from the sacred page.

Fire of Mercy also responds to Pope Benedict XVI’s call to keep God as the subject of theological inquiry. As the pope states:

God, in reality, is not the object but the subject of theology. The one who speaks through theology, the speaking subject, must be God himself. And our speech and thoughts must always serve to ensure that what God says, the Word of God, is listened to and finds

room in the world. Thus, once again we find ourselves invited to this process of forfeiting our own words, this process of purification so that our words may be nothing but the instrument through which God can speak, and hence, that he may truly be the subject and not the object of theology.⁷⁵

Fire of Mercy indeed presupposes this “listening” spirit that “finds room” in the world for the Word of God. Father Simeon’s commentary is truly an instrument for allowing God to speak through the sacred text to the circumstances of today. Through his cordial and canonical approach to *lectio divina*, as well as the rich biblical imagination he applies to art, literature, and poetry, Father Simeon opens the Gospel of Matthew for the reader to hear the Lord speaking. In doing so, the Trappist author displays the living and effective power of God’s Word that bursts forth as a kaleidoscope of grace, weaving various passages of the Bible into a unified vision of God’s heavenly glory.

VII. Conclusion

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis states that “God’s word is unpredictable in its power...The Church has to accept this unruly freedom of the word, which accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking.”⁷⁶ We can only truly accept this “unruly freedom” of God’s Word by approaching the Scriptures as sons and daughters of the Church, that is, guided by Sacred Tradition and the Church’s magisterium. We do so always with gratitude and openness: gratitude for the wonder of such a gift and openness to the living and effective power of Sacred Scripture. Such a spirit of gratitude and openness to the Word of God allows us to approach the Catholic Mass in the same spirit, for in the Holy Eucharist the Word of God takes flesh on our altars and in our hearts.

To move forward with such gratitude and openness, I encourage the faithful on Long Island and beyond - who may have already discovered excerpts of Father Simeon’s commentary in the monthly publication *Magnificat* - to consider incorporating *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word* into your life of prayer. As the premier example of the many resources on *lectio divina* published in recent years, it will assist you to grow in knowledge and love of Our Lord Jesus in Sacred Scripture and in the Holy Eucharist.

Pope Leo XIV recently stressed the importance of *lectio divina* and the frequent reading of Scripture to “encounter the God who speaks, shares his love, and draws us into the fullness of life (cf. Jn 10:10).”⁷⁷ May Father Simeon’s commentary aid in making these practices deeper realities.

I also recommend *Fire of Mercy* to the priests and deacons of our diocese as an invaluable resource to assist in a prayerful preparation of homilies. Father



Simeon's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew not only encourages us to grow more deeply in the daily rhythms of *lectio divina*, but also nourishes our imaginations by presenting us with the wonder and excitement of the biblical world through examples of art and literature. The late Holy Father, Pope Francis, underscored the importance of incorporating literature into a life of prayer, writing that

the literary word is a word that sets language in motion, liberates and purifies it. Ultimately, it opens that word to even greater expressive and expansive vistas. It opens our human words to welcome the Word that is already present in human speech, not when it sees itself as knowledge that is already full, definitive and complete, but when it becomes a listening and expectation of the One who comes to make all things new (cf. Rev 21:5).⁷⁸

Our appreciation of literature and art invites us to recognize how the dynamic power of God's Word shapes not only our own individual lives, but the wider cultural and moral framework of civilization.

A return to the "biblical imagination" which understands that the vitality of human life and culture stems ultimately from the living power of God's Word will help provide a response to the increasing anxiety and despair of a secular age that has flattened humani-

ty's imagination by lowering our sights to the temporal world alone. In this way, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word* inspires us to return once again to the living and effective Word of God and will serve as a source of renewal for our spiritual lives and for the spiritual and moral renewal of our Church and world. As Father Simeon teaches us, when God's Word takes flesh in the Eucharist, we find nothing less than "overflowing joy."⁷⁹

Sincerely yours in Christ,



Most Reverend John O. Barres

+ John O. Barres
Bishop of Rockville Centre

Endnotes

¹ Simeon Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, Volume I (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 19.

² I thank the Reverend Louis Cona, S.T.L. for his research and writing, the Reverend Lachlan Cameron, S.T.L. and the Reverend Brandon O'Brien, J.C.L. for their insightful editing, and Scripture scholar the Reverend Pablo Gadenz, S.T.D. for his review of the text.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), 2. (N.B. All papal and Church documents are available at www.vatican.va)

⁴ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (18 November 1965), 2.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 5.

⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁷ Ibid., 100.

⁸ Ignatius Press of San Francisco, California, published all four volumes of Father Simeon's *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* as follows: Volume I in 1996; Volume II in 2003; Volume III in 2013; and Volume IV in 2021.

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 5.

¹⁰ Ellen Rossini, "The Fire Behind the St. Ignatius Institute," *National Catholic Register*, January 3, 1999. <https://www.ncregister.com/features/the-fire-behind-st-ignatius-institute>. Rossini notes that Professor Leiva-Merikakis's role in the St. Ignatius Institute would not have occurred without a providential encounter with Hans Urs von Balthasar. Leiva-Merikakis connected with Balthasar during his years as a graduate student at Emory University. During that period Leiva-Merikakis "expressed interest in translating [Balthasar's] work into English." Balthasar subsequently "introduced him by letter to Father [Joseph] Fessio who founded Ignatius Press with the intent of introducing von Balthasar's work [to the English-speaking world]." From that moment, Leiva-Merikakis not only began translating Balthasar's work but also commenced teaching at the St. Ignatius Institute at the invitation of Father Fessio. In 1999, Professor Leiva-Merikakis and Father Fessio met with Cardinal Ratzinger during the future pope's visit to the San Francisco offices of Ignatius Press.

¹¹ Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 24.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 117.

¹³ Ibid. The *Catechism* subdivides the spiritual sense of Scripture into the allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses, cf. 115-117.

¹⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III. 22.4.

¹⁵ Jason C. Paone, introduction to *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Commentaries on the New Testament*, ed. Jason C. Paone (Park Ridge: Word on Fire, 2022), xiii.

¹⁶ Ibid., xii.

¹⁷ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 86-87.

¹⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1177.

²⁰ Louis Bouyer, foreword to *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word*, Volume I, by Simeon Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press,

1996), 13.

²¹ Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," *First Things*. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2008/04/biblical-interpretation-in-crisis>. Then-Cardinal Ratzinger delivered this address as the *Erasmus Lecture* on January 27, 1988, at Saint Peter's Lutheran Church in Manhattan.

²² Bouyer, foreword to *Fire of Mercy*, Volume I, 13.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy*, Volume I, 18.

²⁵ Carl E. Olson, "Final volume of commentary of Gospel of Matthew focuses on liturgy, Eucharist," *Catholic World Report*, September 21, 2022. <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2022/09/21/final-volume-of-commentary-of-gospel-of-matthew-focuses-on-liturgy-eucharist/>.

²⁶ Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy*, Volume I, 22.

²⁷ Ibid. Pope Saint John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter, *Fides et Ratio*, highlights a similar reductionist trend in contemporary intellectual discourse: "Another threat to be reckoned with is *scientism*. This is the philosophical notion which refuses to admit the validity of forms of knowledge other than those of the positive sciences; and it relegates religious, theological, ethical and aesthetic knowledge to the realm of mere fantasy. In the past, the same idea emerged in positivism and neo-positivism, which considered metaphysical statements to be meaningless. Critical epistemology has discredited such a claim, but now we see it revived in the new guise of scientism, which dismisses values as mere products of the emotions and rejects the notion of being in order to clear the way for pure and simple facticity. Science would thus be poised to dominate all aspects of human life through technological progress. The undeniable triumphs of scientific research and contemporary technology have helped to propagate a scientific outlook, which now seems boundless, given its inroads into different cultures and the radical changes it has brought." Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998), 88.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy*, Volume I, 39.

³⁰ Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy*, Volume III, 39.

³¹ Ibid., 40.

³² Ibid., 41.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 43.

³⁵ Ibid., 44.

³⁶ Ibid., 45.

³⁷ Ibid., 46.

³⁸ Ibid., 49. Father Simeon also provides eleven "lectio tips" in *Fire of Mercy*, Volume IV, 677-679. There he reminds the reader to open himself to the rhythms and repetitions of the sacred text which seek to awaken his mind and heart.

³⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁰ Simeon Leiva-Merikakis, "Bread of Full Presence: The Gospel of the Eucharist." This address was part of a retreat given to the priests of the Archdiocese of Miami by Father Simeon on September 20, 2023. It is unpublished but available at <https://magnusinstitute.org/magnus-articles/creation-and-the-eucharist/>.

⁴¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 52.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Bouyer, foreword to *Fire of Mercy*, Volume I, 13-14.

⁴⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 55.

⁴⁶ Simeon Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, Volume IV (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021), 38.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Father Simeon's powerful reflections on the Eucharist emerge from his prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture. Here is one example of the richness of Father Simeon's *lectio divina*: "The divine creativity of Jesus' love transforms the mangling and the bloodshed [of his Passion] from an act of violent hatred into the execution of a sacrifice and the preparation of its victim as vital food. At the moment when one would expect the victim to be overwhelmed with fear, such energetic anticipation is instead a prodigious, transformative action by the One in whom the universe was first created and that he is now re-creating through his Passion" (Volume IV, 47-48).

⁴⁸ Leiva-Merikakis, "Bread of Full Presence: The Gospel of the Eucharist."

⁴⁹ Ibid. Leiva-Merikakis continues: "[L]ooking back at how Revelation developed, we can see that what God had intended from the beginning of creation was *totality of personal Presence taking the form of nourishing his people*. This is the sense of the title of this presentation: THE BREAD OF FULL PRESENCE. From the beginning, I say, God intended not only to be present to us and help us from without, but ultimately to *feed us with himself and so indwell us from within*."

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 23.

⁵² Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xix. See also Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to the Synod of Bishops" (October 14, 2008).

⁵³ Simeon Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, Volume III (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), 46.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy*, Volume III, 41.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 48-49.

⁶⁰ Carl E. Olson, "Final volume of commentary of Gospel of Matthew focuses on liturgy, Eucharist," *Catholic World Report*, September 21, 2022. <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2022/09/21/final-volume-of-commentary-of-gospel-of-matthew-focuses-on-liturgy-eucharist/>.

⁶¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 72.

⁶² Simeon Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, Volume II (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 267-268.

⁶³ Ibid., 268.

⁶⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 12 and 72.

⁶⁵ Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1993), 107.

⁶⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xix.

⁶⁷ Ibid., xviii.

⁶⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 12.

⁶⁹ Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy*, Volume I, 159.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 162-163.

⁷¹ Ibid., 167.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy*, Volume IV, 350.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 351.

⁷⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to the International Theological Commission" (October 6, 2006).

⁷⁶ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 22.

⁷⁷ Pope Leo XIV, "Address to the Catholic Biblical Federation," (November 17, 2025).

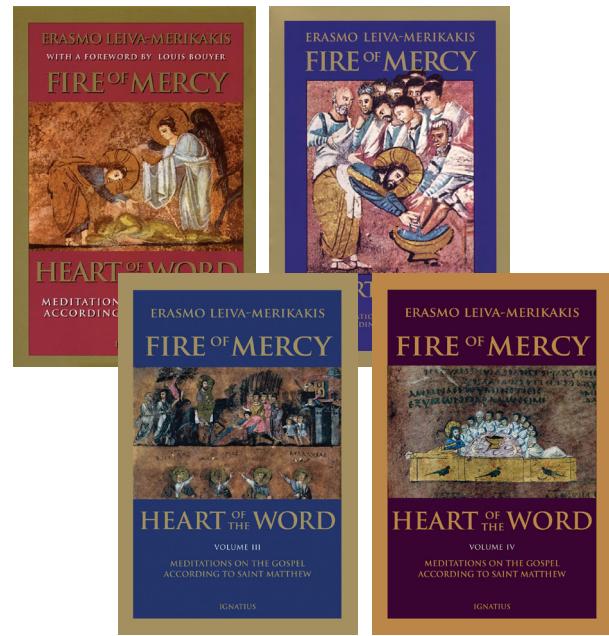
⁷⁸ Pope Francis, "Letter on the Role of Literature in Formation" (July 17, 2024).

⁷⁹ Leiva-Merikakis, "Bread of Full Presence: The Gospel of the Eucharist."

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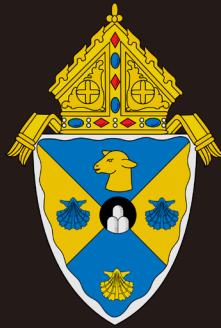
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*“All Scripture is inspired by God and
is useful for teaching, for refutation,
for correction, and for training in
righteousness, so that one who belongs to
God may be competent, equipped
for every good work.”*

– 2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17



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