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Understanding of Scripture

by ***St. Bonaventure***, priest & ***Doctor of the Church***



This excerpt from a short discourse by St. Bonaventure (Prologus: Opera Omnia 5, 201-202) on the Understanding of Scripture is used in the Roman Catholic Office of Readings for Monday in the 5th week in Ordinary time and deals with the principles of biblical interpretation otherwise known as hermeneutics. St. Bonaventure was a Franciscan friar who lived a generation after St. Francis of Assisi. This greatest Franciscan theologian in the Church's history taught alongside St. Thomas Aquinas at the University of Paris before he died in 1274. He is ranked among the Doctors of the Church and has been dubbed "the Seraphic Doctor." Here he emphasizes faith as the key to Bible interpretation and the goal of Bible study which is not academic knowledge, but wisdom -- the experience of God leading to eternal happiness and fulfillment of all our desires.

The source of sacred Scripture was not human research but divine revelation. This revelation comes *from the Father of Light from whom the whole concept of fatherhood in heaven and on earth derives*. From him, through Jesus Christ his Son, the Holy Spirit enters into us. Then, through the Holy Spirit who allots and apportions his gifts to each person as he wishes, we receive the gift of faith, *and through faith Christ lives in our hearts*. So we come to know Christ and this knowledge becomes the main source of a firm understanding of the truth of all sacred Scripture. It is impossible, therefore, for anyone to achieve this understanding unless he first receives the gift of faith in Christ. This faith is the foundation of the whole Bible, a lamp and a key to its understanding. As long as our earthly state keeps us from seeing the Lord, this same faith is the firm basis of all supernatural enlightenment, the light guiding us to it, and the doorway through which we enter upon it. What is more, the extent of our faith is the measure of the wisdom which God has given us. Thus, *no one should overestimate his wisdom; instead, he should soberly make his assessment according to the extent of the faith which God has given him*.

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The outcome or the fruit of reading Holy Scripture is by no means negligible: it is the fullness of eternal happiness. For these are the books which tell us of eternal life, which were written not only that we might believe but also that we might have everlasting life. When we do live that life we shall understand fully, we shall love completely, and our desires will be totally satisfied. Then, with all our needs fulfilled, we shall truly know *the love that surpasses understanding* and so *be filled with the fullness of God*. The purpose of the Scriptures, which come to us from God, is to lead us to this fullness according to the truths contained in those sayings of the apostles to which I have referred. In order to achieve this, we must study holy Scripture carefully, and teach it and listen to it in the same way.

If we are to attain the ultimate goal of eternal happiness by the path of virtue described in the Scriptures, we have to begin at the very beginning. We must come with a pure faith to the Father of Light and acknowledge him in our hearts. We must ask him to give us, through his Son and in the Holy Spirit, a true knowledge of Jesus Christ, and along with that knowledge a love of him. Knowing and loving him in this way, confirmed in our faith and grounded in our love, we can know *the length and breadth and height and depth* of his sacred Scripture. Through that knowledge we can come at last to know perfectly and love completely the most blessed Trinity, whom the saints desire to know and love and in whom all that is good and true finds its meaning and fulfillment.

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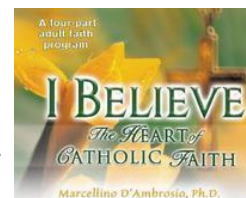
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