



I read Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* in high school, and it changed my life. I honestly don't think I'd be here preaching to you if I hadn't read it; that, and *Crime and Punishment*. There was something about the dark religiosity of Dostoevsky, his near insanity, which I found authentic, and which I still do—a faith real and not sentimental, religion that hasn't become merely a therapy.

From *The Brothers Karamazov*—that long novel about patricide, faith, theodicy, and philosophy—one scene in particular moved me, changing, in the long run, the direction of my life. Not the more famous story of the Grand Inquisitor, but rather the story of the monk Zosima, the mystic mentor to the hero of the novel, the young Alyosha, who must hold on to his faith against his atheist brother, Ivan: that's the part of the novel that stuck with me, changed me. The monk Zosima was like a voice from another world, of truth and God. It was a voice I heard.

Zosima at one point talks about the poor state of the churches in Russia, the poor state of the clergy, most of them underpaid and bitter. Priests complain, he said, that they are too poorly paid and too much overworked, so much that they can no longer teach the Bible to their people, leaving them vulnerable, they say, to “Lutherans and heretics.” Protestants always better organized, better funded, parish priests just didn't feel up to the fight, overworked and underpaid as they said.

But Zosima didn't buy this excuse: “the truth is,” he said, “if someone is to blame, we must share in that blame ourselves.” “For even a priest who is short of time and overburdened with work and church services can still snatch an hour a week to remember God.” His recommendation was that the priest simply invite people into his home, that he simply open the Bible and read it to them; “no need for him to spout wisdom...to give himself airs...He need only read with feeling and humility and be gratified if they listen to him.” “[A]nd let him not worry,” Zosima said, for in the end, the heart will “understand everything;” if priests would simply read the Bible with their people.¹

Simple advice: read the Bible. For me, that's what changed my life, that advice. When I was young, giving up on faith, certainly giving up on Christianity, I was challenged simply to read. Like the child in Saint Augustine's story, “Pick it up and read, pick it up and read,” it was a “plainly divine message,” one that began to dissolve all the “dark shades of doubt” I had.²

Simple advice: read the Bible. That's what I did, daily, reading the Bible bit by bit. For me, there was nothing academic, nothing scholarly to what I was doing; I just started reading it like any other book. I got to know the story. A little bit of the Old Testament, a little bit of Paul, a little bit of the gospels: that's all I did. It's just that it became a habit; I got hooked. And that's what slowly converted me. I didn't become a Christian in a flash, you see; for me, it was a slow opening of the mind and heart, slowly seeing the beauty of the truth of God—a beauty I've just never found anywhere else but in scripture in the Church; not, of course, a material beauty, but a different sort of beauty—immaterial, intellectual, light, divinity. And it came from simply reading the Bible; because I took the time to read it.

Friends, we exist on the worn-out end of a once great culture, now but the ruins of a culture and civilization that couldn't have been built but by a people immersed in the biblical words of

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 352

² Augustine, *Confessions* 8.12.29

Judaism and Christianity, by their humane and sacred genius. Once the Bible formed our mental and moral imagination, giving us the words and allegories and images we used to think with; but, no longer. Now, we are largely biblically illiterate. Now, we don't even know the rudiments of the stories of the Bible, the stories of our own culture, which made us who we are, but more and more sadly who we *were*.

And it is that, more than anything else, which explains the atheisms of our day, rather shallow atheisms, really, which I have belittled before. It is simply the case that so much of what passes for doubt and disbelief today is actually ignorance and distraction, giving up on the faith without ever giving it chance, never opening the book, never looking seriously at the beauty of the truth hidden in the Bible and in the silence of the Church.

Brothers and sisters, let me speak plainly. From my experience, I have learned that almost every doubt, almost every atheism, almost every fear, stems simply from biblical ignorance, from the plain fact that people just don't make the Bible a part of their lives. Leaving the Church: it's often the product of biblical ignorance. Catholicism is the most biblical expression of Christianity there is; no religion is more biblical than Catholicism. It's just that Catholics themselves are so often unbiblical. As a convert, it still shocks me how little Catholics read the Bible. It is, I think, the biggest crisis in the Catholic Church—not all those issues you think are important, but simply this: biblical ignorance.

Of all the programs, all the synods, all the gimmicks meant to revitalize the Church—only people opening the Bible will accomplish anything; and it's free, and you can begin today; you don't have to sign up for anything. Simple advice: read the Bible. That's my simple word for you today: read the Bible. Just read it. If you have doubts, fears, anxieties, confusion, try reading the Bible. Don't consult some clueless celebrity, some talking head, the latest bestseller; instead, read the Bible. "Get wisdom, get understanding! Do not forget...the words I utter," it says in Proverbs.³ It really is a simple invitation, no trick to it at all. Just read, and you will be changed, not by what has changed you in the past—whim and culture and peer pressure—but by God himself. And you will be new and strong and, finally, a genuine Christian.

My words today stem from one little verse from Luke's gospel: "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures."⁴ The risen Christ, standing before his disciples, gave them the gift of understanding, the understanding of scripture. It's a gift Christ still gives, freely. The risen Christ can open your mind to understand the Bible and by that understanding you will understand enough—for salvation, for wisdom, for strength, and for peace. Are you worried about the world, about the Church, about yourself? Take and read. It will convert you, change you; it will strengthen you for the storms of the world and prepare for a new one.

I didn't really want to be a Christian, little about appealed to me. But I read the book, and I couldn't help it; I found truth and beauty. It conquered me. And I'm glad it did, because it's a beauty I cannot live without, a deep and immovable happiness I wish I could give you.

³ Proverbs 4:5

⁴ Luke 24:45

Easter 3 (4.15.18)
Luke 24:35-48

But it only works if you want it, if you want to read. Which, of course, is the real question. Do you want beauty? Do you want truth? Some people don't. But these are questions only you can answer—in the presence, as we are now, of the risen Christ. *Amen.*

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