

The Riches of Memorization

By Michael Donovan

The truth is that our hearts and minds are meditation machines, with the main problem being that we tend to not meditate on the riches of His grace and love for us, which build us up, but rather on the things of the flesh which war against the soul.

A mentor of mine once recounted a fable in which a group of men were traveling on horseback when they happened upon a mysterious sage-like man. In engaging this fellow, they were told that as they journeyed further, they would cross a stream whose riverbed would be full of stones. He encouraged them to gather these stones, prophesying that doing so would simultaneously lead to feelings of great joy as well as sadness. The voyagers were intrigued.

These men continued on their journey and, surely enough, happened upon the mysterious stream. Taking the sage on faith, they gathered a few stones and continued on their journey. The next day, to their great astonishment, they found that the river-stones they had gathered were transformed into diamonds, rubies and other gems. As the sage had prophesied, they were both glad and sad—glad because of the riches now in their possession, and sad because they hadn't gathered more.¹

This fable was told to communicate a truth about scripture and our relationship to it; that is, our journey with God is enriched when the truths we appropriate from sacred Scripture are transformed into spiritual jewels with untold value for us. This helpful metaphor can be taken further when we consider the means which we have available to us to collect such stones-turned-to-jewels. From the beginning, the Church has cultivated and celebrated ways of engaging with sacred Scripture, including the Liturgy of the Word at Mass with its readings and homilies, the Rosary, daily Scripture reading, Liturgy of the Hours, Lectio Divina and many others. Among the most powerful of these practices is Scripture memorization together with meditation. Concerning this practice, St. Pope John Paul II writes:

“A certain memorization of the words of Jesus, of important Bible passages, of the Ten Commandments, of the formulas of profession of the faith, of the liturgical texts, of the essential prayers, of key doctrinal ideas, etc., ... is a real need, as the Synod Fathers forcefully recalled ... The blossoms—if we may call them that—of faith and piety do not grow in the desert places of a memoryless catechesis. What is essential is that texts that are memorized must at the same time be taken in and gradually understood in depth, in order to become a source of Christian life on the personal level and on the community level.”²

Why should we memorize and meditate in order to gather these stones and end up with these metaphorical blossoms, jewels, diamonds and rubies? To use a phrase imparted to me by a friend, “the greatest distance in the world is the 18 inches from the head to the heart.” As much as we would like to believe that leaving our hearts and minds on auto-pilot will lead us to deeper intimacy with Christ, the opposite is true. The truth is that our hearts and minds are meditation machines, with the main problem being that we tend to not meditate on the riches of His grace and love for us, which build us up, but rather on the things of the flesh which war against the soul. Jeremiah lays bare the condition of our hearts, saying that they are deceitful above all else and desperately sick (Jeremiah 17:9,



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¹ Adapted from an excerpt in *Meditation*, by Jim Downing, page 13.

² *Catechesis in Our Time*, by Pope John Paul II, page 55.

The Riches of Memorization

continued from page 3

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ESV). St. Paul describes the battle for the heart and mind by crying out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24, ESV). Again, St. Paul urges his disciples in Rome not to conform to the pattern of this world, but to be *transformed by the renewal of their minds*, (Romans 12:2). It was our Lord Himself who called us to abide in him, allowing his words to abide in us, (John 15:7). What is available to us in Scripture memorization and meditation is a further opportunity to become like the blessed man described in Jeremiah 17:7–8,

*“Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.
He is like a tree planted by water,
that sends out its roots by the stream,
and does not fear when heat comes,
for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of drought,
for it does not cease to bear fruit.”*

With all of this in mind, how does one “get started” in Scripture memorization? There may be a myriad of ways, however, for decades use of a topical method for memorizing Scripture has been very successful as a valuable resource that aims to equip the Catholic man, woman or child with a simple and effective means of hiding God's Word in their hearts and minds. Emmaus Journey has adapted this process and produced *The Catholic Topical Memory System*® (CTMS). This resource features 70 select passages from sacred Scripture that are organized by topics, and also includes perforated memorization cards and a vinyl card holder. These passages are laid out within the booklet along with short bible studies related to each of the verses' context. Each set of two passages features “Reflections on Wisdom from the Church”—that invite you to consider meditations and teachings by various Popes, Doctors and teachers of the Church. These studies and reflections foster deeper meditation, enabling the participant to develop a better grasp on the meaning of the passages. As a help, *The Catholic Topical Memory System*® includes articles that address the mechanics of Scripture memorization to ensure that a person is going about memorization in the most effective way possible, but also learning a process they can use for the remainder of their lives.

At Emmaus Journey it is our hope and intent to continue enhancing the utility of *The Catholic Topical Memory System*®. Websites and apps have proven to be technologies worth leveraging in enhancing engagement with our faith, and it is my personal hope to further the development of this crucial resource in those directions. I look forward to sharing the fruit of those efforts with the Church.

Isaiah has given us a wonderful truth, writing, “*You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock,*” (Isaiah 26:3–4). May you be filled with his peace and find Him as your foundation as you continue to engage with Him through Scripture.

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