

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Year C)

I. Introduction

I once read an interesting philosophy volume called *Ten Books that Screwed Up the World* (MJF Books, 2008). The author, Professor Benjamin Wiker, identifies and describes those books he believes have had the worst influence on human history. The first one he lists is Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, written just over 500 years ago. It advises kings and other rulers that if they want to be successful, they must be ruthless, scheming, and dishonest, while seeking to be feared rather than loved. Machiavelli also instructs them to be hypocritical: they must rid themselves of all religious beliefs and moral values, while merely pretending to be pious and God-fearing. (This philosophy seems to be popular with many politicians today.) Some other books mentioned by Professor Wiker include *The Communist Manifesto*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels; *The Descent of Man*, by Charles Darwin; and Adolph Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (German for "My Struggle"). As a history major in the seminary, I actually read that book; it's a thousand pages of rambling, illogical, hate-filled drivel.

Hitler, by the way, was an admirer of Margaret Sanger, the American social activist who founded Planned Parenthood just over 100 years ago. However, that organization would prefer that you not read her embarrassing and offensive book *The Pivot of Civilization*, for it's filled with racist rants and insistent claims that white society must protect itself from being overrun by blacks, Asians, and members of other supposedly "inferior" races, by reducing their numbers by means of abortion and birth control. Also making Professor Wiker's list is Alfred Kinsey's 1948 book *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, which undermined traditional values in American society and eventually helped usher in the so-called Sexual Revolution. The problem was Kinsey's book was anything but scientific or objective; he deliberately lied by using bogus research and falsified statistics. Over forty years later new research debunked all his findings, but by then the damage had been done.

I don't know if anyone has ever tried to compile a list of the ten *best* most helpful and influential books ever written—but if such a list were to be made, there'd be widespread agreement that the first and most important one would be the Bible. Sacred Scripture is filled with inspiring and entertaining stories, heavenly wisdom, practical advice, consoling images, and the very words of God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. Moreover, everything in the Bible is divinely-inspired, which means guaranteed to be free of all error regarding what we need to know and live by in order to be saved. The Jews have what we call the Old Testament, and as Catholics we have the entire Bible (though Protestants are missing a few books). Even the Muslims, who have their own holy book called the Koran, acknowledge our Scriptures, for they sometimes refer to Jews and Christians as "people of the Book." However, all books—including the Bible—are of little use if they're never opened, and the wisdom they contain accomplishes nothing unless it's read, accepted, and acted upon. This is the responsibility, and opportunity, given to us as followers of Jesus. The Bible, and other religious books such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, are given to us by God so we can discover and travel the path that leads to eternal life.

II. Development

We see in the Gospel that on the Sabbath Jesus went to the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth and served as the lector, reading a famous passage from the Book of Isaiah—a passage promising liberation and blessing for the people of God. Then Jesus announced, “Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” Do we allow God’s Word to be fulfilled in our lives? The 1st Reading describes how the assembly wept when the scribe Ezra read from the Book of the Law, as given in the Old Testament; hearing God’s Word made them realize how much they had sinned and needed the Lord’s forgiveness. Do we allow God’s truth, as given in the Bible and the teachings of the Church, to have a similar profound effect on us? St. Paul speaks in the 2nd Reading of our unity in Christ and our membership in His Church. Do these things truly make a difference in our lives, or are they more abstract or theoretical than real?

III. Conclusion

In the days before shopping malls and on-line purchasing, people often ordered things from a catalog or otherwise shopped by mail. On one occasion a woman and her family hosted their pastor for dinner. Wanting to impress him with their devotion, the woman told her young son, “Johnny, go and get the book Mommy and Daddy always read so much.” She expected the boy to bring back the Bible, but was embarrassed when he returned with the Sears & Roebuck catalog (Msgr. Arthur Tonne, *Jokes Priests Can Tell*, Vol. 1, #62).

If someone were to investigate our reading habits, peruse our bookshelves, or—if we’re not really into reading books and magazines—browse our user history on our computers and cell phones—would we be embarrassed and ashamed? Is our family Bible not only in a place of honor, but actually *used*—or is it just collecting dust? How much time over the course of an entire year do we spend reading and reflecting upon the Bible and other good spiritual books? Yes, I know it’s often hard to find time to read; in today’s world, most of us are very busy, and sometimes so tired we might quickly fall asleep if we opened a book in the evening and started reading. That’s unfortunate—but we have to ask ourselves if this is truly what the Lord intended for us. Would He have had the Church write, compile, interpret, preserve, and share the Bible—and countless other books filled with spiritual wisdom and riches—if most people were never meant to read them?

The devil is happy if we become so busy and stressed out that we never seem to have time for prayer and spiritual reading—for once this habit of neglect is formed, it becomes very hard to break. Perhaps this is what the Lord is requesting us to begin doing today: deliberately and knowingly making more time for Him. If necessary, ask for His guidance and assistance; let Jesus reveal to you one or two little steps to take so as to reorder your priorities, routines, and daily schedule. He knows all the things that keep you so busy; He’s aware of the burdens you carry—but He also foresees the ways you can grow, and the blessings you can receive, if only you can make more space in your life for Him. Jesus said, “*Today* this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” His words were meant not only for the people of 1st century Nazareth, but also for each one of us here and now.