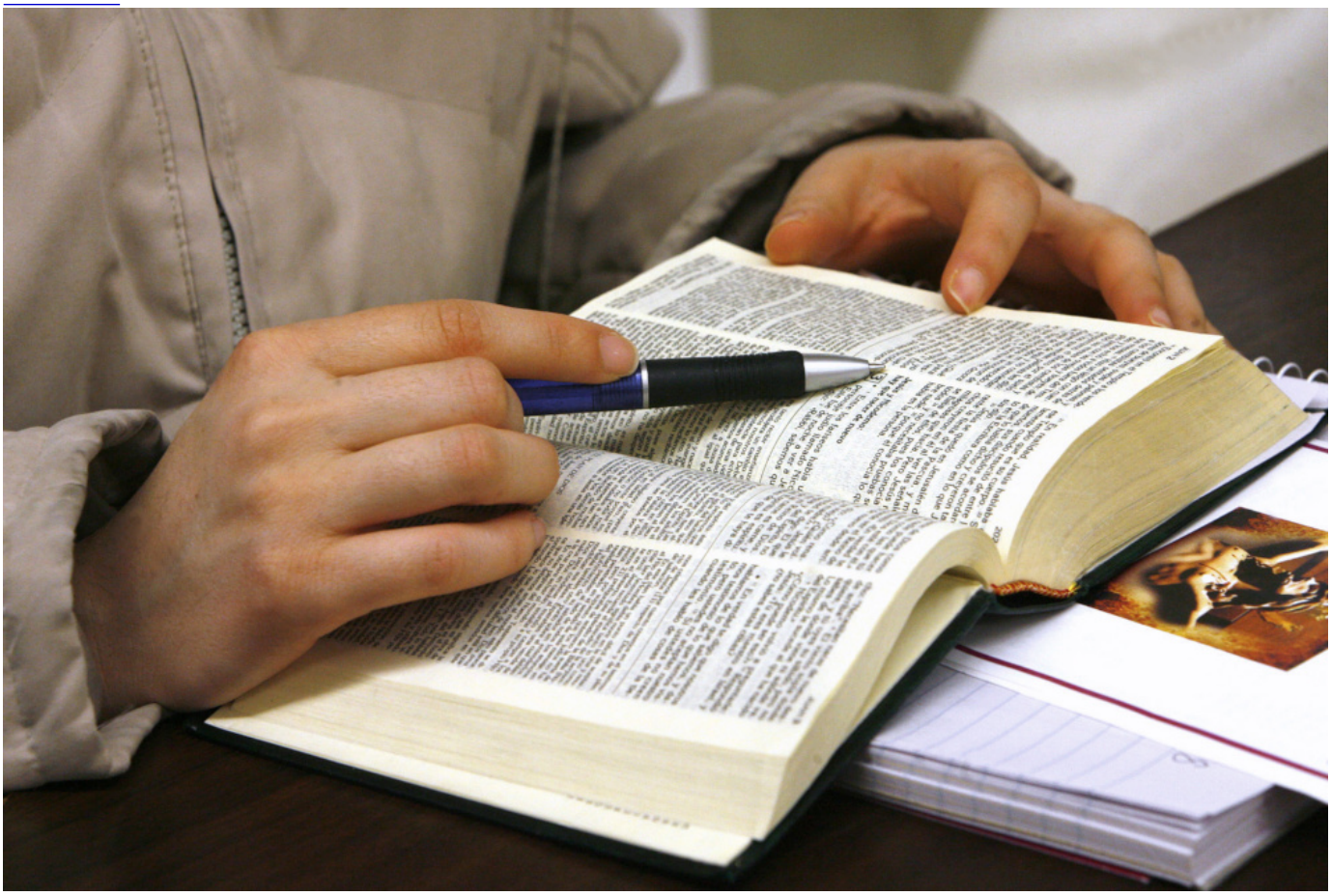
Spirituality
Vatican



A young woman studies the Bible at St. Mary of Celle Parish in Berwyn, Ill., in this March 18, 2009, file photo. To help the church grow in love and faithful witness to God, Pope Francis has declared the third Sunday in Ordinary Time to be dedicated to the word of God. (CNS/Catolico/Karen Callaway)

Carol Glatz

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To help the church grow in love and faithful witness to God, Pope Francis has declared the third Sunday in Ordinary Time to be dedicated to the word of God.

Salvation, faith, unity and mercy all depend on knowing Christ and sacred Scripture, he said in a new document.

Devoting a special day "to the celebration, study and dissemination of the word of God" will help the church "experience anew how the risen Lord opens up for us the treasury of his word and enables us to proclaim its unfathomable riches before the world," the pope said.

The declaration to have a "Sunday of the Word of God" was made in a new document, given "motu proprio," on the pope's own initiative. Its title, "Aperuit Illis," is based on a verse from the Gospel of St. Luke, "Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures."

"The relationship between the risen Lord, the community of believers and sacred Scripture is essential to our identity as Christians," the pope said in the apostolic letter, released by the Vatican Sept. 30, the feast of St. Jerome, patron saint of biblical scholars.

"The Bible cannot be just the heritage of some, much less a collection of books for the benefit of a privileged few. It belongs above all to those called to hear its message and to recognize themselves in its words," the pope wrote.

"The Bible is the book of the Lord's people, who, in listening to it, move from dispersion and division toward unity" as well as come to understand God's love and become inspired to share it with others, he added.

Without the Lord who opens people's minds to his word, it is impossible to understand the Scriptures in depth, yet "without the Scriptures, the events of the mission of Jesus and of his church in this world would remain incomprehensible," he wrote.

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Archbishop Rino Fisichella, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, told Vatican News Sept. 30 that added emphasis on the importance of the word of God is needed because "the overwhelming majority" of Catholics are not familiar with sacred Scripture. For many, the only time they hear the word of God is when they attend Mass, he added.

"The Bible is the most widely distributed book, but it also perhaps the one most covered in dust because it is not held in our hands," the archbishop said.

With this apostolic letter, the pope "invites us to hold the word of God in our hands every day as much as possible so that it becomes our prayer" and a greater part of one's lived experience, he said.

Francis said in the letter, "A day devoted to the Bible should not be seen as a yearly event but rather a yearlong event, for we urgently need to grow in our knowledge and love of the Scriptures and of the risen Lord, who continues to speak his word and to break bread in the community of believers."

"We need to develop a closer relationship with sacred Scripture; otherwise, our hearts will remain cold and our eyes shut, struck as we are by so many forms of blindness," he wrote.

Sacred Scripture and the sacraments are inseparable, he wrote. Jesus speaks to everyone with his word in sacred Scripture, and if people "hear his voice and open the doors of our minds and hearts, then he will enter our lives and remain ever with us," he said.

Francis urged priests to be extra attentive to creating a homily throughout the year that "speaks from the heart" and really helps people understand Scripture "through simple and suitable" language.

The homily "is a pastoral opportunity that should not be wasted. For many of our faithful, in fact, this is the only opportunity they have to grasp the beauty of God’s word and to see it applied to their daily lives," he wrote.

Francis also encouraged people to read the Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution, "Dei Verbum," and Pope Benedict XVI's apostolic exhortation, "Verbum Domini," whose teaching remains "fundamental for our communities."

The third Sunday in Ordinary Time falls during that part of the year when the church is encouraged to strengthen its bonds with the Jewish people and to pray for Christian unity. That means the celebration of the Sunday of the Word of God "has ecumenical value, since the Scriptures point out, for those who listen, the path to authentic and firm unity."