

Archbishop Smith: Read the Instructions!

OK. I admit it. I'm one of those who waits too late to read instruction books. Somehow I have it in my head that I should be able to figure out how to set up a new gadget or use an unfamiliar product without needing to follow the how-to instructions. Anyone who knows just how mechanically or technologically challenged I am would see how preposterous such an assumption is on my part. Needless to say, by the time I do accept the fact that I should look at the directions, I've made a rather total mess of things. If anybody is nearby, the dreaded question is soon asked: "Why didn't you read the instructions to begin with?"

I expect that God would like to pose the same question to a large part of humanity today. His query would arise not from our incapacity to assemble things properly but the inability to live together peacefully. Looking at the mess we have made – widespread isolation and loneliness, homelessness, family dysfunction, hostility separating groups of people from one another, wars among nations, killing the innocent, and so on – God could rightly ask, "Why didn't you read the instructions?" The pain and hardship impacting vast swathes of the human family today could have been avoided if we had.

In point of fact, God has provided us with instructions for how to live. They are found in that instruction book we call the Bible.

Some critically important pages of instruction were given to us at mass on Sunday. From the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel we were given the magnificent parables that Jesus taught concerning God's mercy. They speak of God's desire to seek us out and forgive us, and in so doing teach us that the cause of our difficulties is rebellion against God's love. In so many ways we think we can get along without God and his instructions: like the prodigal son we make a mess of life by squandering the good things God gives us; like the elder son, we get it wrong by thinking that the love of God is something to earn by our own efforts; or, like the Israelite people following Moses in the desert, we botch things up entirely by casting away our reliance upon God and fashioning gods of our own making (cf. Exodus 32:7-11,13-14). It's time to consult the instruction book God provides. In the Bible, He is telling us to turn back to Him in repentance and ask Him to fix, by His mercy, the mess we have made of living by not following His directions in the first place.

There is another instruction book that God provides us to read. It is the witness of his saints. The lives of the saints form a book of instruction by furnishing us with examples of how we are to live in accord with God's design. Today many people are quick to go to YouTube for instruction videos on all sorts of things. When it comes to right living, consult the saints.



Archbishop Smith celebrates Mass at St. Boniface Catholic Church on the Sunday of the beatification of Fr. Richard Henkes, a German Pallottine priest. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

A wonderful example was given to the Church on Sunday. I visited St. Boniface parish that we have here in Edmonton for German-speaking Catholics. They invited me to join them to celebrate the beatification that same day in Limburg, Germany, of Father Richard Henkes. Now his is quite the example! I confess, I had not heard of Fr. Henkes prior to receiving this invitation from the parish, and I am now very moved by, and grateful for, his witness. He served as a Pallottine priest in Germany during the Nazi era. In the face of the horrible evil perpetrated by that regime, he did not hesitate to speak out against it from the pulpit. For that he was arrested and sent to the Dachau concentration camp, where he died. From the "instruction book" that was his life, we learn that attacks against human dignity, in whatever form, are never acceptable and must be met not with silent acquiescence but clear denunciation and a call to repentance, even though there be a cost.

Instruction books are given so that we get things right. Reading them is obviously insufficient. They need to be followed. This is supremely true in the case of God's instruction books for right living: the Bible and the witness of the saints. Let's be sure to read them and follow the directions we are given.