Our subject for today’s homily is documents. Well, probably more of a rant than a homily but I wanted to put you into a receptive and spiritual frame of mind.

We need to prepare for meetings so have to read up on the general background and study the presentations to be given or, more accurately, read at dizzying speed. A wise colleague once said that going to work without previously studying the documents was akin to asking a surgeon to operate without first looking at the x-rays.

However a couple of things happened recently that gave me pause. I was working at one of those international organizations of the type we all recognize, you know, marble entrance halls and croissants for breakfast. The meeting was underway and my colleague was working from a speech and doing well. Someone arrived with the written speech and the colleague then tried to shift from interpreting to sight translation and was completely thrown off course.

Story II: a colleague had to do a speech and we had been told that there would be no written script – yet throughout the speech the interpreter could not stop shuffling through the papers on the desk, feverishly searching for a document that was not there, that we knew was not there and was not going to be provided. And of course looking for the document was a distraction from simply listening and interpreting so performance suffered.

Which of us has not done one or both of the above?

Clearly we need documents, but are we no longer able to function without them? We are interpreters, so by definition we work from spoken language. I readily admit that the nature of meetings has changed over the past twenty years and we hear far more set-piece speeches than we used to, people at meetings are now much more likely to work to a script. But nevertheless, could we not at times simply rely on what is supposedly our core skill?

I am not saying we should start flying by the seat of our pants, and I fully recognize the challenge of an unremitting series of breakneck speeches in imperfect English. I just wonder at times whether we need to be so emotionally invested in obtaining documents that they become a distraction. After all, we are interpreters.

Now you can go and fetch your documents. Get mine too.