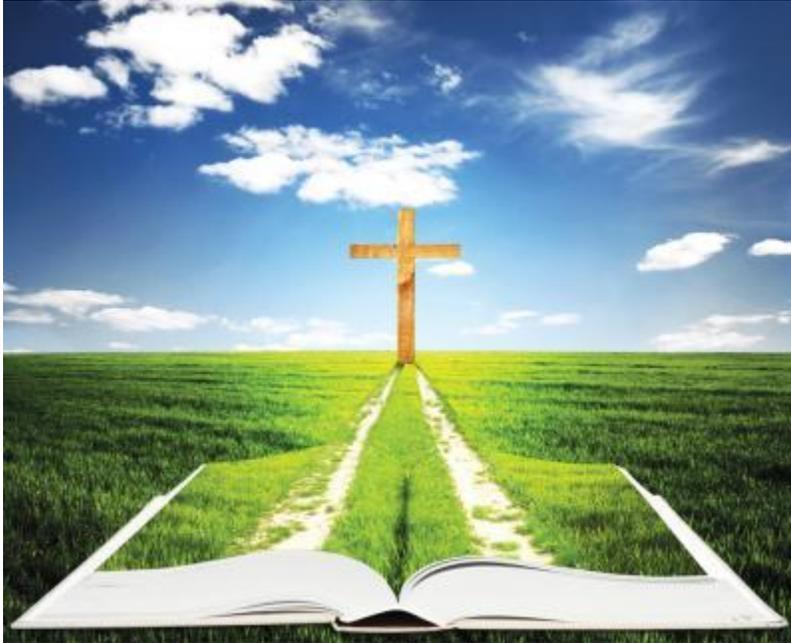


By the Book

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How should Catholics approach Bible study?



Here is some good news regarding the Good News: Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics have made enormous progress in our appreciation of the Bible. Catholic scholars are equals with their Protestant, Jewish and Orthodox counterparts, participating in scholarly discussions together. Moreover, Catholics are more familiar with Sacred Scripture than ever before. This is due in part to the reforms of the liturgy, including Mass in the vernacular, more biblically oriented homilies by priests and exposure to more readings from the Bible because of the revised lectionary. Another factor is that more Catholics have been exposed to or participated in Bible study programs, whether as adults or through catechetical efforts.

There is a downside to this development, however. Although Catholics have developed Bible study programs over the last 50 years, there has been no consistent, universal effort to promote biblical knowledge among Catholics, nor have the vast majority of Catholics ever participated in formal Bible study. In addition, those Catholics who have searched high and low for interesting programs of good quality have sometimes been enticed into Protestant Bible study groups where the approach has been more fundamentalist in orientation and sometimes even hostile to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Some programs that make a strong claim to be Catholic actually are a slightly dressed up version of fundamentalism, leading inattentive Catholics down a road that distorts a Catholic approach to the Bible. Many are left to wonder: What, exactly, is the Catholic approach to the Bible?

Some Essential Characteristics

Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholic teaching has stressed that there is no one method for Catholic biblical study. Instead, Catholics remain open to a wide variety of approaches, ancient

and modern. Pope Benedict XVI himself has praised the achievements of the historical-critical method of Bible study that largely dominated the last century, but he has also called for a reapplication of spiritual or theological interpretation that goes beyond the level of mere historical questions, such as those practiced in the patristic or medieval periods.

Fortunately, resources from these earlier periods are increasingly available in English. But caution is called for when using such resources, as sometimes pre-critical interpretation was very fanciful and went far beyond the text. Catholic interpretation always begins with the literal sense of the text, that is, the most literal meaning of the words, and then proceeds from there. Spiritual or theological meanings can never go against the literal meaning of the text.

Although no one method can be said to be the Catholic method, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Nos. 112-14) outlines three essential characteristics of Catholic exegesis.

1) Catholics must pay attention “to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture.” This means especially how we view the unity of the Old and New Testaments. The New is hidden in the Old, and the Old is fulfilled and made fully understood in the New, all as part of God’s mysterious plan of salvation.

2) Catholics should interpret the Bible within “the living Tradition of the whole Church.” This is an acknowledgement of the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the process of interpretation throughout church history, and the ultimate authority the magisterium retains to interpret Scripture definitively in cases of doubt.

3) Catholics must pay attention to the “analogy of faith,” that is, “the coherence of truths” contained in God’s revelation. This means that though we may not comprehend every detail of God’s plan of salvation, there is an internal coherence to it embedded in the Scriptures.

The Church’s Expectations

There can be big differences in the styles and quality of bible study programs on the market, but there are some basic guidelines for Catholic programs that conform to the church’s expectations. In general terms, a good Catholic Bible study program will do at least the following:

- Be in conformity with Catholic doctrine concerning the Bible, its origin and its interpretation, as well as major Catholic documents on scripture, especially “*Dei Verbum*,” the “*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*” (1965), the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and “*Verbum Domini*,” the postsynodal apostolic exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI (2010).
- Be open to multiple methods of biblical studies and a judicious application of them. This includes the historical critical methods and the history of interpretation (from the patristic and medieval period up to contemporary studies) and sociological studies or interpretations from the developing world.
- Quote biblical passages or explain them in their context in the Bible.
- Make no claim to be the only Catholic approach to the Bible or advocate for a single understanding or theory of biblical inspiration, which the church has never definitively settled (though the Pontifical Biblical Commission is currently studying this question at the pope’s request).
- Make no definitive judgments about matters that the church leaves open. This includes the date and authorship of biblical books and translations or interpretations of specific passages of the

Bible. It should acknowledge the rare instances when the church has declared a given interpretation as the correct one, or has proscribed specific interpretations, such as the passage on the brothers and sisters of Jesus (Mk 3:32), where the church teaches that they are not blood siblings of Jesus.

- Avoid fundamentalist interpretations or improper literal or fanciful interpretations.
- Recognize the complex and dynamic relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. This includes valuing the Old Testament as God's holy word, appreciating the essential Jewish background of the New Testament and avoiding anti-Jewish interpretations of the Bible.

The Need for Good Leadership

Naturally, the quality of a Catholic Bible study program will depend significantly on the quality of both the program and its leaders. Unfortunately, whether because of lack of time or interest or simply because of lack of expertise, many priests today do not involve themselves in Bible study. Sometimes generous lay people step forward and offer to lead such groups. But if these individuals lack training, or if their main approach is only "what-the-Bible-means-to-me," their groups can quickly get off track.

The key to good Catholic Bible study that will avoid any fundamentalist tendency is good leadership. Ideally, if one is promoting parish-based Bible study, the parish should help leaders to acquire some training, either by attending workshops and catechetical congresses, or by working through a prescribed training manual or regimen. Some programs offer both training and leadership materials that provide extra background to biblical books that may not be obvious either to leaders or participants. A good study Bible is also essential, and there are several good Catholic editions that can be used for background. Despite what some people claim, the meaning of the Bible is not self-evident. Even fundamentalist editions of the Bible (like the Scofield Reference Bible) have explanatory notes, though ardent fundamentalists would deny that these in any way affect their understanding of the biblical text.

Before choosing a program, the effective leader should examine the materials to see if the criteria outlined above are met. Ideally, diocesan religious education offices or the like should be able to offer sound advice on such matters; but in my experience, such resources are sorely lacking. There is also nothing on the national level that offers such advice, neither on the level of the U.S. bishops' conference or the Catholic Biblical Association. So responsibility, unfortunately, devolves to the diocesan or local level.

Relating Study and Prayer

Another misconception for some Catholics is that praying with the Bible somehow bears no relation to studying it. At times, people seeking true spiritual nourishment from the bible are frustrated because it involves too much history, too many details and too much open-ended process. They look for quick, easy and definitive interpretations. Furthermore, they want something that truly gives them spiritual guidance. This is a healthy desire. It is also the primary reason the scriptures exist! God wants us to be fed, strengthened, inspired by God's own holy word. As the Second Letter to Timothy says: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (3:16-17). The Scriptures exist for our spiritual and moral well-being.

At times people seeking this nourishment invoke the image of the church fathers, the patristic period of interpretation, as the ideal. They prayed Scripture, whereas we read and study it. This is a false dichotomy. It forgets that the reason the fathers of the church could become so enthralled with Scripture and readily use scriptural imagery is that, for them, study and prayer were intimately intertwined. They pored over the sacred Scriptures day and night. They reveled in studying the language of the Bible, exploring its literal sense in order to arrive at the infinite depths of the spiritual sense. Then they meditated upon it, commented on it, preached upon it and proclaimed it to others.

This was not a process of prayer alone. It was a deep enterprise of closely reading the Scriptures, remaining open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to arrive at the spiritual messages they contain. From a Catholic perspective, good Bible study leads to the ability to pray the Scriptures with ease. And good prayer with the Bible leads one to seek more insight, to want to go further, to comprehend the good news the scriptures contain.

The Rebirth of *Lectio Divina*

The dual relationship between study and prayer of the Bible leads to another area that has seen a rebirth in recent years, especially with the encouragement of Pope Benedict XVI. *Lectio divina* (literally, “holy reading”) is the ancient practice, developed even further by the monastic tradition of the Middle Ages, of prayerful reflection or meditation upon the Scriptures. The process can be very simple, like just sitting and slowly reading and reflecting on a biblical passage, or quite complex, involving various stages of spiritual insight leading to contemplation. The point is not which method is used but that a prayerful reading of Scripture is done. This is especially important for lectors and homilists at the Mass. Such meditative reading should be done before ever proclaiming or preaching on the Scriptures. Fortunately, there are many resources being published today to help people rediscover this ancient practice, which had drifted into the shadows in the wake of modern scientific study of the Bible.

Still, *lectio divina* is not the only way to pray with the Bible. How one chooses to study and pray with the Bible depends upon what one is looking for. For example, do you want personal or group study? Are you looking for programs with lots of audiovisual aids or text-oriented programs? Are you called to *lectio divina* or a more academic approach? Do you have knowledgeable leaders who already have some background in biblical studies and can move ahead quickly, or are you just starting out and do not have a leader with experience?

Despite the abundance of modern study options, St. Augustine’s ancient advice still is the best: *Tolle, lege!* Pick up the bible and read it! The three-year-long observance of the golden anniversary of Vatican II offers Catholics a unique opportunity to engage in Bible study in a serious way. Consider one of the following as a first step:

- Buy a study Bible and use it to help you better understand one or more of the Sunday Mass readings.
- Read the Bible five or 10 minutes a day for yourself.
- Read and discuss short passages from the Bible with your family.
- Read the Sunday Mass readings in advance so you can better understand them.
- Consider joining or starting a parish Bible study with interested parishioners.
- Take time to attend a lecture on the Bible or a catechetical congress.

The word of God has renewed the church before, and it was instrumental in shaping the documents of the council. With a little effort on our part, it can continue in our own day to shape our lives, for in the word of Scripture, we encounter the Word-made-flesh, Jesus Christ.

TAKE AND READ

While I cannot recommend any one Bible study program, I can indicate a few resources with good track records.

- Electronic New Testament Educational Resources (<http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/>), maintained by Felix Just, S.J., is chock full of information that can supplement good Catholic Bible study. Despite its name, it also has resources on the Old Testament, liturgy and spirituality.
- Little Rock Scripture Study, directed by Catherine Upchurch, started in the Diocese of Little Rock. (Full disclosure: the author has contributed directly to some of these programs.) This program was designed for small groups and is based on the New American Bible, revised edition, which is the basis for the Lectionary. It includes videos, short commentaries, study guides, leadership training and a stand-alone study bible. It explores books of the Bible and biblical themes, and is available in Spanish.
- Threshold Bible Study, authored by Stephen Binz, is organized thematically, which gives it a distinctive character. It does not attempt to introduce the Bible in the customary fashion of many Bible study programs. Yet the themes are each rooted in biblical foundations. Designed for either individual or group study, each book contains thirty chapters that explore the theme, accompanied by discussion and reflection questions and a prayer. Biblical quotations, which generally introduce each chapter, come from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition of the Bible. It also offers practical suggestions for group facilitation and fosters a traditional form of lectio divina, noting how Pope Benedict XVI has emphasized the importance of this ancient practice of meditation.
- The Word column and The Good Word blog in America and at www.americamagazine.org.

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