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MINI COURSE



# EMBRACING THE MODERN BIBICAL RENEWAL, First in a series on Catholics and the Bible

By Rev. Donald Senior C.P.



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Fr. Senior is a frequent lecturer and speaker throughout the United States and abroad, and serves on numerous boards and commissions, including the Board of Directors of William H. Sadlier, Inc. In 2001, Pope John Paul II appointed him as a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and he was reappointed in 2006 by Pope Benedict XVI.

This has been quite a year for the Bible and the Catholic Church! Last June Pope Benedict XVI dedicated the coming year in honor of the 2,000 anniversary of the birth of Paul the Apostle. His declaration produced an amazing avalanche of lectures, study groups, conferences, publications of all sorts and a sharp uptick in the number of pilgrims tracing Paul's footsteps in Turkey, Greece and Rome itself.

And last October nearly 300 representatives from episcopal conferences from around the world gathered in Rome for a historic Synod on "The Scriptures in the Life and Mission of the Church." The bishops, together with other scholars and religious leaders (including for the first time a Rabbi!), produced some 55 resolutions for the Pope's consideration.

In both of these instances, the official teachers of the Church approached the Bible fully comfortable with the use of modern biblical methods of interpretation. This was not always the case. While the Scriptures have always been an essential and vital part of the Church's life and teaching, the use of modern historical and literary methods to interpret the Bible truly came to the fore in the Catholic Church only in the 20th century. In fact, in the late 19th and early 20th century Church authorities viewed modern biblical methods with great suspicion and even hostility. Catholic scholars who attempted to incorporate such methods in their teaching or writing were often censured.

What lay behind this reaction was the fear that underlying the use of such methods was an intention to debunk the historical and religious value of the Scriptures. In fact, some of this fear was justified. Some of the historical approaches to the Bible among continental scholars in the late 19th century (and some still today) was based on rationalism and a conviction that the Bible was basically a book of superstitions and

folk tales. The transcendent and miraculous dimensions of the Bible were considered accretions on a small core of basic historical facts about Jesus and his first century Palestinian context.

What helped put Church authorities at ease was the responsible use of historical and literary methods by Catholic scholars whose faith and integrity could not be questioned. Scholars such as Pere Marie Joseph Lagrange, O.P., the founder of the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem or Stanislaus Lyonnet, S.J. a distinguished professor at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, or Barnabas Mary Ahern, C.P., who served as an advisor and counsel to so many of the American Bishops at the Second Vatican Council. These and many other Catholic biblical scholars helped the Church see that the use of modern biblical methods could be a blessing for the interpretation of the Bible and not a threat.

In subsequent articles, we will track the Church's embrace of the modern biblical renewal and consider some of the principles for a sound interpretation of the Bible by a community of faith.

## WAYS TO IMPLEMENT

### At Home

1. How we approach the Bible makes a big difference. Reading the Scriptures with an attitude of faith and openness to God's presence in history paves the way for using all of the sound methods of investigating the historical circumstances that produced the biblical materials. Does this perspective fit your understanding of what the Bible is?
2. Everyone--no matter how objective they might claim to be--brings certain convictions or assumptions to their reading and study of the Bible. What do you think are key convictions necessary for reading the Bible from a Catholic perspective?



## CHURCH LEADERSHIP PAVES THE WAY, Second in a series

By Rev. Donald Senior C.P.

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One of the notable features of the modern biblical renewal in the Catholic Church has been the leadership provided by the highest levels of the Church's teaching authority. As described in our first segment ("Embracing the Modern Biblical Renewal") Rome was, at first, leery of modern biblical methods--fearing that they were motivated by a desire to rob the Scriptures of their historical truth and religious authority. But as the 20th century unfolded and Church authorities became more at home with modern biblical methods, that fear was transformed into genuine endorsement.

Pope Pius XII led the way with his encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, published in 1943. This "Magna Carta" of modern Catholic biblical studies affirmed that the Church had nothing to fear from a responsible investigation of the historical background and literary forms of the Bible. The Pope went on to encourage Catholic scholars to become expert in the biblical languages and to open the riches of the Scriptures to the Church. The Pope's message encouraged a new generation of Catholic biblical scholarship that would bear fruit over the next several decades.

One of the major documents promulgated by the Second Vatican Council was *Dei Verbum* ("The Word of God"). Here, too, was another ringing endorsement of the role of the Bible in the Church and an encouragement for Catholic biblical scholarship. After considering such issues as biblical inspiration and the inerrancy of the Bible, the document concluded with a series of remarkable pastoral recommendations, including an appeal for more Catholic involvement in biblical scholarship, the development of new translations derived from the original biblical languages (and encouraging collaboration with Protestant scholars on such translations!), more use of the Bible in Catholic theology and preaching, and encouragement for ordinary Catholics to study and pray the Scriptures.

These recommendations helped generate an explosion of interest in the Bible at every level of the Church. Within a few years after the Council the three year cycle of Bible readings in the Lectionary were introduced in the Liturgy and Bible courses and Bible study groups mushroomed in parishes around the world. The growth in popular devotion to the Bible in the Catholic community was paralleled--and encouraged--by serious engagement with biblical scholarship on an official level. The Pontifical Biblical Commission--a group of twenty biblical scholars from around the world appointed by the Pope--developed a series of major studies or position papers on biblical subjects that were endorsed and promulgated by the Pope. Until his election as Pope, Cardinal Ratzinger was the head of this commission in his role as leader of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. A scholar in his own right, Cardinal Ratzinger attended virtually every session of the Commission's work.

In 1993 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, the Commission published a study entitled, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. This extensive study explored the various modern methods of biblical interpretation and showed their usefulness for understanding the Bible. (Several of the principles this text enunciated will be explored in later segments of this series.)

In 2002, at the special request of Pope John Paul II, the Commission issued another major study, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*. It charted the debt that Christianity owed to Judaism in the development of the Christian Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments, and using knowledge of the historical context of the New Testament, gave perspective about what appear to be anti-Jewish aspects of some New Testament texts.

This study was followed in September 2008 by another major position paper on *The Bible and Morality*. Here, too, this study, ultimately promulgated by Pope Benedict the XVI, utilized the principles of modern biblical interpretation to consider how complex modern moral issues can be illumined by the biblical materials.

For some Christian denominations today--particularly those who have a fundamentalist bent--use of historical methods of interpretation or exploring the literary dynamics of the biblical text or dealing with the diverse viewpoints of the biblical authors remain a source of consternation and suspicion. Not so for the Catholic Church. The Church firmly believes that there is no inherent contradiction between exploring the human dimensions of the biblical text and its history and viewing the Bible from the vantage point of Christian faith.

How that is done will be the subject of the segments of our series to follow.

## WAYS TO IMPLEMENT

### At Home

1. How important is it that the Church's leadership encourage study of the Scriptures and devotion to them?
2. Can you think of some ways that the Bible and its content have become familiar to you as a Catholic? Has this made any difference in your Catholic faith?



## GOD'S WORD IN HUMAN WORDS, Third in a series

By Rev. Donald Senior C.P.

After reviewing the Church's strong embrace of the modern biblical renewal, it is time to consider some specific principles that guide a Catholic interpretation of the Bible. Many of these, it should be noted, are not unique to Catholicism and are shared by many other Christian denominations. Nevertheless, they are important guides for a solid Catholic interpretation of Scripture.

In many ways the first principle is the most important and encompasses all the rest. Catholics view the Bible as *God's Word but written in human words*. There are two fundamental convictions here: (1) That the Bible is truly inspired by God and (2) that it is a thoroughly human text. Each deserves some comment.

The Second Vatican Council decree, **Dei Verbum** ("Word of God") affirmed our faith conviction that God speaks or communicates with humanity in a variety of ways, some quite natural, such as the beauty and order of nature or the thoughtful reasoning and solid experience of humans through the ages. But God also reveals his Word to us in more extraordinary ways. We believe that the one Word of God comes to us both in the Scriptures and in the Tradition and teaching of the Church. These are not two separate "pipelines" as it were, but the one Word of God reflected in both key sources of our faith.

By affirming that God's Word comes to us through the Scripture--or put more vividly, that God *speaks to us* through the Scriptures--we mean that the Scriptures are a sacred book, containing in their totality the true message that God wants to reveal to us for our salvation. We speak of the Scriptures as "inspired," that is, we believe that God's Spirit guided the events and people of the Bible and also helped illumine those responsible for formulating the various biblical books and ultimately putting them in written form. This is a fundamental stance of faith that makes the Bible a sacred book and one different for us from every other writing, no matter how sacred or important they might be.

Yet, here is also an important part of the picture...by saying that the Bible should ultimately be considered God's Word to us does NOT mean that "God wrote the Bible," or that God dictated the words of Scripture to the various biblical writers. And that brings us to the other key part of the principle cited above--namely that God's Word is written *in human words*. Although ultimately inspired by God, the books of the Bible are thoroughly human in every aspect. The stories and sayings of the Bible were shaped and transmitted by human communities--first within the context of Israel and then by the early Church itself. In composing their texts, the biblical writers (most of whom are anonymous) were subject to all of conditions and limitations that any writer experiences. They wrote within the assumptions and perspectives of a particular time and culture, they were more or less adept in the language they used and the literary forms they employed, they were influenced by the events and conditions of the social context in which they lived. Thus the Bible is also a thoroughly human book.

Emphasizing the human dimension of the Scriptures does not take away from its sacred nature. The Council fathers used a daring and important metaphor to help us understand that. Just as in Jesus the Word became flesh--or in the Eucharist the Body and Blood of the Risen Christ is present within bread and wine--so God's Word comes to us in a truly human manner. In other words, from the Catholic perspective, the Bible partakes of same mystery of the divine and human as the Incarnation itself.

One of the important consequences of this conviction is that it opens the way for us to explore the Scriptures with the same tools and methods we would use to explore any ancient literature--while not ignoring the unique sacred character of the text. So we can ask: What is the historical background of this biblical book? What were the circumstances that may have influenced the author? What were the social and economic context of this author and his community? What about the author's literary style and point of view? And so on--the very questions that guide modern biblical studies.

Realizing the human dimension of the Scriptures also alerts us to the complex process by which the biblical materials were transmitted and that, in many instances, we are not speaking only about an individual author but also about the community's role in the preservation and formulation of the traditions that make up the Bible. Many of these issues will be addressed in subsequent principles of interpretation that we will consider.

From this first criterion or principle of interpretation comes one important conclusion: people of faith have nothing to fear from exploring the human dimension of the Bible nor does this imply a lack of respect for the sacredness of the Scriptures. On the contrary, studying the biblical literature with all the means at our disposal is a tribute to how God has revealed himself to us--through the beauty and power and, yes, the limits of our human nature.

## WAYS TO IMPLEMENT

### **At Home**

1. What do we mean when we say that, "God is the author of the Bible"?
2. Would you prefer to have, as our Bible, a text that was literally dictated by God to the biblical author, or as it actually is--the Bible as inspired by God but written in a fully human manner?



## THE BIBLE HAS MANY MEANINGS, Fourth in a series

By Rev. Donald Senior C.P.

In exploring important principles for interpreting the Bible in Catholic tradition, we will often find that such principles are shared by many other Christian denominations. That is certainly true of the fundamental principle we want to talk about in this installment.

Some people approach a biblical passage expecting that it has only one true meaning. Biblical interpretation, in this view, is something like digging for a hidden treasure--until the treasure is uncovered anything else turned up along the way is meaningless. But understanding the meaning of a biblical text is not like a treasure hunt. In fact, the Bible in whole and in part is capable of many authentic meanings. The stories and sayings of the Bible are rich in potential meaning and have many dimensions that reveal themselves to the attentive reader.

This is true of much great human literature. By contrast, a stop sign at the corner may have only one meaning: *stop!* But great literature, whether one of Shakespeare's plays or an epic saga such as Homer's *Ulysses* or a Robert Frost poem, carries many authentic meanings. People refer to such literature as "classics." The Bible, too, is surely a "classic" in this sense. As we noted in an earlier segment, for people of faith the Bible is God's inspired word, but it is also a fully human word. And on both counts, the Bible opens itself to many possible meanings.

This insight, in fact, was well-known in the earliest centuries of the Church. The Church fathers traditionally apparent original meaning of a passage as intended by its author and received by its original audience; 2. The "allegorical" meaning that finds other levels of meaning in the story beyond the historical or literal sense, applying the biblical passage to other religious truths, similar to the way Jesus himself explained the parable of the sower by giving a special meaning to each of the types of soil. This allegorical method was a favorite of Christian authors in the early centuries of the church; 3. The "anagogical" or mystical meaning whereby a particular biblical passage was seen to refer to transcendent and heavenly realities beyond the literal sense of the story; and, 4. The "tropological" meaning which referred to the moral teaching that could be drawn from a biblical passage.

An example of finding multiple meanings in a biblical passage might be the variety of ways of understanding Jesus' famous parable of the Good Samaritan found in the Gospel of Luke (10:25-37). One could read this as a story that attacks prejudice against people of other cultures (e.g., the Samaritan as a type of a despised stranger), or as a way of defining what it means to be a "neighbor" (which seems to be the point of Jesus' question in this story), or as an explanation of what is the most important obligation of those who seek to do God's will (see the introduction to the parable in 10:25-28). Much depends obviously on the perspective and



experience and interest of the reader or interpreter. Each of us individually and all of us collectively bring different vantage points to our understanding of the text. Our social and economic status, our cultural heritage, our particular spirituality--all of these and more influence the meaning we might discover in the Bible.

But what if someone were to use this story of Jesus as a justification for an anti-Jewish interpretation? After all, the Jewish priest and a Levite walk by the man in the ditch without taking care of him. Here is where another important aspect of the principle of "multiple meanings" comes into play. In Catholic tradition, the range of possible meanings of a biblical passage should always cohere in a credible way with the literal or historical meaning. An authentic interpretation cannot be justified that runs directly counter to the fundamental literal or historical meaning. In Luke's Gospel, for example, Jesus' story is situated as a response to the lawyer who tries to test Jesus. Jesus, in turn, responds by directing the lawyer's attention to a fundamental statement of Jewish belief that stands at the heart of the law: "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). In the literal setting of Luke's Gospel, the parable of the Good Samaritan is an illustration of the Law's true meaning--not an attack on Jews and Judaism.

Not infrequently someone will ask me: "what is the Catholic Church's interpretation" of a particular biblical passage. As far as I know the Church has rarely, if ever, given an official single meaning to any passage in the Bible. Certainly the Church has often cited some key texts in its official teaching--for example, citing the blessing of Peter in Matthew 16:18 ("You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church" ) as an affirmation of the papal office . But the Church leaves open--even regarding this passage--the possibility that a theologian or a preacher or an individual Christian reading the Bible for spiritual reading will find other levels of authentic meaning in the biblical text. The safeguard against bizarre or harmful interpretations includes squaring a particular interpretation with the literal or historical sense--but there are also other helpful safeguards that we will take up in later segments.

## WAYS TO IMPLEMENT

### At Home

1. What does it mean to say that the Bible is a "classic" text?
2. If a biblical passage can be interpreted in a variety of ways, how can we know if a particular interpretation is an authentic or helpful way of understanding this passage?
3. Take a favorite biblical story and see how many different meanings you (and perhaps some of your friends) might find in this story.



## THE BIBLE IN COMMUNITY, Fifth in a series

By Rev. Donald Senior C.P.

One of the most important things to keep in mind when considering the Bible is the fact that it is thoroughly communitarian in nature--and here, too, is an important criterion for properly interpreting the Bible.

First and foremost, we have to remember that the Bible emerged from cultures and times that were thoroughly communal. Ancient Israel was a clan society, as was the case for most of the ancient world (and for much of our world today, apart from Western society). While the individual was valued, far more important and decisive for human life was the family or the clan or the society as a whole. Individual survival depended on the larger community and one's individual interests had to be subordinate to the community as a whole. In the history of Israel a key concept was that of the "covenant"--the bond of relationship forged between God and Israel that also determined the communal obligations of those who belonged to that covenant people.

The paramount importance of community also influenced the way the Bible was composed. Thus the Old Testament books emerged over time from multiple authors who were part of a larger community. Traditions that would eventually be written in the biblical text were shaped and preserved in community settings from generation to generation. The Bible was never the preserve of any individual but was an integral part of the religious and social life of the community.

The same is true of the New Testament. The Mediterranean world in which the early Church was born was also a civilization in which community was key. Even though the values of Greek civilization had begun to bring new appreciation for the role of the individual, Jesus and his disciples were part of a people who instinctively respected community obligations. Jesus formed a community of disciples and, as described in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, the church that was founded in his name also had a strong communal bent, in the spirit of God's covenant with Israel--all things were shared in common and no one was to be in need (see Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-35).

In the case of the Gospels we know that the sayings and stories of Jesus and the impact of his life and mission were kept alive and transmitted and, indeed, shaped in the life of the early post-Resurrection Church. Early Christian faith in Jesus as Son of God and Risen Lord now had a profound influence on the way the stories of Jesus' life were remembered and used in the liturgy, catechesis, and moral teaching of the apostolic church. When the evangelists set about to put the story of Jesus' life and teaching into written narrative form, they did not do so in the isolation of their personal library but in the context of a living community of faith that had a profound understanding of Jesus. The attempts of the evangelists to put that portrait into written form had to be done in a way that would be received and endorsed by their communities of faith.

Even Paul who wrote personal letters did not do so in isolation but in a context of community. He cites and was influenced by the emerging traditions of the early church and in many of his letters he refers to his associates (e.g., Silas and Timothy and others) who are with him in the composition of these key messages to his communities. And the questions and concerns and hopes of these early communities such as Philippi or Corinth or Thessalonica had an impact on what Paul wrote.

Thus the New Testament, like the Old, did not drop down miraculously from above but was shaped by living communities of faith. In a very true sense we can say that the Bible is the "Church's book"--both as a guide and norm of faith for the Church but also because the Bible emerged from the Spirit informed Church.

This dimension of the Bible is also an important principle for its interpretation. Veteran Catholics will remember the warnings about "private interpretation" of the Bible. This doesn't mean that any one of us should avoid reading the Bible lest we fall prey to a toxic "private interpretation"! In fact, the Church encourages Catholics to read and study and pray with the Bible. But the truth of this old admonition is that none of us "owns" the Bible and that we should be open to the wisdom and sound teaching of the Christian community as a whole in seeking the meaning of the Bible. It often takes time and the collective wisdom of the Church to understand the implications of the biblical message as a whole. For example, even though it is now clear that the institution of slavery is incompatible with the Bible's emphasis on human dignity and freedom, it took Christians many centuries to come to a clear realization that an institution they were used to was, in fact, contrary to the teaching of the Bible. Another example may be the concern for ecology. Only now when we see the destructive impact that our industrial society is having on creation have we rediscovered as a Christian community the Bible's emphasis on the beauty and sacredness of creation and human responsibility for it.

The Bible, then, both because of its nature as a "communal" text that emerged from the Church and belongs to the Church, is not the preserve of any single individual but should ultimately be understood in the context of the community of faith as a whole.

## WAYS TO IMPLEMENT

### At Home

1. What is meant when we say "the Bible is the Church's book"?
2. Why is it important to ultimately understand the teaching of the Bible in the context of the Christian community as a whole?



## SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION, Sixth in a series

By Rev. Donald Senior C.P.

While most of the principles for interpreting the Bible that we have been citing in this series would be shared by many Protestant denominations, the one we discuss in this segment is a characteristic Catholic perspective.

In the Second Vatican Council's groundbreaking document, *Dei Verbum* (or "The Word of God"), dealing with Divine Revelation, the bishops emphasized the close relationship between the Scriptures and the Church's Tradition. Here is how they put it: "Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal. Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit" (*Dei Verbum* #9).

The key concept, as the document describes in more detail, is that God communicates to us in a variety of ways—through history, through the beauty and power of creation, and through the great events and great people that defined Israel and the early Church. However, this communication is ultimately expressed in a unique way through the Scriptures themselves. Thus, as we have noted earlier, we can truly say that the Scriptures are the "Word of God" (even though, as we have discussed, God did not "write" the Scriptures). What Catholic teaching affirms is that this Word of God communicated in the Scriptures is also fundamentally revealed through the sacred Tradition of the Church. As the Council document puts it: the one Word of God communicated *both* in Scripture *and* in Tradition.

Notice that following the lead of the Council I have capitalized the word "Tradition." What is referred to by Tradition in this context is not simply old customs or accumulated ways of doing things, as when we say it is "traditional" that we say or doing things this way for a long time in our family or our church. The Tradition referred to here is the deepest currents of Catholic teaching that have been affirmed over and over by the authoritative teachers of the Church, such as the Pope and the great Councils where the collective teaching

of the bishops together with the Pope is expressed. Some of this kind of Sacred Tradition has been embedded in the creeds we recite at the liturgy, such as the Apostle's creed or the Nicene Creed. Such statements reflect the most fundamental convictions of the Church, such as the divinity and humanity of Christ, or of the efficacy of the sacraments, or belief in the resurrection of the dead.

To affirm that both Scripture and Tradition express the one Word of God is ultimately based on the conviction that the Holy Spirit has guided the Church and its teaching, just as the Spirit ultimately guided the formation of the Scriptures. The one Spirit of God animating both insures that on a fundamental level the message of the Scriptures and the official teaching of the Church are in harmony.

This perspective coincides with our understanding of how the Bible was formed. As we had noted earlier in one of our segments, the Scriptures did not drop down magically from above but were forged within the Spirit-guided communities of Israel and then of the Early Church. In a very true sense, we can say that the Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament emerged from the faith and teaching of the apostolic Church. Even the letters of Paul were composed not as pure individual reflections but in dialogue with the faith of the communities Paul addresses and taking into account the teaching of the apostles of which Paul was a recipient. Thus the Bible is the "Church's Book"--not only because the Church reverences the Scriptures but because the Scriptures and the faith community of the Church have been inseparable from the beginning.

In practice this means that both the Church and the Scriptures need each other! To be true to itself, the Church's practices and teachings cannot stray far from the message and spirit of the Scriptures. If, for example, we forget the poor and vulnerable that are such a concern of the Bible, or if we reduce the figure of Christ to a good first century Jewish rabbi and nothing more, then we are out of harmony with the message of the Scriptures. On the other hand, we also need the collective and Spirit-guided wisdom of the teaching authority of the Church to help us truly understand the Bible and its meaning for us. When, for example, biblical scholarship or popular preaching might seem to discount the enduring truth of the biblical message and to consider the Bible just as another piece of ancient literature, however influential it may be, then the teaching authority of the Church has a duty to speak out and right the balance.

Thus as Catholics we revere both the Scriptures and the authentic teaching authority that forges the Tradition of the Church. These two expressions of God's Word to us are inseparably bound to each other and affirm each other.

## WAYS TO IMPLEMENT

### At Home

1. When Catholics speak of "Sacred Tradition" what is meant by this phrase?
2. In what ways can we truly say that the Bible is the "Church's Book"? Can you think of any practical consequences of thinking of the Bible in this way?



# Catechist Development

## READING THE BIBLE AS A WHOLE, Seventh in a series

By Rev. Donald Senior C.P.

A teacher in a college course on a particular book of the Bible or a biblical scholar trying to analyze a challenging biblical passage will necessarily and legitimately focus only on one small section of the entire Scriptures and a limited number of parallels. A course on the Gospel of Matthew, for example, might consider the Sermon the Mount of chapters 5-7 and explore it in the context of Matthew's overall Gospel narrative or maybe compare it with the "Sermon on the Plain" in Luke's Gospel. A scholar working on the literary form of the creation story in Genesis might well compare it with literature from other Middle Eastern civilizations contemporary with this passage.

These approaches are fully legitimate when one is focusing on the specific meaning or history or literary form of a particular passage. However, when a preacher or a religious teacher or a Bible study group or an individual reader wants to draw out what a biblical passage might mean for my life as a person of faith or to understand the value of the Bible on a particular moral issue, then another principle of interpretation comes into play—namely the need to interpret the meaning of any particular passage of the Bible in the light of the whole of the Scriptures.

From the point of view of the Church, the Bible is not simply a collection of individual books, ranging from Genesis to the Book of Revelation. Over time, the Church decided on a "canon" of Scripture. The word "canon" derives from a Greek word which means the in the Church's liturgy and teaching. Virtually at the same time in the early centuries of the Church, the Jewish community was also affirming which books it considered to be inspired and part of its canon. There are a few books that Catholics claim for the Old Testament that the Jewish community (and most Protestant communities) does not, such as Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Baruch, the Letter of Jeremiah, and 1 & 2 Maccabees. Catholics and Protestants fully agree on the 27 books included in the New Testament canon. And there was never any real debate among Jews or Christians about the major books of the Bible, and those books that are disputed are recognized by all as sacred and to be revered, if not reaching the status of inspired Scripture.

The important point for interpretation, however, is that it is the totality of the Scriptures that one has to keep in mind in drawing significant conclusions about the moral authority of the Bible. Often a single passage can stand on its own, such as the two-fold love command taught by Jesus in Matthew 22:24-40 ("You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."). Yet how are we to weigh the Old Testament instructions about total destruction of one's enemy in the context of the wars of conquest in the Book of Joshua? Or what would we say is the Bible's teaching on slavery—when there are few passages that seem to directly disapprove of this practice?

In these instances it is important that we keep in mind the whole of Scripture, recognizing, for example, the Bible's teaching on the sacredness of human life and its embrace of human freedom—teachings found throughout the Bible in various expressions which should also inform our judgment about what the Bible ultimately has to say about violence or slavery. Keeping in mind the totality of the Scriptures helps offset the tendency many people to have to justify a particular moral or social stance on the basis of a single verse (often taken out of context). Thus someone wanting to downplay the urgency of social justice for the poor might quote Jesus' famous saying, "The poor you will always have with you" (Matthew 26:11). But, in fact, justice for the poor is a strong biblical injunction throughout the Old and New Testaments.

This emphasis on interpreting a specific biblical passage in the light of the whole of Scripture is sometimes referred to as a "canonical" approach. The Church embraces the whole of the Scriptures as an expression of its faith and moral teaching, not just the message of a particular passage or individual book of the Bible. Here again is the need for the wisdom and good sense of the faith community in drawing out the meaning of the Bible for our lives. There are well-intentioned Christian groups, for example, who incorporate handling poisonous snakes as part of their worship based on the text in Mark 16:18 ("They will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them..."). Such a passage should not be made a norm of faith but be understood in the wider context of the Bible.

The Bible, as we have noted, spans many centuries and includes many different literary forms. While inspired it is also a thoroughly human book and some biblical passages will express the limited scientific and moral perspectives of their time. Within the Bible itself one can see later traditions modify and advance previous perspectives.

Thus the need for thoughtful interpretation of the Bible and the awareness that Christian life is not guided by any single passage or individual biblical book but by the Word of God that comes to us in the totality of our Sacred Scriptures and in the wise counsel of the Christian community.

## WAYS TO IMPLEMENT

### At Home

1. What is meant by the "canon" of Scripture and how does this provide a context in which to consider the meaning of any specific biblical passage?
2. Can you think of a specific biblical passage or story that needs a wider context in order for it to be properly understood?





## READING THE BIBLE IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST, Eighth in a series

By Rev. Donald Senior C.P.

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It might seem self-evident but when we are talking about Catholic principles of interpreting the Bible it is very important to be aware that we read the Bible as *Christians*, that is, we read the Scriptures from the vantage point of faith in Jesus Christ.

Not all readers necessarily share this same perspective when turning to the Bible. A historian might read the Scriptures only for the purpose of determining the historical circumstances that surround a book or passage in the Bible, without having any particular faith stance at all. A literary critic might study the Bible as a classical text that has had a profound influence on world culture, but the critic is not necessarily interested in the religious message of the Bible. But when we read the Bible precisely as people of faith and in the context of a community of faith such as the Church, then we are looking for the religious meaning of the Bible for our Christian faith.

This principle may not be as simple as it seems. For example, out of deference and respect for Jewish tradition, some Christian scholars prefer to speak of the "Hebrew Bible" rather than the "Old Testament" — believing that the term "old" might have the connotation of something no longer viable or important. (Some use the alternative "First Testament" and "Second Testament" in order to avoid the term "old".) While the sentiment is a good one, the problem is that, as Christians, we do not read the "Hebrew" Scriptures but the "Christian" Scriptures. Although we reverence the Old Testament Scriptures as truly inspired by God and of great significance for our life of faith, we cannot avoid reading them from the vantage point of our Christian faith. An observant Jew, for example, reads the books of what we call the Old Testament from a different, yet valid, faith perspective of their own. For them these books truly are the "Hebrew" Scriptures (although the Jewish community itself does not refer to them by this name). As the Pontifical Biblical Commission pointed out, the Jewish interpretation of their Scriptures is valid in its own right. "Both (Christian and Jewish) readings are bound up with the vision of their respective faiths, of which the readings are the result and expression" (*The Jewish People and Their Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, #22).

The "vision" out of which we Christians read the Bible is our firm belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, both human and divine. We believe, therefore, that for all of history God had in mind the coming of Jesus as Savior of the world. However as the Biblical Commission text went on to say, "To read the Old Testament as Christians then does not mean wishing to find everywhere direct reference to Jesus and to Christian realities" ( #6). The Old Testament speaks from its own historical and religious contexts and we reverence these parts of the Bible on their own terms. The beautiful description of the sacredness of creation in the opening chapters of Genesis, the searing words of the prophets about the claims of justice for the poor, the eloquent laments and prayers of praise in the psalms—all of these and more have profound meaning for us and find their place in the Christian liturgy.

This is an important point because in the past some Christian interpreters reduced the Old Testament Scriptures to simply a prefigurement of Jesus. Some even went so far as to accuse observant Jews of being spiritually obtuse for not seeing the clear indications of Christ's prefigurement everywhere in their Bible. The Church today emphasizes that the Old Testament Scriptures have meaning in their own right and that it is not proper or fair that Jewish believers would be compelled to read and pray their Scriptures from a Christian perspective.

Yet, at the same time, as Christians it is perfectly valid for us to absorb these words of the Scripture and relate them to our faith in Jesus. In a sense we read the Scriptures "retrospectively" through the lens of our Christian faith. This will lead, at times, to seeing an event of Israel's history or a longing of the Jewish people as a prefigurement of Jesus. Thus the Exodus which brought Israel out of slavery to a promised land prefigures the saving event of Jesus' Death and Resurrection. The suffering of the servant on behalf of the people in Isaiah 53 foreshadows the redemptive suffering of Jesus himself. These readings are, in a true sense, "retrospective," as we read the Old Testament now from the vantage point of our faith in Christ.

This was already taking place in the New Testament itself. The Bible of the earliest Church was, of course, what we refer to as the "Old Testament." As the Gospels were being formed the evangelists reflected on the events of Jesus' life in the light of their Scriptures: thus Jesus' actions are often presented as "fulfilling" texts of the Old Testament or Jesus' own words are shaped in harmony with passages of the Old Testament such as his words of lament drawn from Psalm 22 at the moment of his Death ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). Paul, too, draws heavily on the events, symbols, and direct quotations from the Old Testament in composing his letters to his communities —viewing them now in the light of his faith in Christ.

Just as it is impossible for us to understand Jesus and our Christian faith without the Old Testament so, too, is it impossible for us now to view the long history of God's people without relating it to our faith in Christ.

## WAYS TO IMPLEMENT

### **At Home**

1. What does it mean for us as Christians to read the Old Testament Scriptures "retrospectively" from the vantage point of our faith in Jesus?
2. Why do we refer to the biblical books that precede the New Testament as the "Old" Testament? What connotation does the term "old" have for you in this context?



## THE BIBLE MADE “ACTUAL” BY AN “ATTENTIVE” COMMUNITY, Ninth in a series

By Rev. Donald Senior C.P.

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This is one of the most important principles for a truly Catholic and Christian interpretation of the Bible. When the Pontifical Biblical Commission published its now famous study "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" in 1993, it stated that the Christian comes to the Bible ultimately not simply as if reading a historical text from the past but as the living Word of God for the present. This, in fact, is why most Christians turn to the Bible—to find meaning for their lives.

The Biblical Commission's text uses the word "actualize" to describe the process of finding what the Bible means for our lives today. It is a word not so common in English and may be more familiar for Italian or French speakers. To "actualize" the biblical text means to make it applicable to present circumstances. We know that discovering the original historical context of a biblical passage is an important step in understanding it, but it is not the ultimate or final step for those who read the Scriptures from the vantage point of Christian faith. We believe that God's Word speaks to us today and we want to draw from the Scriptures a message that is capable of transforming our lives.

The Biblical Commission's text pointed to three steps in the process of "actualizing" the biblical message:

1. First, one needs to “hear” the biblical text "within one's concrete situation." That means when we turn to the Scripture in a spirit of faith we are also aware of our current circumstances: what is happening in our world or in our workplace or in our family life and personal experience that is affecting us right now.
2. Secondly, we need to consider what aspects of our current situation seem to be "highlighted or put in question by the biblical text." In other words, do I see some connections between my circumstances in the present and the biblical story or saying that I am contemplating. Sometimes the connection is immediate and clear, as when at a time of great personal loss or grief one reads the anguish and faith of the psalmist, or when a parable of Jesus such as the story of the Prodigal Son reminds me of God's infinite mercy at a time of great personal discouragement or guilt. In other circumstances and with other biblical passages, the connection may be more indirect and is found only after thoughtful reflection.
3. Finally, as the Commission's text suggests, we should "draw from the fullness of meaning contained in the biblical text those elements capable of advancing the present situation in a way that is productive and consonant with the saving will of God in Christ." That is, once we have discovered meaning for our lives in contemplating the Scriptures we need to let that meaning change our lives for the better. The Scriptures heard or read in this way might challenge some aspect of our life that needs to be turned in a different direction, or a biblical passage might confirm us in our faith and inspire us to lead a deeper life of holiness, or we may learn again from reading the Bible about the beauty and power of Jesus' example and teaching.

Implicit in this principle of "actualizing" the biblical message is the need to be "attentive" to the Word of God that comes to us through the Scriptures. Being "attentive" is a wonderful and demanding virtue. It means focusing our minds and hearts and putting aside the many distractions that flood into our lives every day. As Catholics we encounter the Bible in a variety of settings: hearing the readings at Mass; being reminded of biblical stories through art and music; hearing the meaning of the Scriptures opened for us in a good homily; studying the Bible in a group or reading a passage of Scripture on our own in a spirit of prayer and reflection. Each of these instances calls for us to be "attentive." It can often happen to each of us that when the reader at Mass concludes a passage of Scripture we can not even remember what the passage was because we were distracted--our thoughts absorbed somewhere else or our attention commandeered by a child wiggling next to us. Or in a Bible Study group we can go off on a tangent about other unrelated things rather than grappling with the meaning of the Biblical text at hand.

Being "attentive" means letting the biblical text "speak" to us on its own terms. We need to listen and reflect on what the passage actually says before we impose our own meaning and concerns upon it. And here there is also room for some thoughtful study of a passage that might be more complex or opaque in its meaning so that we can learn from the wisdom and knowledge of our fellow Christians, including the Church's official teaching.

This latter point reminds us, too, that understanding the meaning of a biblical passage is not simply a matter of what it means to **me** but what it means for **us**. As Catholic Christians we know that we are not just a group of individuals seeking inspiration for ourselves. We are part of a community of faith and the Scriptures are the "Church's book." In bringing our present circumstances to our exploration of the meaning of the Bible we need to be aware that we belong to each other and cannot live our Christian lives in isolation or with indifference to the concerns and experiences of others. The Bible was born in the community of faith of ancient Israel and the early Church and it is in a context of a community of believers that its full meaning can blossom.

## WAYS TO IMPLEMENT

### At Home

1. How would you describe what it means to make the Scriptures "actual" for us today? Can you give some examples of how the message of the Bible was spiritually nourishing for you?
2. What does it mean to be "attentive" in reference to understanding the meaning of Scriptures? And, in this context, why is it important to keep the community in mind when interpreting the Bible?



## READING THE BIBLE FROM DIVERSE VANTAGE POINTS, Tenth in a series

By Rev. Donald Senior C.P.

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Biblical interpreters point to two fundamental ways we can approach the biblical text: either "behind the text" or "in front of the text;" an alternate way of stating this is to speak of viewing the biblical text as a "window" or a "mirror."

Studying the Scriptures from "behind the text" or as a "mirror" happens when our questions are mainly historical: e.g., What were the circumstances, the social and religious context, that helped shape this particular biblical book or passage? How and where and when was the Gospel of Mark composed? Where was Paul imprisoned when he wrote his letter to the Philippians? And so on. These are valid questions that help us understand more about the circumstances and nature of the biblical book under consideration. In effect, we are looking through the biblical text as if looking through a "window" to the historical circumstances that produced this particular text.

But we can also concentrate on the relationship "in front of the text", that is, between the biblical text and the reader. What particular experiences or assumptions (or prejudices) do we bring to our reading of the text that affects the meaning we might draw from the biblical passage? What might this biblical passage mean for me in my life right now? In this instance we are viewing the biblical text as if a "mirror" -- that is, the biblical text casts light on who we are and how we view our lives.

We considered some aspects of this in our last segment when we spoke of the need to be "attentive" when reflecting on a biblical passage, concentrating our attention on what the text says to us, not letting our own distractions and concerns drown out what the Scriptures might be able to say to us.

The same Pontifical Biblical Commission document— *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*—that spoke of the need to "actualize" the Bible (that is, meaningful for our present circumstances) and the need to read it "attentively," also speaks of the importance of using our cultural and social diversity as a means of enriching our understanding of the Scriptures. "Inculturation" is an important concept often spoken about in the context of the Church's universal mission. Each particular culture has its own particular traditions and practices, its own perspectives and understandings that should be respected and preserved--even as we recognize the universal value of the Gospel and the solidarity of all human beings as one family under God.

This same perspective should be brought to our interpretation of the Scriptures. Each culture and every particular social and economic context can bring new insight into the meaning of the Scriptures. In recent years, much more attention has been given to the perspective of those who are materially poor and who are able to read the Scriptures in a more radical way than those of us who may be economically comfortable. The parables of the rich man and his barns in Luke's Gospel (12:16-21) or the story of Lazarus who sits

hungry and sick outside the doorway of the rich man who is oblivious to his need in Luke 16:19-31, will certainly be read differently in the desperate slums of Rio De Janeiro than they will in the wealthy suburbs of an American city.

The Biblical Commission's document draws attention to a number of different vantage points that bring a rich diversity to our understanding of the biblical message. One of these that has become very important in recent years is what is called a "feminist" reading of the Scriptures. A woman (or a man) attentive to long history of oppression and exploitation of women and the characteristic experience of women in a specific culture will bring fresh eyes to a reading of the story of the woman bent double (whom Jesus defends as a "Daughter of Abraham" in Luke 13:10-17 or to the singular praise given to the woman who anoints Jesus in Matthew 26:13--"Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." Feminist interpreters now are a significant part of modern biblical scholarship, including many Catholic scholars.

Another example of interpreting the Bible from a unique "cultural" perspective was brought home to me a few years ago. For a number of years I have had the privilege of leading groups of persons with various physical disabilities on a study tour of the Holy Land in concert with an organization called Stauros that advocates access for persons with disabilities. We visited the site of pools of Bethesda in Jerusalem and read the story of the man Jesus cured there in John 5:1-18. When the reader came to the question that Jesus posed to the man (who, you will recall, had been sitting by that pool for 38 years and always missed his chance to get in the healing waters!) --"Do you want to be healed?"--our group laughed out loud! They interpreted this story from their own unique experience and concluded that the paralyzed man actually did **not** want to be healed but preferred to passively accept his situation and had grown comfortable with it. And, by contrast, the members of our group did not identify themselves by their physical disability but led active lives born of hard work and courage.

So each reader and group of readers brings the richness of their own experience and cultural background to the interpretation of God's Word to us. That is why we need the benefit of a community of interpretation and not just our own individual insights. We can learn much from the experience and insights of other Christians about the powerful meaning of the biblical text—even as we share a common dignity and destiny as Christians and sons and daughters of God.

## WAYS TO IMPLEMENT

### At Home

1. What does it mean to say that we can view the biblical text as a "window" or as a "mirror"? Can you give examples of each approach?
2. When we reflect on a biblical passage and try to draw out its meaning, what influence does our particular experience or cultural background play? Take a particular biblical story and think of the different ways that people from different backgrounds or experiences might interpret this story.



## READING AND PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES, Eleventh in a series

By Rev. Donald Senior C.P.

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Throughout our series in interpreting the Bible from a Catholic perspective, we have emphasized both the human and the divine character of the Scriptures. “Divine,” in that we believe as a community of faith that the ultimate origin and inspiration of the Bible are rooted in the Spirit of God and that the collective message of the Scriptures reveals God’s truth to us—who we are as human beings and children of God, what our destiny will be in full communion with God, and what are the values and ways of being an authentic human being that will lead us on the right path to God.

At the same time, Catholic teaching respects the thoroughly “human” character of the Bible. The Scriptures are not a magical text, mysteriously dropped down from heaven or dictated to the biblical authors by the Holy Spirit. No, we believe that God’s Spirit works through authentic human authorship and thus the Scriptures are subject to the normal limitations and power of all great human literature—shaped by the literary skill of individual authors, touched by the influence of the community of which they were a part, subject to the characteristic values and perspectives and limitations of the cultural, social and historical context in which the particular biblical book was composed.

Thus a Catholic biblical scholar needs to respect the sacred character of the Bible but, at the same time, to work hard to be familiar with the historical context and literary features of the passage under study.

With the exception of scholars and teachers who are fortunate enough to spend their professional life studying the Bible, most of us turn to the Bible perhaps less frequently but also seeking inspiration rather than information. For most of the centuries of Christian history, in fact, the vast majority of Christians could not read or, even if they could, would not have easy access to a written version of the Bible. Acquaintance with the Scriptures came mainly through the Church’s liturgy in which passages of the Bible were proclaimed and preached about, or through viewing the illustrations found in stained glass windows, or statues, or other pieces of art, or in absorbing the yearly rhythm of the church’s liturgical festivals that marked the great events of Christ’s life and the history of Israel.

This way of contemplating the biblical message is still valid and, for many Catholics and other Christians, remains the main source of their exposure to the Bible. But in a particular way since the Second Vatican Council and the biblical renewal that accompanied it, the Church now encourages Catholics to turn directly to the Scriptures and to reflect on them as a source of prayer and devotion. This can take place in several ways and it is important that the individual find the way that is most helpful to him or her.



One method, that is written a lot about today but is actually an ancient practice that was characteristic of the monastic movement for many centuries, is called “Lectio Divina” or “divine reading.” This approach is flexible and can take several formats but at its heart is a meditative reading of the biblical text. This approach is different from Bible study or discussion and is, rather, a form of prayer and meditation.

Components of Lectio Divina include: a) setting aside a time and place where one has a few minutes of quiet suitable for reflection and prayer; b) beginning with an appeal to the Holy Spirit to help open one’s heart and mind to the Word of God that comes through the Scriptures; c) selecting a biblical passage that will be the object of one’s contemplative reading (e.g., a psalm, a selection from the prophets, or a particular gospel or letter of Paul that one will turn to in a sequential reading over several sessions of Lectio Divina; d) a slow and deliberate reading of the biblical text, pausing frequently after a word or phrase or verse that might draw one’s particular attention; e) quietly and peacefully reflecting on the message of each particular passage or segment before going forward to the next.

The goal here is not to “finish an assignment” or to successfully complete the reading of a particular biblical book. Rather the biblical text becomes a stimulus to and an inspiration for prayer, allowing the beauty or challenge of the biblical passage in hand to raise our minds and hearts to God and, at the same time, to enable the Scriptures to illumine our life. The inspiration of the passage might lead us simply to praise God, to offer thanksgiving for the many gifts we have received in our lifetime, or it might remind us of our past failings and lead us to ask God’s loving forgiveness. In times of discouragement or confusion, prayerful meditation on the Scriptures might give us strength and comfort, an awareness of God’s presence with us. Or the example of Jesus or other characters in a biblical story or passage or parable might help us understand more deeply the values that should guide our life today.

There are other ways and formats for reflecting on the Scriptures. Some Catholics I know like to make the Lectionary readings the focus of their prayer. Some, for example, like to read over the particular selections for a Sunday a day or two ahead as preparation before going to Sunday Mass. Others carry in their pocket or purse one or other of the leaflet type missalettes that include the Sunday and daily readings and read them each day quietly on the train or bus on the way to work or as a form of night prayer before going to bed.

This devotional reading of the Bible taps into a deep instinct of Catholic piety that uses concrete items to help stimulate and focus our prayer. Our tradition includes remembering the mysteries of the rosary while fingering the beads, or having a holy card with a favorite prayer or picture tucked in a book we are reading, or having a scented candle lit in a quiet place to help us prayer, or turning to a crucifix or statue in our home and offering a brief and heartfelt prayer, or blessing ourselves with holy water. Like the Bible itself with are both flesh and spirit, both human and touched by the divine.

Reading about the Scriptures and studying them either on our own or with a group of other Christians can help us have a deeper appreciation of the Bible and learn more about the depth and beauty of its message. But the final step for people of faith is to allow the Scriptures to touch our lives, to lead us into communion with the God who is the source of all truth and the ultimate object of our love.

## WAYS TO IMPLEMENT

### At Home

1. What is the difference between studying the Bible and praying with the Bible?  
Why would it be important to do both?
2. What is meant by “Lectio Divina”? How would you find it most comfortable and helpful to use the Bible as part of your daily prayer?



## RESOURCES FOR STUDYING AND INTERPRETING THE BIBLE, Twelve in a series

By Rev. Donald Senior C.P.

Throughout this series we have been discussing various aspects of how best to read and interpret the Bible from a Catholic perspective. In the decades since the Second Vatican Council and the biblical renewal that was part of it, more and more Catholics have been studying and prayerfully reflecting on the meaning of the Scriptures—either on their own or in parish Bible study groups. This is a great blessing for the life of the Church.

Fifty years ago there were very few resources available to help the average Catholic tackle the Bible in a thoughtful way. Fortunately the situation is very different now. In this last of our series I want to point to some of these available resources. Given the constraints of space, this will not by any means be a comprehensive list but rather will point to different types of useful resources, with a sample or two under each heading. For the sake of truth in advertising, I have to admit that I myself have been involved in the composition of some of these resources!

### Translations:

There are numerous English translations of the Bible but two in particular should be signaled out. One is the **New American Bible** (NAB) which is under the sponsorship of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. This is a fine translation, which also includes as an integral part of the text very informative footnotes. This is the translation to be used in the Lectionary at Mass. Also noteworthy is the **New Revised Standard Version** (NRSV), also a fine translation which originates under Protestant auspices but is also published in a Catholic edition. And if you want to compare four major translations at once check out **The Complete Parallel Bible** (Oxford University Press) which prints side by side the NRSV, the NAB, the **Revised English Bible** and the **New Jerusalem Bible** translations.

### Study Bibles:

Some Bible editions, in addition to the biblical text itself, include numerous helps for the reader. Such is the **Catholic Study Bible** (Oxford University Press) which includes the entire Bible (NAB version), reading guides for each biblical book, maps of the biblical areas, and individual articles on specific topics. There is also an annotated version of the NRSV, **The New Oxford Annotated Bible** (Oxford University Press), which provides introductions and additional explanatory footnotes to the biblical text.

## **Commentaries:**

There is an abundance of fine commentaries available on every book of the Bible. Commentaries usually offer an extensive introduction explaining the history and background of the biblical book, and then verse by verse explanation. Some commentaries are more technical in nature (e.g., delving into the Greek or Hebrew text)—others more popular. A fine Catholic series is **Sacra Pagina** (Liturgical Press; Collegeville, MN) which strikes something of a middle road—offering both detailed analysis of the text and summaries of its message. More recently a new explicitly Catholic commentary series is being published under the title **Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture** by Baker Academic press (an Evangelical press!).

There are also handy one-volume commentaries that provide commentary on all the books of the Bible under one cover: Two good examples are **The New Jerome Biblical Commentary** (Prentice Hall) and **The Collegeville Bible Commentary** (Liturgical Press).

Not all commentaries are in print format—for several years publishers such as the Paulist Press and the Liturgical Press have offered commentaries on tapes and more recently on CD's. A strong new example of this is the growing list of Bible commentaries on CD by *Now You Know Media*. In this format Catholic biblical scholars provide twelve or more lectures on individual biblical books.

**Dictionaries of the Bible** A good resource for either individual study or parish libraries are “dictionaries” of the Bible. These usually take the format of substantial individual volumes that provide encyclopedia type articles with information on different biblical topics. Some examples among many choices are the **Harper Collins Bible Dictionary**, the **Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible**, and the **Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology**.

## **Concordances:**

Allied to this category of resource are biblical concordances. A concordance lists in alphabetical order all of the words found in the Bible and identifies the number and verses where these words are found. This is handy when you think of a quote from the Bible but don't know where to locate it! English language concordances need to be geared to a particular translation. For example, there is **Nelson's Complete Concordance of the New American Bible** (Liturgical Press) and **The Catholic Bible Concordance**

## Magazines and Journals:

Finally, there are some subscription journals that offer good resources for ongoing study of the Bible. **The Bible Today** is a publication of The Liturgical Press intended for a popular audience that appears six times a year. Along with various features, each issue includes a “Biblical Update” section where several articles focus either on a particular book of the bible or a major motif or dimension of the bible. The section includes a study guide for discussion and resources for further reading. Another popular magazine is the **Biblical Archaeology Review** which appears six times a year and offers wonderfully illustrated articles on the history and archaeology of the Bible.

There are also some more devotional Bible study resources such as **God’s Word Among Us** that provides inspirational articles and reflections on biblical topics. Noteworthy two are monthly publications such as **The Magnificat Magazine** and **Living with Christ** that provide Catholic audiences with the daily and Sunday readings from the Lectionary, along with the text of the Sunday and daily liturgy. Studying Scripture in conjunction with the Lectionary readings is an excellent way to become more acquainted with the Bible and to make it part of one’s spiritual nourishment.

I hope this brief survey of different types of Bible study resources (further details about all of them can be found on the internet) is a useful conclusion to our series. Catholics today can be grateful that both in print and online there is an abundance of accessible resources to help open the beauty and power of the biblical text. And, of course, nothing substitutes for a prayerful and thoughtful reading of the Bible itself.

## WAYS TO IMPLEMENT

### At Home

1. What difference might it make to you and your life as a Christian to study the Scriptures in a more in-depth way?
2. If you have attempted to study the Bible either on your own or with a group, what resources have you found most helpful? What additional things might you try?