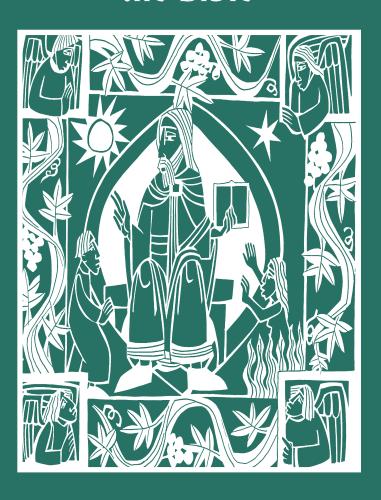
The Word of God in Scripture

How to read and interpret the Bible



THEOLOGY COMMISSION CANADIAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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1999

Re-released on the occasion of the Synod on *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church,* 2008.

Art & Design:

Creative Art & Design, Publications Service, CCCB

Illustrations:

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Published by:

Theology Commission
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
2500 Don Reid Drive
Ottawa, Ontario
K1H 212.

Tel.: (613) 241-9461, ext. 217 Fax: (613) 241-8117

www.cccb.ca

First printed in Canada by:

M.O.M. Printing Ltd.

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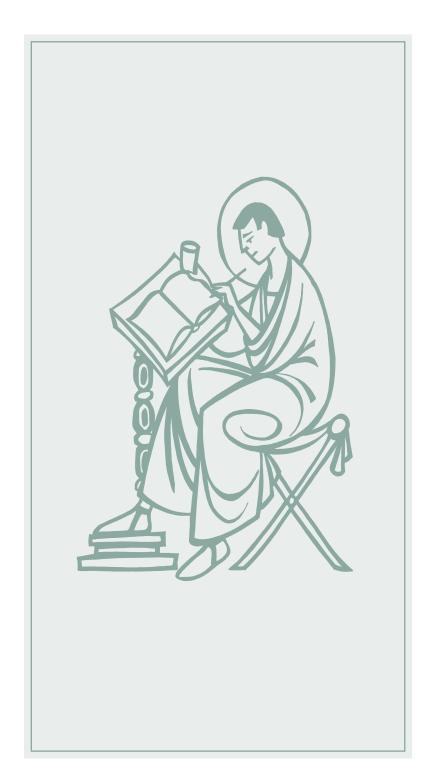
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Introduction

ncreasing interest in the Holy Scriptures is a source of great joy in the Church today! Personal prayer more often starts with the Word of God in the Bible; study and prayer groups place Scripture at the centre of their activities. Lectures and study sessions are organized in different places as well as on radio and television. Publications of the Bible are blossoming, as well as the production of books and periodicals related to the Bible.

The Theological Commission of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops would like to enlarge the number of friends of the Word of God in the Scriptures. A great many Christians suspect that they might draw light, inspiration and courage from the Scriptures, but they hesitate without a map and instructions to guide them through a complex and dense country. They are precisely the candidates for whom we, the Bishops of this doctrinal Commission, have designed this simple and practical guide.

This guide for the reading and interpretation of the Bible begins by showing the importance and place of the written Word of God in the whole of the Christian life. Then, it presents the conditions for a fruitful reading, a plan to be followed and a list of tools for deeper study. Finally, the guide offers some fundamental criteria for the interpretation of these very particular books: we have indeed to be reminded that they are indivisibly both the Word of God and human words, that they are directed toward faith and that they are to be understood in the community of the living Church.

These comments are intended to point out the road and inspire the desire to travel it. If they are in some way adequate, the benefit that can come from the development of a vibrant guide will be immediately apparent. We will be well rewarded if these notes lead to constant dwelling in the Scriptures as in a beloved home, through which, above all, God dwells among us.





The Word of God in Scripture: How to read and interpret the Bible

I. The Word of God

esus is the Word of God, the second person of the Trinity who became flesh and dwelt amongst us. He wrote nothing, but instead gathered together a community of disciples. After the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the Holy Spirit empowered those disciples to spread the Good News throughout the world.

The Good News of Jesus has been alive in the Christian community from the start, but it did not take written form until several decades had passed. Eventually, over a period of many years, the Holy Spirit inspired some of the members of the Church to write what we now call the "New Testament," for the good of the Church.

Down through the ages, Christians have encountered Jesus, the Word of God, in the Sacred Scriptures, in the sacraments, in the liturgy, in the teaching of the Apostles and their successors, in the lives and writings of the saints, and in many other ways.

The Sacred Scriptures have a special place among the diverse elements of living Christian Tradition, through which we encounter Jesus, the Word of God. Unlike all other kinds of writings, the 46 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament not only have a human author, but also have God as their author. So, after a reading from the Letter to the Romans we do not say "The Word of Paul," but rather, "The Word of the Lord." Somewhat in the way that Jesus is both human and divine, the books of the Bible are both human and divine.

The only way in which we know which writings are "the Word of the Lord" is that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the sacred authors guided the Church to discern with certainty which writings are inspired.



II. How to read the Bible, the Word of God

1) Ways of Reading Scripture

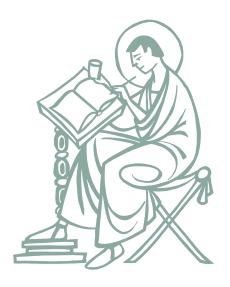
Liturgical Reading: This is the primary setting for reading the Word of God. Much of the Bible was written to be read at the Liturgy.

Continuous Reading: This situates individual texts within the whole of the Bible.

Contemplative Reading: The Bible is meant to be prayed.

Exegesis: "Exegesis" means "to draw the meaning out of the text." Study of the Word of God is essential, since the Scriptures were written far away and many years ago.

Reading to Preach or Teach: When we preach or teach, then we engage in all of the above ways of reading Scripture, with the intention of communicating it to others.





2) Buy a Bible

- Buy a sturdy Bible with clear print and a pleasing layout. Make sure it is complete. If you buy the *Good News Bible*, or *The Revised English Bible*, or *The Revised Standard Version* (an edition of this, with notes, is published as *The Oxford Annotated Bible*), be sure to get the edition "with Apocrypha," or "with deuterocanonical books," or "Catholic Edition." If you do not, you will get a Bible with only 39 of the 46 books of the Old Testament. If you buy *The New Jerusalem Bible* (get the full edition, the one with the notes) or *The New American Bible*, the Bible will be complete.
- Some translations (e.g. *The Revised Standard Version*) are *relatively literal*: some of the Hebrew or Greek language structure is carried over into the English. Literal translations are valuable, for they keep us close to the originals, though that may at times mean that the English is not as natural and understandable as it could be.
- Some translations (e.g. the *Good News Bible*, or *The Revised English Bible*) are relatively free: the translators were not so concerned with keeping closely to the language structures of the original, but to use whatever vocabulary or word order they felt most faithfully expressed in English the meaning of the original. Free translations are valuable, since they are a kind of commentary, and usually are clear and easy to read. At times, however, poetic richness is lost, as well as levels of meaning which are in the original text.

¹ Deuterocanonical books or sections, so-called because of their late coming in the canon of Scripture, are: Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, sections of Esther and of Daniel.

3) Read for a Life-time

The Bible is a whole library. We do not have to read it all at once. Just read steadily, day by day. Feel free to ponder some passages at length, and to skim over others. Although all of the Bible is inspired, not all of it is of the same spiritual value.

4) Read the Bible in a Spirit of Prayer

This is the Word of God: "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening." (I Samuel 3:9)

5) Read Slowly

The best plan for reading a book of the Bible is:

- a) Skim through it, reading the section headings, to get an idea of the whole. Read any introductions which are provided.
- **b)** Read through, slowly, one section at a time. Check the notes (especially useful in *The New Jerusalem Bible* or *The Oxford Annotated Bible With Apocrypha*). Perhaps check a commentary. Mark up your Bible.
- c) Read and reread the section. Memorize some parts.
 Try reading aloud.

6) Always Read as a Member of the Church

The Bible is meant by God to be a part of the whole life of the Christian in the Church, a life which includes prayer, the sacraments, works of practical charity, active involvement in the parish, knowledge of the teachings of the Church, etc. It must always be part of this wider picture.



7) Adopt a Plan

You might want to read a chapter (or a smaller section) a day, perhaps in this order: the Gospels, the Psalms, the rest of the New Testament, the Wisdom books of the Old Testament (Proverbs, Sirach, Wisdom, Qoheleth, Song of Songs, Job), then the rest of the Old Testament.

An excellent plan: read the Mass readings for the day. Over the course of 2 years, at daily Mass, almost the whole of the Bible is read (except for lists and things like that). At Sunday Mass there is a three year cycle for the Gospels: Matthew one year, Mark the next, then Luke. The Gospel of John is read during some of the special seasons (Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter), and in the last Sundays of ordinary time in the year of Mark. The first reading is chosen from the Old Testament to throw light on the Gospel. The Second Reading is chosen independently: the letters of the New Testament are read. The Mass readings from the Lectionary provide a full experience of the Bible, and link us to the sacramental life of the Church throughout the world.

For a text of the Mass readings, you might want to subscribe to *Living With Christ*. Complete edition. Novalis, Periodicals Department, 49 Front Street East, 2nd Floor, Toronto, Ontario, M5E 1B3. [(416)-363-3303]





The Bible is God's Word in human language. Because it is human as well as divine, and was written long ago in a culture far different from our own, we sometimes need help in understanding what it says. A little information, easily available, can save us from misunderstanding the Bible.

 An excellent series of short bible commentaries, in booklet form from The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 56321:

The Collegeville Bible Commentary. Old Testament Series. 25 booklets

New Testament Series, 11 booklets
The Sacra Pagina Series (an excellent set of more detailed commentaries.)

- A most useful introduction: An Introduction to the New Testament, by Raymond Brown. New York: Doubleday, 1997.
- A valuable commentary on the whole Bible, with useful topical articles: *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Prentice Hall, 1990.
- Some more detailed commentaries:

Matthew: Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*. *Sacra Pagina*, Volume 1. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991.

Mark: Augustine Stock, *The Method and Message of Mark*, Michael Glazier, Inc., 1989.

Luke: Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2 vols. Anchor Bible. Doubleday, 1981 and 1983.

John: Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. Anchor Bible. Doubleday, 1966 and 1970.

The Psalms: A. A. Anderson, *Psalms 1-72. Psalms* 73-150, New Century Bible Commentary. Eerdmans, 1972.

The Book of Revelation: John Sweet, *Revelation*, SCM Press, 1979.



9) Find a Time and Place for Reading Scripture

Each day spend at least a few minutes prayerfully reading the Word of God. Begin with a short period of prayerful attentiveness, and then reflect upon a short passage of Scripture, reading it again and again. End with a period of silent prayer. Rejoice in the Word of the Lord: it is light for our path, and leads us to grateful awareness of God's mercy.

10) Read: *Dei Verbum:* The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation

This is the document of Vatican II which deals with the Word of God. It is superb! Its 6 sections deal with 1) divine revelation itself; 2) the transmission of divine revelation (through Scripture and Tradition); 3) sacred Scripture: its divine inspiration and its interpretation; 4) the Old Testament; 5) the New Testament; 6) sacred Scripture in the life of the Church.

Dei Verbum can be obtained in booklet form, and is also found in any collection of the *Documents of Vatican II*. You should also read: The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 74-141.







III. How to interpret the Bible

ive the Bible to ten different people and you can get ten different and contradictory interpretations of it. **The Bible does not explain itself**. Nor do individuals enjoy some kind of God-given guarantee that they will hit upon the correct

interpretation of difficult passages. Much of the Bible is quite clear, but when in doubt here are some principles of interpretation to help us understand what the Bible means.

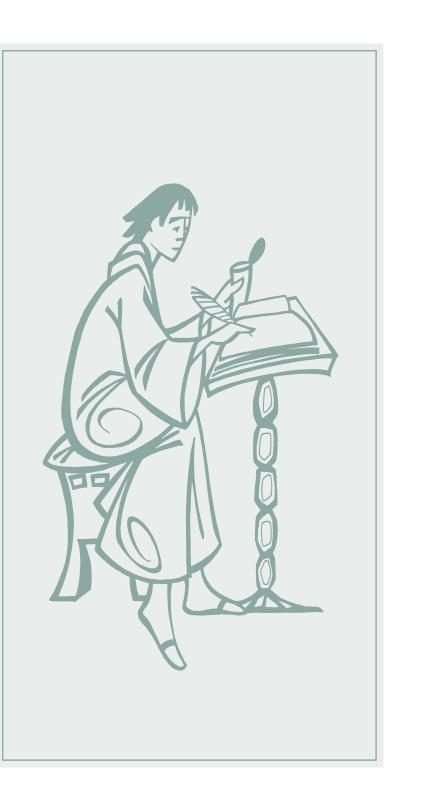
1) The Principle of Variety

Be aware of the different types of human literature through which God's truth is expressed in the Bible: poetry must be read as poetry, parable as parable, history as history, etc. Always keep in mind the original situation out of which the passage arose, and the purpose of the writer. "In order to discover the sacred authors' intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at the time, and the modes of feeling, speaking, and narrating then current." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 110)

2) The Human and the Divine

"In the process of composition of the sacred books God chose and employed human agents, using their own powers and faculties, in such a way that they wrote as authors in the true sense, and yet God acted in and through them, directing the content entirely and solely as he willed. It follows that we should hold that whatever the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm is affirmed by the Holy Spirit; we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture teach firmly, faithfully and without error such truth as God, for the sake of our salvation, wished the biblical text to contain." (*Dei Verbum*, 11)





3) Respect for Information

There is a barrier of time and culture between us and the biblical writers. Scholars can help us to overcome that barrier, and understand the customs, the history, and the literary traditions of biblical times.

4) The Principle of Completeness

No single verse of the Bible, taken by itself, expresses the whole of God's plan. You can prove anything by taking verses here and there out of context. Keep in mind the context of the whole book, and of the other books of the Bible.

5) The Norm of Christ

"Different as the books which comprise it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart, open since his Passover." (*Catechism*, 112) The Old Testament has a value on its own, but Christians can see in it the foreshadowing of Christ. When disturbed by some things in the Old Testament (e.g. violence, ritualistic concerns, harsh laws), we should see them in the context of the final revelation in Jesus.







6) The Context of Living Faith

The Bible must be read within the context of the living faith of the Church upon which the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. Christ did not give us the Bible directly: he gave us the Church, and it was out of the Church that the New Testament later arose. "Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart, rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of Scripture." (*Catechism*, 113) It is our sense of the unity of the whole faith, sometimes called "the analogy of faith," that allows us to interpret rightly any portion of it. (*Catechism*, 114) For example, if we want to know how to interpret the scriptural references to the Eucharist, we will be guided by our living faith in the Eucharist, which we Christians have celebrated since long before the Gospel was put into written form.



IV. Conclusion

Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church



he force and power in the Word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and permanent source of spiritual life."

"Just as the life of the Church grows through persistent participation in the Eucharistic mystery, so we may hope for a new surge of spiritual vitality from intensified veneration for God's Word, which 'lasts forever'." (Is 40:8; cf. 1 Pet 1:23-25)

Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation



