

# Interpretation of Sacred Scripture



# God's Plan Revealed

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# Interpretation: Key Terms

Examining the Church's teaching on the interpretation of Sacred Scripture, we encounter a number of key terms that need defining if we are to come to an understanding of this teaching. These terms include:



- † Economy
- † Typology
- † Mystagogy
- † Senses of Scripture
- † Exegesis
- † Hermeneutics
- † Tradition



# Divine Economy



From the Greek *oikonomia* (*oikos* & *nomos* - household & law), the divine economy is the principle governing all creation and the events of salvation history; in a sense, as Scott Hahn calls it, "the law of God's cosmic household."

St. Paul refers to this when describing how God

"has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him as a plan\* for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth" [Eph 1:9-10]

*\*oikonomia translated as "plan"*



# Divine Economy



A loving God lowers (humbles) Himself to communicate with us on our level. He uses history as a means to teach us, doing so through the events that correspond to his eternal plan.

*Oikonomia* means “more than simply the ‘history of salvation’; it is the dispensation, or wise arrangement by stages, whereby the mystery that is Christ is brought to fulfillment” - Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship*, p.6]

“The Lord your God took on your manners as a man would take on the manners of his son” [Dt 1:31]

# Divine Economy



Theology and economy mean very different things. Theology refers to the mystery of God's inmost life within the Holy Trinity. Economy refers to all the works by which God reveals Himself and communicates His life. [CCC 236]

"The whole of divine economy...is therefore expressed in accordance with the great moments of the communication of this [Trinitarian] life: the word of creation and divine governance (Providence), the work of redemption through Jesus Christ, and the work of sanctification in the Holy Spirit through the Church...in the age of the Church it becomes the sacramental economy." [Cardinal Christoph Schonborn]



# Typology



The Bible consists of two parts: the Old and New Covenants.

Typology is the literal sense in which the New reads the Old.

Typology is exactly what Jesus revealed to the disciples along the road to Emmaus:

“...beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them what referred to Him in all the scriptures” [Lk 24:27].

“Typology discerns in God's works of the Old Covenant prefigurations of what He accomplished in the fullness of time.” [CCC 128]

# Typology



Past events (and people), then, are figures of those to come, figures of something different, of something greater.

Typology is not nostalgia, not a return to what went before. As the Gospel reveals, it signifies a *new* creation.



# Typology



The Lord of History

God uses both word and event to signify things, so not only are the words of Scripture signs of things that happened in history, but the very events of sacred history were fashioned by God as material signs, as temporal events and realities that disclose eternal truths.

# Typology



For the biblical writers Creation, Exodus, and the establishment of the Kingdom are arguably the three most significant divine acts in history. They become the three mountain peaks of typology through the prophets and the New Testament.

Christ appears often in the New Testament as a new Adam, a new Moses, and the Son of David, thus recapitulating the three mountain peaks (Creation, Exodus, Kingdom).



# Typology



The "type", then, is the prefiguring sign which points to or signifies something greater, the "antitype". For example, Noah's family being saved through water corresponds to salvation through Baptism. The flood, then, is a "type" signifying sacramental Baptism [1 Pt 3:21].

Typology depends upon the unity of all Sacred Scripture and upon the salvific intent of God from all eternity.

The prophets are typological in their interpretation of historical events in the Torah as foreshadowing events in both their time and the future.

# St. Hilary on Typology



St. Hilary of Poitiers  
310-367 A.D.

“Christ begets the Church, cleanses it, sanctifies it, redeems it by true authentic prefigurations through the whole course of world history: in the sleep of Adam, in the flood of Noah, in the blessing of Melchizedek, and the justification of Abraham. Everything which Christ would fulfill had then been prefigured since the beginning of the world” [*Tractatus Mysteriorum*, 1,1].



# Mystagogy



Mystagogy is a movement toward illumination.

It is the oral and written explanation of the mystery hidden in the Scriptures *and celebrated in the liturgy.*

*In a sense, then, mystagogy is typology applied to the sacraments.* All healthy liturgical interpretation depends on a ritual symbolism determined not arbitrarily, but by the testimony of tradition rooted in the Bible

Mystagogy is to liturgy what exegesis is to Scripture.

# Mystagogy



Both historically and theologically the Bible's natural habitat is the liturgy.

The biblical story was given to Moses in an encounter with the Lord God, and the covenant with Israel was sealed with sacrificial liturgy.

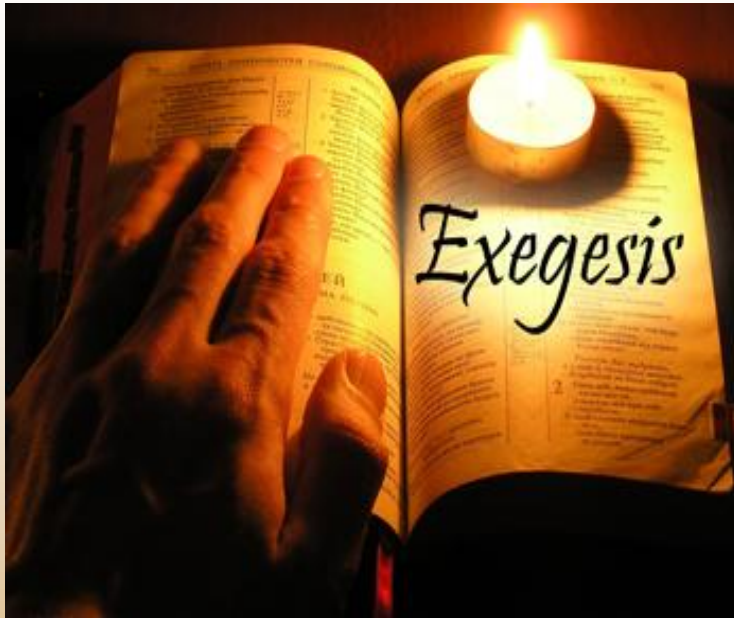
For the early Christians the question of canonicity was phrased

in liturgical terms: "Which documents could be read, chanted, and proclaimed in liturgy, and which were forbidden?"

For early Christians, then, and for the Jews who preceded them, Scripture was learned and experienced in the context of liturgy.



# Exegesis



- † Exegesis is the actual interpretation of the Bible by drawing the meaning out of the Biblical text.
- † The focus of exegesis is the text itself - to understand a passage in its ancient context
- † But one must approach the text in faith, as the Word of God

"Modern exegesis...completely relegated God to the incomprehensible, the otherworldly, and the inexpressible in order to be able to treat the biblical text itself as an entirely worldly reality according to natural-scientific methods..." Quoted from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis"

# Exegesis



Quoted from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis"

- † "Certainly texts must first of all be traced back to their historical origins and interpreted in their proper historical context.
- † "But then, in a second exegetical operation, one must look at them also in light of the total movement of history and in light of history's central event, Jesus Christ.
- † "Only the *combination of both* these methods will yield understanding of the Bible."<sup>16</sup>

# Exegesis

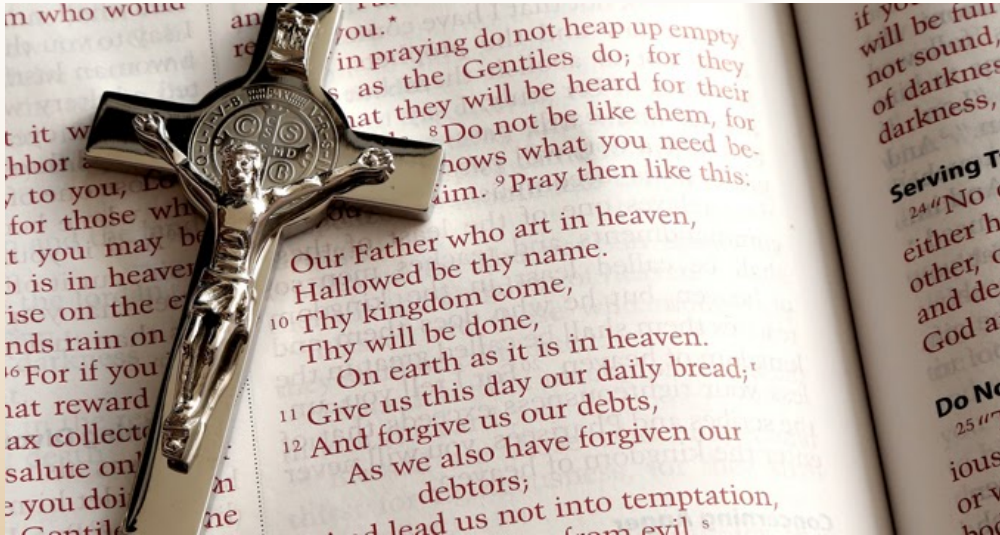


- † "...the exegete should not approach the text with a ready-made philosophy, nor in accordance with the dictates of a so-called modern or "scientific" worldview, which determines in advance what may or may not be.
- † "He may not exclude a priori that (almighty) God could speak in human words in the world.
- † "He may not exclude that God himself could enter into and work in human history, however improbable such a thing might at first appear."

Quoted from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI),  
"Biblical Interpretation in Crisis"



# Hermeneutics



- † The focus of hermeneutics is matter like exegesis... why do we do it? how do we do it? how should we do it?
- † The distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics is a thin line.

- † Hermeneutics is the field of study concerned with how we interpret the Bible, using the principles of biblical interpretation.
- † Hermeneutics not only integrates exegesis, but also employs models for applying a biblical passage to a modern context.

# Tradition

Tradition can be said to include several levels, within which is expressed the reality of the Christian present. The course of the entire post-Apostolic Church is present in the whole life of the Church in which Sacred Scripture is the central, but not the only, element.



Tradition includes:

- †Revelation, inscribed not only in the Bible but in hearts
- †The speaking of the Holy Spirit throughout the whole age of the Church
- †The councils of the Church
- †The liturgical tradition and the whole of the tradition of the Church's life

# The Senses of Scripture



The Church's tradition, going back to its earliest days, addresses two major senses of Scripture:

† **Literal Sense**

† **Spiritual Sense**, which is subdivided into the allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses.

The profound concordance of the four senses guarantees all its richness to the living reading of Scripture in the Church.



# The Senses of Scripture

## Literal

The meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation: "All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal."

## Allegorical

Acquiring a more profound understanding of events and people by recognizing their significance in Christ.

## Moral

Events revealed in Scripture lead us to act justly. As St. Paul says, they were written "for our instruction."

## Anagogical

Understanding realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us toward our true home.

## Spiritual

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 116-119

# The Senses of Scripture



**“...all the senses are founded on one – the literal – from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those intended in allegory.”**

**[St. Thomas Aquinas,  
Summa Theologica 1:1,10,  
ad 1]**

# Allegorical Sense (Example)



See Nm 21:4-9; Jn 3:14-15

In John's Gospel Jesus is seen as fulfilling the Exodus event:

†As the serpent lifted up in the desert and healing those who looked upon it [Jn 3:14-15]

†As the manna coming down from heaven and healing God's people [Jn 6:31-33]

†As the spring which gushed forth from the rock to benefit those dwelling in tents [Jn 7:37-38]

†As the pillar of fire which followed the people – the “light of the world” [Jn 8:12]

†As the Paschal Lamb whose blood washed away the sins of the world [Jn 1:29; 19:36]



# Moral Sense (Example)

✚ In much of Scripture, especially in the New Testament, we encounter Christ's teachings on how we are to act and live. Indeed, much of the Sermon on the Mount falls in this category.

✚ For example, when Jesus tells us to “turn the other cheek” we understand it as a metaphor that transcends its literal meaning and instructs us to avoid retaliation when evil is done to us.

# Anagogical Sense (Example)

- † The anagogical sense is most apparent in Jesus' parables relating to the Kingdom.
- † Through these parables Jesus relates truths about the last things of death, judgment, hell and heaven.
- † For example, Jesus describes the separation of the "sheep" and the "goats" and the judgment that follows [Mt 25:31-46].
- † In the parable of the prodigal son [Lk 15:11-32] Jesus reveals the mystery of the Father's merciful, forgiving love in light of repentance.

# Rules of Interpretation-1

**“Be especially attentive to the content and unity of the whole Scripture.” [CCC, 112]**



Despite the variety of the many books that make up Sacred Scripture, the Bible possesses a real unity based on the fact that it is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and through it God has revealed His plan to us. It is a plan in which Jesus Christ is the center and heart.

**“The Bible’s ‘content and unity’ refers specifically to the *literary sense* of Scripture, the *divine economy*, the ‘plot’ that unifies all the individual books as well as the two Testaments.” [Scott Hahn, *Letter and Spirit*, p. 164]**



# Rules of Interpretation-2

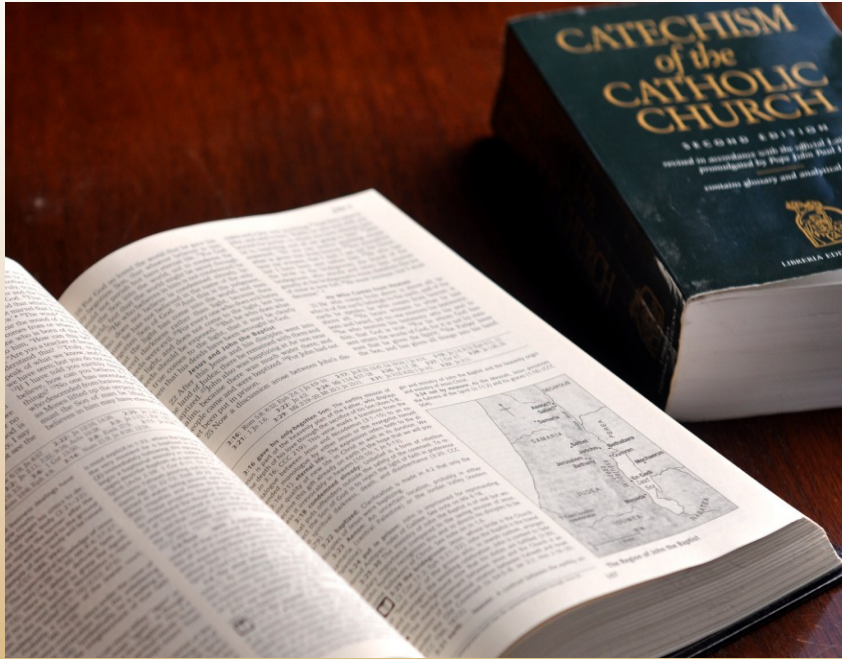


**“Read the Scripture  
with the living Tradition  
of the whole Church.”  
[CCC 113]**

**The Holy Spirit grants to  
the Church the spiritual  
interpretation of Sacred  
Scripture. In her Tradition  
the Church carries the  
living memorial of God's**

**Word. Sacred Scripture, then, is written not so much  
in Church documents and records, but is written in the  
Church's heart.**

# Rules of Interpretation-3

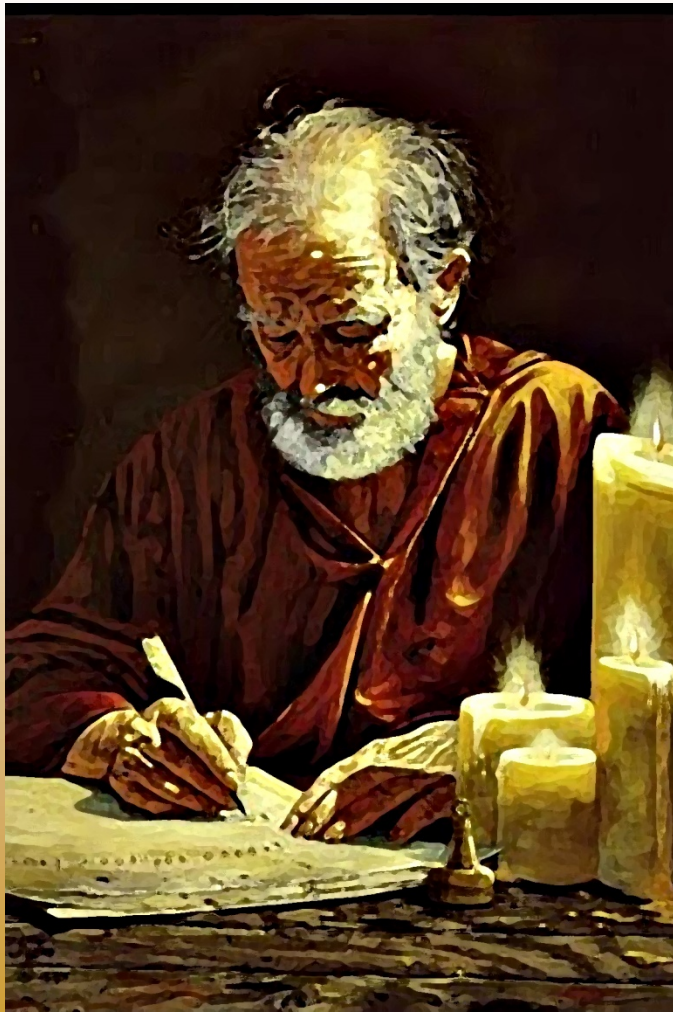


**“Be attentive to the analogy of faith.”  
[CCC 114]**

By the “analogy of faith” the Church means the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of Revelation.

**“To understand the word of God, then, we need to appreciate and experience the essential meaning and value of the liturgical action. A faith-filled understanding of sacred Scripture must always refer back to the liturgy...” - Pope Benedict XVI**

# Role of the Exegete



St. Paul in Prison

"It is the task of exegetes to work, according to these rules, toward a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture in order that their research may help the Church to form a firmer judgment."  
[CCC 119]



# Role of the Church



"But I would not believe in the Gospel, had not the authority of the Catholic Church already moved me." [St. Augustine, *Against the Manicheans*]

"For, of course, all that has been said about the manner of interpreting Scripture is ultimately subject to the judgment of the Church which exercises the divinely conferred commission and ministry of watching over and interpreting the Word of God." [CCC 119]

# All Through the Holy Spirit

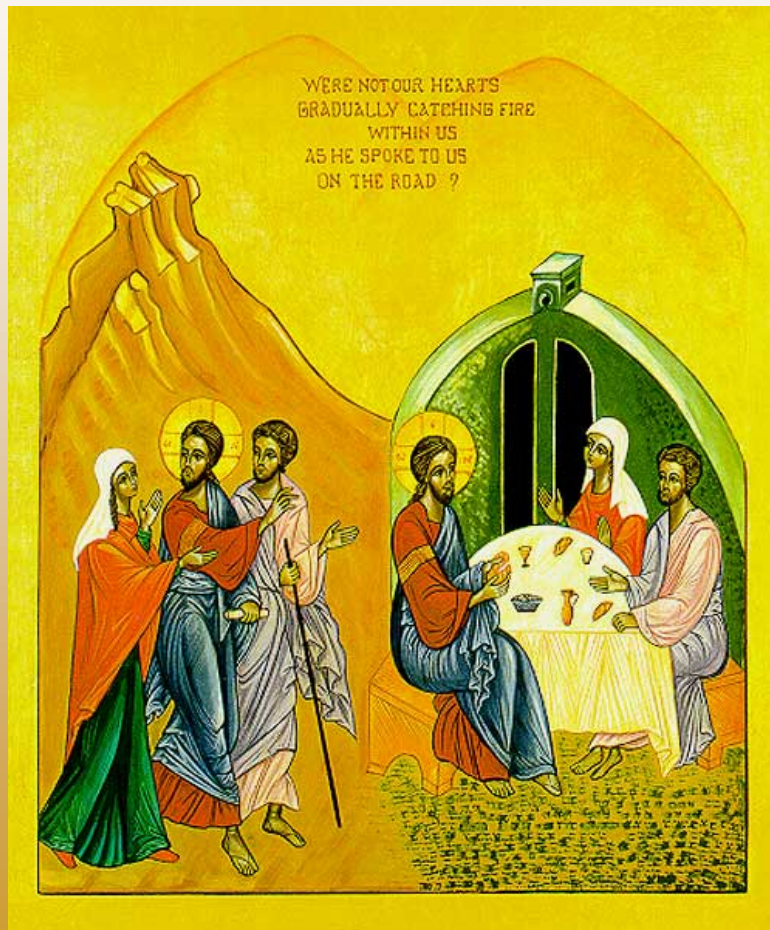
**Scripture**  
Inspirator

**Tradition**  
Animator

**Holy  
Spirit**

**Magisterium**  
Guarantor

# Jesus Teaches at Emmaus



"Every Eucharistic liturgy conforms to the pattern established at Emmaus: the opening of the Scriptures followed by the Breaking of the Bread, the Liturgy of the Word followed by the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Mass, then, is the place par excellence of the Scriptures faithful reception" [Scott Hahn, *Letter and Spirit*, p. 29]