

For those just joining our parish Bible Study, let me offer a few suggestions and a little food for thought. The following comments are based largely on questions I have been asked over the years by those new to the study of Sacred Scripture.

Choosing a Bible. You can choose from many Catholic Bibles in English. Among the most popular are:

- Revised Standard Version – Catholic Edition [RSV-CE];
- New Revised Standard Version – Catholic Edition [NRSV-CE];
- New American Bible [NAB];
- Jerusalem Bible;
- New Jerusalem Bible;

A number of older translations are also available, but most people today find their language difficult to follow, and some translations are not as accurate as more recent versions.

In our Bible Study, I will use both the Revised Standard Version [RSV-CE] and the New American Bible [NAB]. I personally prefer the former, but the latter is the same translation used at Mass and so most people are familiar with it.

Why are the Catholic and Protestant Bibles different? In the early days of the Church, while the New Testament was being written, there was no definitive list of Old Testament books. The Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint), translated by Jewish scholars in Alexandria during the 2nd Century B.C., contained more books than the Hebrew Scriptures and it was this longer list that was used by the early Church and New Testament writers. It was generally accepted throughout the Church as Sacred Scripture during the centuries that followed. It wasn't until the time of the Protestant Reformation that the reformers assumed the Old Testament of the early Church was the same Bible as that read by the Jews in their day. And so they omitted seven Old Testament books that are in the Septuagint but not in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Catholic Church, however, has always considered these books canonical and this was confirmed by the Council of Trent. As a result the Catholic Old Testament consists of 46 books versus the 39 of the Protestant Old Testament.

Where to start? Well, you're in luck because our parish Bible Study program will make that decision for you. Our Bible Study is ongoing and will eventually cycle back to its beginning. Visit our Bible Study website (currently at:<http://catholic-scripture.com>) where you will find many study guides and lots of other information relating to the parish program.

As you will soon discover, we do not move at a set pace because those taking part determine how fast we progress. The study of Sacred Scripture is a lifelong process and we will never completely plumb its depths of meaning, so don't be impatient if we seem to be moving slowly. Take the time to draw out that meaning as it affects your own life.

We study both the Old and New Testaments. This is important since both are the word of God, with the Old Testament being fulfilled in the New. You can't truly understand one without the other.

Relating the Bible to your life. One of the most effective ways to read the Bible is through an ancient practice known as *lectio divina*, a prayerful way to reflect on the meaning of Scripture within the context of one's own life. It involves a slow meditative reading of the text and a response in prayer, followed by contemplative prayer during which we rest silently in God's presence. In a very real sense, our reading of God's word then becomes a dialogue with God. The idea is to be personally transformed by God's Word. Instead of just reading with our eyes and listening with our ears, we hear God's word, as St. Benedict said, "with the ears of the heart." This, of course, is what we are seeking through Bible Study. Our primary goal is not to simply increase our knowledge, but rather to deepen our relationship with God Himself.

Who wrote the Bible? This is an important question because our Catholic understanding will lead us to a different answer than you might receive from others.

First of all, the Bible is the Word of God. This doesn't mean, however, that God physically wrote the Bible, but it does mean that the Holy Spirit is the primary author. The Church has always believed that God's authorship means that He *inspired* the human writers. He worked in their minds and hearts so that the texts

expressed the truth that God wanted them to express. Each author, though, wrote in his own style, in his own language, and with all the peculiarities and limitations of his particular time and culture. The Bible is, then, *incarnational*; that is, it is fully human and yet, at the same time, fully the Word of God. And this remains true today. The same Holy Spirit speaks to us through Scripture just as He inspired the human authors so many centuries ago.

What in the Bible is fact, and what's fiction? Much like a library, the Bible is made up of many different books written in a wide range of literary styles. Some are history books, some are books of poetry and songs, and some are books of stories written to impart a moral, a lesson, or draw us into a deeper relationship with God. Others are even mythical, describing events and actions in ways the people of the time could best understand and appreciate. Some books describe famous individuals and relate what they had to say to the people of the time. Other books in this sacred library consist of letters written to individuals or to groups of people, while some are collections of wise sayings passed down from one generation to the next. And there are even some law books filled with legal codes and proscriptions. Yes, the Bible is quite a library.

The important point to remember is that God can express divine truth through all of these literary styles. He can use a story like the Book of Job, or a court history like Chronicles, or a collection of poetry like the Psalms and through each of these books express the truth He wants told. This is something our early ancestors in faith understood well. Unfortunately, many people today cannot accept this. They think that only factual information, collections of data, can communicate what is true. If that's the case than the plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of Dante or Milton or Keats, and the music of Bach or Mozart are all valueless. As Catholics we know that such thinking is very wrong because our own tradition is filled with history, music, stories, poetry, symbols...all expressing truth through different ways.

Are we supposed to take everything in the Bible literally? This is really a follow-up to the above question. The Church teaches that we should always consider the writer's literary style, his intentions, the context of the passage, and the tradition of its interpretation in the Church through the ages. A good example would be the words Jesus says at the Last Supper: "This is my Body." Jesus was very emphatic when He said these words. He didn't qualify them or interpret them. And the Church, from the very beginning, understood that Jesus was telling us that He is truly present in the Eucharist and intended to give the Church an eternal gift. On the other hand, in Genesis 1 the Church explains that the writers were telling a truth about God's creative act, but doing so without an understanding of exactly how that creation came about. And so they used poetic and figurative language to apply the truth of God's creative work in ways that the people of the time could understand. It is not the *how* of creation that is important; it's the *truth* of creation and the *why*.

Is God really as violent as He is depicted in the Old Testament? Keep in mind when reading the Bible that we are seeing things through the eyes of God's people, and that what we read is often their perception of what God is like. God's people in the Old Testament went through a long learning process. It was a centuries-long process during which God revealed Himself to them more clearly in ways they could understand at any given point in their history. Understand, too, that the people at that time considered God as the *direct cause* of all that happened in the world – the good and the bad, the joyful and the painful. They had no understanding of God's permissive will by which He allows bad things to happen but does not directly cause them to happen. The important point here is to understand that the God of the Old Testament is the same loving Father of Jesus. It is incorrect – very incorrect – to say that the God of the Old Testament is violent and angry, while the God of the New Testament is loving and merciful. God is changeless, immutable! A careful reading of Scripture will show us the one God of love who desires only the fullness of life for His people.

Does the Church officially interpret Bible passages? There is no official compendium of Church interpretations of Bible passages. In doctrinal matters, however, the Church does demonstrate how its teachings are rooted in Scripture. This is most evident in the documents issued by Church Councils over the centuries and in papal encyclicals. Probably the best place to find Church teaching using Scripture in this way is in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Even when it does use a passage to support a doctrinal belief, the Church does not say that this is the *only* definitive meaning of that passage. The Bible has layers upon layers of meaning and new insights are found by individuals seeking the gifts of wisdom and understanding. The truth of the Bible is a bottomless well from which we can continually draw forth rich waters.