

READING THE BIBLE AS CATHOLICS

A couple of weeks ago I mentioned in a homily that as Catholics we do not have to read the faith stories of the book of Genesis as literal history. In fact, I think it is detrimental to read them in that way and to insist that they are to be read in that way. It can lead to an either/or for anyone who has accepted that all of creation and all of life, including human life, has evolved over many eons. Either I have to accept that the stories of Genesis are historically accurate descriptions of creation and humanity (and therefore are to be embraced as more historically trustworthy than anything science can tell us) or they are wrong. At best they become creative myths with no more value than any other ancient myth.

There are, however, other ways to read, understand, and learn from the stories of Genesis and the Bible as a whole. One comes from our Catholic tradition. The Bible as a whole is seen as a collection of inspired stories of faith. The books of the Bible include many historical details, but they also include legends and myths, poems and short narratives, collections of sayings and proverbs, letters, Gospels, apocalyptic writing, and more. These writings are not necessarily historically accurate depictions of the times, though they can be. These writings are not eye witness accounts of actual events, but the accumulation of oral and written stories about various events. They are viewed as inspired by God's Holy Spirit and therefore worthy of being brought into the community's sacred liturgical celebrations as vehicles through which God can touch our minds and hearts. As inspired writings, Christians are encouraged to read them prayerfully as part of their spiritual growth, but always guided by the Bible as a whole and the Church's long tradition of applying the insights of the Bible to daily life. When it comes to whether they are "true" or not, the Church declares that they are inerrant only in a very specific way. The Sacred Scripture is without error for that which is necessary for our salvation.

I want to unpack some of the insights from our Catholic understanding, when it comes to reading Sacred Scripture, especially in light of our current understanding of humanity and the universe opened up by various scientific approaches such as anthropology, biology and genetics, physics and more. How has that changed our common understanding of inspiration or inerrancy of the Bible as mentioned above? If many of the stories of the Bible are not historically accurate descriptions of events, does that negate them or free them to be more powerful in our lives? In the end, I want to suggest a way to read the Bible—where to begin (not at the beginning!) and how to proceed—which, I think, helps us enter into the world of the Bible in the most fruitful, spiritually enriching way.

Let us begin with the current Catholic understanding of inspiration. The basic Catholic doctrine is that all the books of Sacred Scripture are inspired by the Holy Spirit. The genius of Catholic doctrine is that it tries to keep the faith community within a common understanding, but allows that understanding to grow and develop as new insights become available. So, notice that the doctrine on inspiration does not initially specify what books constitute the totality of Sacred Scripture (more on that below), nor does it define what it means to be "inspired" by God's Holy Spirit. The most common understanding from the earliest years of the Church's existence was that God picked out specific writers and gave them the infused knowledge to write down everything we see in the various books of the Bible. Thus, typically, Moses was said to be the "author" of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), King David the composer of the Psalms, the prophet Isaiah the author of everything in the book of Isaiah, Matthew (the tax collector turned apostle) the author of the Gospel of Mathew, the apostle John (younger of the sons of Zebedee) the author of the Gospel of John, and so on. In the Greco-Roman culture the idea that the Muses inspire writers would have been current, and so that the one, true God is capable of picking out authors and sending angels to inspire their minds and hearts was certainly not hard to believe. The advantage of this traditional view was that it guaranteed that many of the events in the Bible were written down by an eye

witness. It also gave a very clear reason to accept all that was written in the Bible—that is the way God wanted it. In turn, to not believe in what was written in the Bible as both historically accurate and true was seen as not believing in God or God’s wisdom. Is there, perhaps, another way to understand inspiration?

Let us begin with an understanding of how various writings became part of Sacred Scripture. For the Old Testament it might seem as though it was fairly easy—just take over all the books accepted by the Jewish faith as inspired. Or, more specifically, try to figure out which books of Scripture would have been accepted as inspired during the time of Jesus (and so accepted by Jesus) and you have the First (or Old) Testament. But Scripture was not written as a complete book. Various writings were on scrolls. Scrolls might contain what we would consider a “book” of the Bible (such as Isaiah or Genesis or Exodus or the Psalms) or a few “books” brought together (especially some of the shorter books of the prophets). One did not go to one book to read all the various inspired writings. You had to sort through a number of scrolls and there was no necessarily agreed upon order to them. There were also scrolls of writings that never made it into either the accepted Jewish Sacred Scripture or accepted Christian Old Testament, which were used by various Jewish communities of faith. Add to that the fact that there was a more ancient Masoretic (Hebrew) text for the various writings on the scrolls and a later Septuagint (Greek) text, with the latter having more writings and some additions to the more ancient texts.

All this comes to a head when the Jewish community and the Jewish-Christian community completely split apart in the latter part of the first century. As well, scrolls began to be replaced by indexes that were more like our current understanding of a bound book, and so an order had to be given to all the books which were considered inspired Scripture. The end result was our current Jewish Scripture and Christian Old Testaments (plural is deliberate). While they are mostly similar there are differences. The Jewish community accepted only the writings that had Masoretic texts and so there are fewer books in “their” Bible than the Catholic one, which accepted the more expanded Septuagint version. Also, the Jewish community arranged the order of the books into what is called, in short, the Tanakh (spelled various ways). This is a made-up word connecting the beginning letters of each part of the Jewish Scripture: T for Torah (the “Law” or the first five books also called Pentateuch); N for Nevi’im (the “Prophets”); and K for Ketuvim (the “Writings”). Notice the order. The Jewish Sacred Scripture ends not with the prophetic books but the wisdom and writings about the people of Israel.

The early Church’s understanding of what constitutes the Old Testament included all the books of the Jewish Scripture and also the additional ones that formed part of the Greek-translated Bible called the Septuagint. As importantly, and maybe more importantly, it also arranged these books in a slightly different and four-part order: The Pentateuch (same first five books), the Historical Books (which continue the history of Israel), the Wisdom books (Psalms, Proverbs, etc.), then ending with the Prophetic books. This was the common Christian understanding of the Old Testament until the time of the Reformation. Luther, in fighting against the role of papal authority and for the authority of the Sacred Scriptures, saw the additional Old Testament books that were not in the Scriptures of the local Jewish community of his time as an example of papal hubris, adding to what was the “correct” number of Old Testament books. In actual fact, as mentioned above, Luther was the one who was changing the long-accepted Christian understanding by eliminating books that had been part of the inspired Christian Old Testament.

Why is any of this important when it comes to the question of inspiration? Because the Christian understanding is that the books of the Bible are inspired for our salvation. We read, interpret, and use them differently than we do any other literature. It is important, then, to define the limits of that inspiration. Secondly, we believe the Scripture as a whole is inspired, not just the individual books or

writings within the Bible. We enter into the world of Scripture with an understanding that there is an inner unity to the whole of Scripture. As Catholics we do not play one passage off against another but include all insights, all passages, and look for ways they can be interpreted as a whole. An example of this, is the very order of the books of the Old Testament. By ending with the prophetic writings, the Christian order of the books suggests that there is yet to be a fulfillment of the promises given to the people of Israel. For Christians, The New (or second) Testament becomes the vehicle for understanding that fulfillment, without nullifying anything that was written in that first (Old) Testament. That is part of the inspired nature of the Bible for Christians.

The fact that our Catholic understanding of what constitutes the Old Testament is a bit different from the Jewish understanding of what constitutes their Sacred Scripture, and yet both believe their version of Scripture to be inspired, suggests that inspiration is not simply a process of dictation of words from God to human beings, but a much more communal, more complex process. The whole community plays a role in what is accepted as authentic writings of Sacred Scripture and therefore what can count as inspired by God. For the New Testament, for example, even though certain writings were accepted fairly quickly as inspired Scripture—some of the Gospels, some of Paul’s letters, the Acts of the Apostles—others took much longer before being more universally accepted as inspired writings and therefore to be read by all the Christian communities when they gathered for worship and put into any official compendium of Sacred Scripture. Various communities would circulate the writings and use them in their gatherings, but there would not have been an agreed upon full list of Sacred writings. In the second century, however, certain teachers such as Marcion argued that some of the accepted writings were not truly inspired and therefore were not to be used by the community. Others, especially those we now designate as Gnostics, argued that many of the writings not accepted by most Christian communities should count equally as inspired Scripture because they gave those with special abilities of interpretation a deeper access into the mystery of salvation. It became necessary, then, to more carefully define what was “in” and what was “out” in terms of the New Testament. In other words, to create what we call an official “canon” (word means a ‘rule’ or ‘measuring stick’) of Scripture. By the end of the 3rd century, most of what we consider the current New Testament was accepted by a large majority of Christian communities, though some still disputed the Letter to the Hebrews (because it did not seem to be written by Paul and there was no authorial designation), the Gospel of John (because it seemed too Gnostic to some), the Book of Revelations, and a few other non-Pauline letters.

Looking at this history of the formation of what is called the canon of the Bible clearly highlights its complex process. Looking at that process from our 21st century vantage point we now know that even the accepted Gospels and letters are products of a longer history. We no longer presume that one of the apostles wrote the entirety of the Gospel attributed to them. We no longer presume that all of the letters attributed to Paul were necessarily written by him alone. Yet we consider the whole of the writings of the New Testament to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and so can be and are to be used by the community of faith in its worship and in understanding the mystery of salvation. In other words, inspiration was not some whispering in the ear by God to a certain few authors. Inspiration was the faith community’s recognition that what a certain writing contained was both compatible with the faith tradition that had been handed down and helped to capture the heart of that faith tradition for future generations. It is of no concern if Moses did not write any of the books of the Pentateuch or that the apostle Matthew probably did not write the Gospel of Matthew. What matters is the decision of the faith community, tested over time, about how universally the writings were accepted. That allowed a particular writing to be recognized as inspired by God and to be included in the canon of Sacred Scripture and used by the community in its worship and faith life.

From a Catholic perspective, it is only with the Council of Trent in the 16th century that the Church officially named the full and complete canon of inspired Sacred Scripture, in order to respond to certain Reformers who threw out some of the heretofore agreed upon Old Testament books (such as the Book of Wisdom) and certain of the New Testament books (such as the Letter of James). To say that a writing of Sacred Scripture is inspired is to say that it is part of the Church's core Tradition. It is to be used in the community's worship, become part of individual and group uses of the Bible, and used with all other books of the Bible to try to give authentic interpretations to the doctrines of the faith. The Catholic Church does not have a doctrine as to how God so inspires these words, although it has come to understand that the simplistic idea of direct and immediate inspiration does not have to be promoted. The inspired Scripture does not stand apart from or above or outside the Church as a whole, because before there was an agreed upon set of Sacred Writings, there already existed the Church. Rather, our inspired Scripture sits at the core, at the heart of the Church, ever inspiring it to renewal and deeper understanding of the mystery of God's saving grace at work.

Take a look at the use of Scripture on a typical Sunday, say, the inspired story from the Gospel of Mark in which Jesus sends the apostles out two by two to essentially do what he had been doing—showing that the kingdom of God can break the power of evil, heal the sick and bring hope to those who are open to it. What is inspired? Is it the style of Mark's writing? No. In fact, his Greek is not that elegant. Luke writes in a much more polished Greek. Are the facts of the story inspired and therefore historically accurate? Not necessarily. Both Luke and Matthew take this basic story and change some of its details here and there to bring out a deeper understanding of what Jesus was trying to do. Is it because the author (traditionally connected to the person called "John Mark" in Paul's journeys) knew both Paul and Peter personally and so had intimate second-hand knowledge of all that happened in Jesus' life? No. We really do not know who put the Gospel of Mark together. Rather, that story and all of the Gospel of Mark is considered the inspired Word of God, because the Church as a whole has accepted it as such. This allows us to gather on Sundays and take a small excerpt from the Gospel and connect it to a passage from the Old Testament from Amos about how prophets who bring God's word to the community are often not accepted. In turn, this lets us meditate on our own lives and instances where maybe we were misunderstood or tried to do something good but people took it in a wrong manner. To know that this happens as part of being a disciple of Jesus helps us from becoming discouraged. Because it is inspired Scripture, it allows us to bring that story of faith into prayer, imagining ourselves with Jesus in that story, hearing him talk with us, sending us out, encouraging us—and then connecting that to some situation in our own lives. In the end, because it is part of the inspired Sacred Scripture, this Gospel—all of Scripture—can be read and meditated upon and used for our spiritual growth and good.

The reflections above raise a difficult question. If the Sacred Scriptures are inspired by God, then why do they seem to contain so many historically inaccurate facts? Why do two Gospel versions of the same story have at times small, at times significant differences as to what exactly happened? In short, how can we say the Bible is not only inspired Sacred Scripture but "without error"? Such question caused relatively few problems throughout the course of Christian history. The fact that the Bible was inspired was enough. God must have a purpose in allowing these discrepancies. Or, there really are not any discrepancies; only a lack of human understanding about how we are to understand them. If the Bible says the sun literally stood still for almost a day in order to help the Israelites defeat their enemies, it must have been so. If the Bible says that creation happened in six days, then that is simply to be accepted in faith.

One way around these difficulties was to interpret the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament. It did not matter, then, if something did not make perfect sense in the Old Testament, if one could find a way to relate the passage to Christ and the salvation we have in Christ Jesus. Theologians

used their creative imaginations to find all sorts of ways that the Old Testament writings seemed to prefigure or point to something of Christ. We see this already in St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he completely reverses what the Old Testament Scripture actually says. He connects the covenant with Israel to Hagar, the slave woman or concubine of Abraham, rather than to Sarah, the freeborn wife of Abraham. This then allows him to call following the Mosaic law and its practices such as circumcision, a type of slavery and to exalt the freedom Christians have in Christ. Theologians in the early centuries followed suit and creatively reinterpreted the images and stories of the Old Testament in ingenious ways to connect them to Christ.

For most of Christian history, then, the Bible was not read for its history (though most would have accepted that what it said is historically accurate), but as the inspired source for images and doctrines and understandings of the salvation Christ achieved for us. In its liturgies the Church felt free (and still does) to skip over awkward verses and connect passages that were not initially intended to be connected. To say that the Bible was "without error" meant that everything in the Bible was intended to be used to discover the deepest truth of salvation in Christ. This all comes to a head in the modern era as historians and then archaeologists, anthropologists and other scientists begin to question the value of the Bible for their disciplines. They were discovering scientific "truths" that seemed to directly and indirectly contradict some of the events of the Bible. As these modern disciplines start to challenge what they called the errors of the Bible, a counter reaction occurs. This was felt very acutely in many of the Protestant Churches, because, for them, trusting the authority of the Bible was what differentiated the correctness of their faith from the "errors" of the Catholic Church, which relied on a human source of authority (pope and bishops) rather than what seemed a supernatural one (the inspired and inerrant Bible).

What is called a "fundamentalist" understanding of the Bible is one of the results of this challenge to Biblical truth. Although there are many variations of fundamentalism, they usually agree on the fact that the Bible is directly inspired by God and the Scripture is therefore without any historical or factual error. As a result, those who accept the designation "fundamentalist" usually insist on the scientific correctness of the Genesis version of creation, though some are willing to modify it and see in the term "six days" a metaphor for various stages of development. Each of Jesus' miracles is to be taken as an intervention by God over and above the natural laws of the world, and so on. What ends up happening in many quarters is an opposition between the "truth of science" and the "faith of religion," as though the two are somehow contrary to one another. At best this opposition leads to an agreement that science can say very little about the fundamental assumptions of faith and faith has no say over the tenets of science. At its worst it leads to a dismissal by science of all faith-based assertions (turning the Bible into a collection of myths and fairy tales), and a scorn by people of faith for anything that seems to undercut the truth of Scripture (and so dismissing the age of the universe or evolutionary theory, and so on).

In the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century the Catholic Church went through its own period of a type of Catholic fundamentalism that culminates in the anti-Modernism decrees of Pope Pius X in the early 20th century. This included an "Oath against Modernism" which had to be sworn by all clergy, pastors, confessors, preachers, religious superiors, and seminary professors of philosophy and theology. Reading the oath today you can see the underlying worry about the new ideas that were coming into play in history and the sciences in terms of how they impacted the understanding of our faith and interpreting Sacred Scripture. Even as late as the 1950 papal encyclical by Pius XII, *Humani Generis* ("On Human Origins"), you see in the Catholic teaching office a very cautious approach to some of the findings that were emerging regarding the origin of the universe and the evolution of the human species. It is only with the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and its aftermath that the Church's official magisterium seems to value and embrace some of the insights of contemporary science. And it is with the last three popes—

John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis—that the papal teaching has endorsed evolutionary theory as beneficial to our understanding of God’s creation, as long as we do not lose the sense of the human soul as a unique, God-given reality within creation.

In other words, the Catholic Church, even in its official teachings, has slowly but steadily come to understand contemporary insights from science not as something to be feared but to be included in the common pursuit of truth. For all truth ultimately comes from God’s design of the universe. We have nothing to fear, from any scientific “truth,” even if some scientists interpret their findings in a non-theistic, deterministic way. The best of scientists admit that they start with certain assumptions that cannot be proved/disproved, just as theologians admit that there is no definitive scientific proof of God’s reality. All who seek a truer understanding of the workings of the universe are on the same quest, using different tools and methods, at times challenging, at times confirming aspects of each other’s work. This rapprochement with science and an openness to dialogue with all the disciplines of learning (sociology, psychology, history, literary theory, etc.), along with always interpreting Scripture from a non-fundamentalist point of view, allows a Catholic reading and understanding of the Bible that is very rich and fruitful. We can use the methods of literary and textual criticism without fear to see what they tell us about the actual text and writers and editors who might have contributed to the final text. We can use the methods of history and not worry, if it turns out that much of the written text of the Old Testament comes from centuries after the events described. The same calm ensues, if much of what is written in the gospels are not direct descriptions of the reality as Jesus would have experienced it but reconstructions which highlight how Jesus’ life and words are important for a later community which is putting the story of Jesus into written form. As Catholics we take our cue for reading the Sacred Scriptures from the long history of the liturgical use of Scripture and the many spiritual traditions (especially monastic), where what counts is not some historical detail, but how the Church uses that portion of Scripture to bring out a deeper understanding of the mystery of salvation at work in the world.

What, then, does saying that the Bible is “without error” mean for Catholics? The Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) addresses this issue very carefully. A number of the bishops at the council were schooled in the anti-Modernist mode and were worried that, if the Council encouraged everyone to read the Scriptures people might interpret them in ways contrary to the magisterium of the Church. Others wanted to highlight the authority of the Bible as normative for all Christians, including Catholics, in order to create a deeper connection to non-Catholic, specifically Protestant, Christians. The bishops discussed what it meant to say something was historically true or without error versus other understandings. In the end they carefully crafted the following definition of inerrancy for a Catholic understanding of the Bible (par. #11): *“Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.”* What is without error is the truth necessary for our salvation. It leaves open all the many creative ways that the Catholic tradition has looked for truth in the Bible. If a particular way of reading the Bible or an interpretation of a Biblical book or passage advances one toward salvation and has not been forbidden by the Catholic teaching office, it is compatible with a Catholic understanding. If it is not necessary for our salvation, then one is free to use it or not in that way. If it harms our path toward salvation, it is not to be accepted or promoted.

This understanding frees us from the straightjacket of historical fundamentalism. The Bible is not without error in many cases when it comes to historical facts. And certainly it is not intended to be read as trying to give a scientific account of something. We are free to allow the Holy Spirit working within the community of faith to inspire many creative uses of Scripture. In the Catholic tradition a number of ways

stand out and are recommended for use. The most prominent is the Church's liturgical use of Scripture. Building on the Patristic (the first few centuries of the Church) practice of finding inspiration and saving truth by reading the Old Testament in light of the salvation we know was achieved by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Church pairs a Gospel passage on Sunday with an excerpt from one of the Old Testament books. This sets up a dynamic reading of both passages. We gain deeper insight into how Jesus both continues and fulfills, in his unique way, the covenant God has made with his people. There is a danger that can occur from this type of interpretation—to think that the Old Testament has no salvific meaning on its own. At its extreme it leads to believing that the God revealed in the Old Testament Scripture is somehow different from the God of Jesus Christ. This is not the Catholic understanding at all. The covenant God made with the Jewish people is still valid and a way to salvation. The books of the Old Testament can be profitable for our salvation, whether they are tied to the New Testament or not. All of Scripture, both Old Testament and New, contains truth necessary for our salvation. But it is profitable for that salvation, from a Christian perspective, to read Scripture from the vantage point of what Jesus Christ has already made possible for us and for all people.

A second time-honored Catholic method for reading, interpreting and allowing Scripture to lead us toward salvation is centering prayer. Certain phrases from Jesus' teachings (for example, "*Repent and believe in the good news*"), responses of people to Jesus ("*Lord, leave me for I am a sinner*" or "*My Lord and my God*", many others), portions of various psalms ("*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*", etc.), or really any short excerpt from the Old or New Testament writings (for example, "*and God saw that it was good*" or "*behold, I make all things new*" and so on), are easily memorized and can become part of a rhythm of repetitive prayer. Prayed again and again, tied to an atmosphere of controlled breathing and quiet, letting everyday thoughts fade from our attention, coming back to what some would call a biblical mantra, helps center one's spirit through an inspired passage of Scripture. In turn this enables us to let go of all that is unnecessary, anxious, and too busy in our lives. Perhaps the most famous such use is called the Jesus Prayer or "Prayer of the Heart" which focuses the person praying on the mercy of God present in Jesus. It can be as simple as "*Lord Jesus, have mercy on me*" or even just the words "*Jesus, mercy.*" One traditional phrasing is "*Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner,*" which connects to several passages of the New Testament. It can be repeated as often as necessary to quiet one's inner spirit, which in turn helps a person to center themselves on Jesus and his loving mercy. The use of the Hail Mary in the rosary is very much aligned with this tradition. The first half is a reworking of a couple of New Testament phrases, and the whole prayer, repeated in threes or tens allows one to center oneself in prayer to the point where the focus is not on the words of this prayer but on one's heart open to and trusting in God.

A third Catholic use of Scripture for our salvation is called *lectio divina* ("*divine reading*"). It grows out of the Benedictine monastic practice of reading and praying the Scriptures. It allows one to read any part of Scripture not for sheer interest in what the author was saying, but as a present, living Word that can touch our hearts and lives here and now. A passage from Scripture is read. This can be done more than once and, in fact, works best in my experience if read at least three-times. The first time one reads relatively slowly to let one's mind begin to grasp what is happening in that passage from Scripture. The second time much more slowly to focus on any words, phrases or images that the reading is triggering in one's mind and heart, letting that word, image or phrase open up one's mind and heart to God. The third at the slowest pace, to let a word, image or phrase connect to one's life, to open up oneself to what God is revealing to you about yourself. If something does trigger a strong sense of connection or inspiration, then one need go no farther into the passage. This way of reading (*lectio*), of triggering some present connection to the biblical Word, then leads into meditation (*meditatio*) on what has come into one's mind and heart. This in turn opens one to prayer (*oratio*): thanksgiving, gratitude, adoration, sorrow, intercession—the type of prayer dependent on what the reading triggered in meditation. As the prayer is

exhausted one is left with silence, a contemplative silence (*contemplatio*), of just sitting quietly with no words or images necessary. Just being. If one gets distracted, then re-focusing on the biblical word or phrase can re-start the cycle of meditation, prayer and contemplation. This way of using Scripture and style of prayer can be learned and so one can become better at it the more one practices it. It is an excellent way to prepare for the Sunday readings, reading and praying them in this way of the *lectio divina*. The point of Sunday's Liturgy of the Word is not to examine what is happening on an historical level in the readings, but to find a living connection to something within the readings that allows God's Word to be with us.

A fourth way of using and interpreting Scripture comes from the Jesuit practice of imaginative prayer. It leads not to quiet contemplation where thoughts and ideas fall away into silence, but to an active (and at times even physical in the sense of sounds, smells, and sights) contemplation on the passage in question. In this regard certain parts of Scripture are better for this than others, with the Gospel stories of Jesus' ministry being the most often used. Like the Benedictine tradition, one reads a passage more than once, and again, at least three times seems to help, each time more slowly. Unlike the Benedictine *lectio divina* one does not stop at a word or phrase or image that comes to mind. Instead a person actively puts oneself into the scene of the story. A slow, meditative reading, repeated as necessary, allows a person to "thicken" the scene, to begin to imagine the people, their faces, sounds, smells, and sights that might have been there. Note that it is not important that this be literally what was going on. We trust in the present reality of the Spirit of God to use our own reality, including our own psychology, to open up an encounter with God and especially with Jesus. As you enter into the scene, you begin to notice where you "are" in the scene. Sometimes it is in the crowd, at times as one of the disciples, even at times you find the Spirit inviting you to inhabit the character of Jesus. In that way the same passage can have different meanings for different persons and, for the same person, one can re-read the same passage and find oneself drawn into it in different ways.

The second through fourth ways mentioned above do not lead to **the one and only** biblical truth of a passage from the Bible, but to a living encounter with the Word of God, using the inspired nature of Scripture and the trust that it is without error for our salvation. One caveat, however, if one gets an interpretation that is life-changing, as sometimes happens. For example, St. Anthony, the desert father, hears the words from Scripture "*If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven*" as a direct command to change his life. This in turn leads him to sell his property, put his sister in a community of women, and spend the rest of his life in the desert as a Christian hermit. When it comes to such life-changing decisions, it is very important to test one's interpretation of the Scripture in question by seeking guidance from a mature, prayerful Christian. In other words, be sure to have some sort of spiritual direction if you are hearing in your heart the need for a radical change of life!

Although Sacred Scripture is meant to be at the core of our personal spiritual journey, we also recognize the use of the Bible for deepening our theological understanding of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Church, eschatology (the "last things"), Christian anthropology (sin, grace, etc.) and for safe-guarding Catholic doctrine. In that sense, Scripture can ground our understanding of a doctrine of faith and, vice versa, a doctrine can provide a framework for interpreting certain Scriptural passages. An example would be our understanding of God as always and only one God, but whose divine nature is revealed as three Persons—Father, Son (or Word) and Spirit. There are a number of Scripture passages that are suggestive of this. For example, at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus commissions the disciples to go and make disciples in all the nations, "*baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*" In the early Church this Trinitarian practice was tied to baptism, but there was not yet an agreed

understanding of just how the unity and relationship of Father, Son and Spirit were to be understood. The New Testament writers themselves might not have (probably did not have) a very nuanced theological understanding of the nature of God. In the very early Church, as long as a person believed that Jesus was God's Son in a unique way, but also truly human and was the divine instrument of salvation, she or he could interpret those Scripture passages in any number of ways. But once the Church doctrinally defined its understanding of the Trinity during the 4th century ecumenical councils, such a variety of interpretations of Scripture was no longer seen as legitimate for the Church.

This means that a Catholic use of Scripture supports what is called the "development of doctrine." Even though the Scripture writers themselves need not have had our understanding of a doctrine of the faith, we can discern in their understanding a kernel of that truth, and there is nothing in their writings which directly contradicts that Catholic doctrinal understanding. For that reason the Church has always considered it important to start with what is called the "literal sense" of Scripture—what the Scripture writer(s) is trying to convey. This is very different from a fundamentalist view discussed earlier in this article. For example, the anonymous author of the book of Jonah was writing a fun story about a fictional character, Jonah, called to be a prophet by God, who initially runs as fast and far as he can from what God wants him to do. The "literal sense" of the book of Jonah, then, is not that there was an historical Jonah, or that someone really did live in the belly of a fish for three days. Rather, the "literal sense" is that the author is inviting readers into a fictional story that will help them understand what it means to be called by God and to respond to God in faith.

The Church begins with the "literal sense" in its development of doctrine when it comes to using Scripture to support a doctrine of the faith. For example, in Luke's Gospel Mary questions her being pregnant—*"How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?"* Taking the Gospel as a whole, it seems to be conveying both that Mary is a virgin at the time of Jesus' conception and that she is the ideal disciple who is fully open to saying "Yes" to all that God asks. This allows the Church not only to affirm the core doctrine of Jesus' virginal conception, but also to experience a development of doctrine with regard to Mary's being a virgin here entire life ("perpetual virginity"). Even though there is no explicit Scriptural passage on Mary's perpetual virginity—and in fact some passages on their own such as those that talk about the "brothers and sisters" of Jesus might most easily be interpreted as suggesting Mary had other children—the Church's tradition, both in the eastern Church (Orthodox) and the western Church (Roman Catholic), has allowed for a development of doctrine in regard to Mary's life-long virginity. This doctrine finds its kernel in the virginal conception and is not contradicted explicitly by any Scripture passage and so is allowed as authentic doctrine on the principle of the development of doctrine. The Church has gone beyond a general "seal of approval" for using these passages to deepen one's personal experience of salvation to insisting that it is inspired and without error for what it says about Jesus' virgin birth and Mary's full openness to the Spirit of God in her life-long virginity. As a consequence, this means there has to be another interpretation about the passages that talk about Jesus' "brothers and sisters." In the western tradition they have usually been seen as cousins and more removed blood relations of Jesus. In the eastern tradition, they have usually been seen as children of Joseph from an earlier marriage. There is no definitive Catholic doctrine on who they are. But it is interesting that both ancient Church traditions accept the doctrine of Mary's life-long virginity and this has influenced the interpretation of certain passages of Scripture accordingly.

In the last century or so, biblical scholars have developed more sophisticated tools for uncovering the process of how the books of the Bible were put together. These tools include a better understanding of what the underlying text of Scripture would have looked like in its original Greek or Hebrew form; a recognition that most of the books of the Bible are not a product simply of one author, but an

amalgamation and editing of many separate authors and sources; that various forms of writing have to be read with different rules of interpretation (reading history is one thing, reading a Gospel is another, for example); and the final editing of various books of the Bible was done not to preserve some ancient memories, but to help the people of a contemporary community better understand what God was trying to say to them. These methods, often named under the term “historical-critical method,” have been invaluable for gaining a better understanding of the Bible and uncovering insights into the literal sense of the Scripture. At the same time there is the danger in thinking that because one has uncovered some of the underlying sources and forms and redactions that went into a biblical writing, one has come to the “true” meaning of the Scripture passage. And that is not the case. The Catholic understanding is that the final writing as we have it in the original Greek, Hebrew or approved translation, is inspired. Historical-critical methods are invaluable but not determinative for the truth in Scripture necessary for our salvation. In recent decades further methods to help with understanding the literal sense have emerged, including what is called “canonical criticism.” This last method takes the finished product of the Bible in its entirety and explores insights that emerge when looking at various words, images, phrases throughout the entire Bible and not just within one passage or writing. All of these methods, taken as a whole, point to the importance of using a translation of the Bible that offers some guidance in these areas if one wants to understand the writings of Sacred Scripture in the fullest manner possible.

We now are able to address the question of how the “average” Catholic should go about reading the Scriptures, especially if one has never read the whole Bible before. How might one deepen one’s ability to allow the Word of God through Sacred Scripture to shape one’s life? All that is written above is meant as background to what I think is the most important point. **As Catholics we are encouraged to embrace the Sacred Scriptures as central to our lives, to read and pray with the Bible daily if possible.** The Old and New Testaments are our inspired Scripture, without error when it comes to what God intends for our salvation, and the heart and soul of the Catholic Tradition on all matters of faith. Here is my pastoral advice on how to go about reading the entire Bible, bringing it into one’s spiritual life.

1. Get a Bible. At least one sturdy Catholic study Bible that will withstand many page turnings, allow for writing in the margins and other notes, and will weather a number of years. What version should one buy? In its official pastoral advice over the centuries the Church has long encouraged what is called the Vulgate translation. This goes back to St. Jerome’s translation of the Hebrew and Greek into Latin in the 4th century with some revisions over the years. It is still able to be used in one’s personal spiritual growth, but any English translation of the Vulgate makes it a translation of the Latin, which is itself already a translation. It is not the translation that corresponds most closely to what we use on Sunday. And, it does not correspond as closely to the best understanding of the underlying Greek and Hebrew text, as do the other translations mentioned. So, while the Vulgate translation has some historical value, I would not recommend using it for one’s personal reading of the Bible.

Over the past fifty years scholars have gone back to the original Greek and Hebrew texts, as they can be best reconstructed, and have made translations directly into a modern language. The most often used translation has been the Revised Standard Version and it is available in a Catholic edition (remember that Catholics and Protestants differ on the status of several books of the Old Testament). The Canadian bishops authorized the use of this translation in their liturgies and so it is a solid translation. A few years ago the publishers put out a “New Revised Standard Version” translation, which makes the language more contemporary and tries to minimize unnecessary gender-specific pronouns. This also has a Catholic edition and can be used in one’s prayer, though the bishops have not authorized it for any liturgical use. Another group of translators, mostly connected to Christian Reformed churches, wanted to modernize the King James translation of the Bible (because its language has become quite stilted to our ears) and

thought the New Revised Standard version much too contemporary and shallow in its choice of language. They came up with the New International Version of the Bible. It adheres a bit more closely to the wording of the underlying text, and so is a good study Bible, but it still sounds a bit stilted at times and so is not as conducive for prayer and meditation. I am not aware of any Catholic edition of the New International Version at this time. The bishops of the United States authorized a new translation from the Greek and Hebrew called the New American Bible and used much of it as the basis for the liturgical readings. There are a number of Catholic study editions for this Bible which are worthy of use. It has since been revised into the New American Bible (revised edition), but (unfortunately from my perspective) it does not correspond always with the wording we use in our liturgy. The stories of the Bible would have a greater impact if the Scripture passages we use on Sunday—which are heart and soul to forming us as one communion of faith—were identical to a Bible translation one could use in one’s own personal prayer. Bottom line recommendation: find a “Catholic study” version of one of the Bible’s mentioned above. A study edition contains significant amount of background material to read at one’s leisure, has footnotes to help explain some difficult passages of the Bible, and approaches the inspired meaning of the Bible in a non-fundamentalist way.

2. Begin to read and pray with the Bible by starting with one of the first three gospels—Matthew, Mark, or Luke—not with the book of Genesis. Why? Something happens when we have entered into the gospel stories sufficiently through prayer and meditation, identifying our lives and actions with the events and sayings of Jesus, which opens up the world of the Bible in a wonderful way. When it comes time to read and pray with the Old Testament books, the solid grounding in the gospels will make those all the more meaningful. We will find ways that the gospel stories of Jesus again and again bring some passage of the Old Testament into the new light, not exactly fulfilling all the prophecies of the Old Testament, but drawing upon them and going beyond them.

So, my advice: start with one of the three, relatively similar (so similar they were given the name ‘Synoptics’, which means ‘to see with the same eye’) gospels. Because the Church makes passages from the gospels the high point of the Liturgy of the Word, you find yourself more and more attuned to the Sunday Gospel. And here is how I would read each of the gospels. Read it once all the way through in a couple of sittings. Try not to get overly bogged down in specific stories or any interpretative notes provided by your Bible. Then read the gospel again, from start to finish, without skipping, but this time using the interpretative notes at the beginning of the gospel or in the footnotes. Let this take as long as needed, though usually a week or two will allow one to read and analyze and absorb the gospel in this way. Read it one more time through all the way, in one or two sittings, letting the knowledge and familiarity you have gained with that gospel raise questions, mark interesting passages, get you reflecting.

Going over a gospel in the way described will help you get at what we called above the ‘literal sense’ of the Bible, getting into the mind of the author and the structure that they have given to the particular gospel. Now I would encourage a reading of the same gospel yet again, but this time in a context of pure prayer and reflection, going through the gospel as slowly as you want. With each scene or passage, enter into it in an imaginative way, putting yourself within the scene somewhere and letting the images, sounds, reality come alive for you. Re-read a small passage or portion in a prayerful, meditative way, using the process of what was described in a previous column as the ‘lectio divina.’ In this method a word, image or phrase might be sufficient to sustain your prayer that day. Come back to that passage as long as it stays fresh and you find the passage speaking to your heart. Move on to the next passage, when that isn’t happening. Slowly, even very slowly, go through the one gospel from beginning to end in this way. It might take a few weeks to go through an entire gospel if you give about a half hour a day to this type of prayer and reflection. But when you have finished, you will know the gospel, not only in your head (in terms of

how it is structured, what follows what, etc.) but also in your heart.

The Gospel of John, in my opinion, would be the last of the four Gospels to read. It is structured very different from the other three and presents a much more divinely empowered view of Jesus. Structured as a series of encounters with Jesus, the living Word, your previous praying with the gospels will make you well-suited to enter into John's gospel. Begin with the poem on the Word becoming flesh in the first chapter and then move through the Gospel of John in the same manner as suggested above, eventually meditating on each passage slowly and prayerfully. Do this for each gospel and God's Word will forever be able to speak to you at every Mass.

3. Begin reading and praying with the Old Testament through the Psalms. Again, I would not begin with Genesis but save the first set of books of the Bible for later. The Psalms were acclaimed by both the Jewish assembly and the Christian assembly as divinely inspired poems or songs, which allow one to express every emotion of the heart. There are psalms of praise, of sorrow and lament, of joy and hope and trust, of complaint and anger, of discouragement and despair. The Psalms are themselves poetic prayers and so lend themselves to personal prayer and meditation immediately. Moreover, in the course of reading and meditating on the psalms one will be connected to all the significant events of salvation history up to the time of Jesus—creation, slavery, exodus, the land, the kingdom, exile, salvation.

After getting well acquainted with one of the Synoptic Gospels, I would begin alternating one's prayerful use of Scripture between the other gospels and the Psalms. The Psalms even lend themselves to being read aloud. Let the words and emotions they capture speak to your heart. Each psalm can be treated as described for the gospels above. Read a psalm all the way through a few times, including one time using a good study edition, in order to prepare one for a more prayerful, meditative use of the psalm. Then begin a slow, meditative praying of the psalm, moving to the next line or phrase only when it feels there is nothing more to reflect. The psalms do not have to be read in the order from 1-150, and there is a divergence in how the psalms are numbered between the Catholic and Protestant approach, though nearly all new contemporary translations have the same numbering. So skip around, but if the goal is to do a complete reading and meditating on the whole Bible, there is nothing wrong with taking them in order all the way through.

4. Get into the habit of preparing for the upcoming Sunday readings. The above suggestions, done daily, would take a little over a year to complete. That might seem so slow and ponderous, but I assure you your prayer life will come alive and your Sunday experience will be enhanced. You will not only know the gospels and Psalms, but you will have more knowledge of the entire Bible than you realize. As you go through the Gospels, begin to add a weekly reading and meditating on the upcoming Sunday readings, in addition to reading other books of the Bible. In the end, a Catholic reading of the Bible is always aimed at the living Word which God wants to plant in our heart at Eucharist. These readings can be found online at the usccb.org website. Having gone through the Gospels and the Psalms in a detailed way, you will be well prepared for the snippets of the gospels and the responsorial psalm that are used at each Mass.

5. Read, study and meditate on the remainder of the New Testament books. You will notice as well that the second reading on Sunday is from a book of the New Testament other than the Gospels, and often has no direct thematic connection to the first or Gospel reading. Excepts for special feasts, the second reading is a series of excerpts from one of the New Testament books, other than the gospels. In the course of the three year cycle of the Sunday Lectionary, we will get snippets from every New Testament book, and so that is how I would enter into reading the remainder of the New Testament. When a series of second readings on Sunday is going to come from one of the remaining New Testament books, I would

encourage you to read the entire letter or book at least twice through, then a third time using the Catholic Study Bible, in order to get an overall sense of the book. Remember, the Church calls this the “literal sense”—what the author(s) is trying to convey. Then go through it in a more prayerful, meditative way as you would one of the gospels or the Psalms. I would save the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, for last. And definitely read some background material and notes as you go through it the first couple of times. It is not predicting the end of the world or anything to do with historical events of our day or the future. It is a style of literature called “apocalyptic writing” which has to be interpreted with its own set of rules.

6. Now tackle the rest of the Old Testament. For the remainder of the Old Testament (a large amount!) there is no one right or best way to go through these books. I mentioned that there are basically four sections in the Old Testament: (1) the first five books (called the Pentateuch) that bring us the story of how God chose the people of Israel and brought them to the Promised Land; (2) the “historical books” (though not written as factual history in all cases, they are written in an historical, story-telling way) which include all the books from Joshua through 1 and 2 Maccabees; (3) Wisdom books from Job through the book of Sirach; and finally (4) the prophetic books from Isaiah through Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament in terms of how the Christian Church put the order together. Whichever section one starts with, I would encourage you to read all the books that are part of that section of the Old Testament before moving on to another section. I personally would first try to create a deeper understanding of and connection to the Wisdom books and the prophetic books before reading the Pentateuch and historical books. Although the prophets can at times be obscure, with the help of a good study Bible, one can usually read and meditate on them in the ways I have previously described. As to the Pentateuch and history, they definitely need to be read with the aid of a study Bible. Except for a few passages, they do not lend themselves as easily to prayerful reading and meditation as do the other books of the Bible. But they capture the heart of the story of the covenants God makes with his people and so need to be understood if one wants to fully understand the entire Bible, including the New Testament.

If one were to delve as deeply into the Bible, as the above suggestions lay out, you will know the Bible well and find all sorts of connections between the New Testament and the Old. From that point on, I would encourage you to continue to connect to the Sunday Scripture readings and to pick up any of the books of the Bible and delve into them again and again. Go back to favorite books and favorite passages. Remember, have a sturdy Bible that will last for years and is able to be underlined, notes written into margins and such. Make it personal to you.

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