

THE CATECHIST'S GUIDE TO

Reading Your Bible

a Catholic View

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN 978-0-9764221-3-6

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Contents

| | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| <i>The Catechist and the Bible</i> | 5 |
|------------------------------------|---|

PART ONE

Deciding to Make Your Journey

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. The Journey That Will Change Your Life | 9 |
| 2. Overcoming Your Fear of Bible Travel | 21 |
| 3. Why Your Bible Is Different from Other Books | 31 |
| 4. Reading the Bible as a Catholic | 39 |

PART TWO

Preparing for Your Journey

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| 5. Getting the Lay of the Land | 51 |
| 6. How the Bible Came to Be | 63 |
| 7. Biblical Authors and Audiences | 79 |
| 8. A Bible Explorer's Travel Kit | 89 |

PART THREE

Making Your Journey

| | |
|---|-----|
| 9. A Quick Tour of Your Bible | 107 |
| 10. How to Get the Most Out of Your Bible Reading | 135 |
| 11. How Scripture Scholars Can Help You Read | 145 |
| 12. Bringing God's Word to Life | 157 |
| A Glossary of Biblical Terms | 168 |

*The Bible, which we call God's Word,
contains the family stories
of how God has come to our world
to help us become a new kind of community,
living the way God wants us to live.
It tells us what God wants to say to us:
how much God loves us and wants to be with us,
and how we are to live with one another
in the community of Jesus' friends, called the Church.
Because it is God's Word, we read or listen to it
as if God or Jesus himself is talking to us.
Whether at church or at home,
we quiet ourselves and listen to hear its message.
When we have made its message our own,
we seek to share that message with others
through our words and our lives.
We are all catechists.*

The Catechist and the Bible

*“The study of the sacred Scriptures
must be a door opened to every believer.
It is essential that the revealed word
radically enrich our catechesis
and all our efforts to pass on the faith.
Evangelization demands familiarity with God’s word...
which calls for a serious, ongoing study of the Bible,
while encouraging its prayerful individual and communal reading...
Let us receive the sublime treasure of the revealed word.”*

—**POPE FRANCIS**

The Joy of the Gospel, #175
(November 24, 2013)

In Mark’s gospel there is a curious incident that probably resonates with anyone who has accepted the call to be a catechist for their parish catechetical program. Through his teaching, healing and exorcisms Jesus has attracted much attention and many curious followers, and then one day:

“He called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons” (Mark 3:13-15).

As they remain with him and accompany him, he begins to teach these chosen disciples in order to prepare them for their eventual sending out. No doubt they thought they would have plenty of time to be with Jesus to learn what he was revealing about God and the kingdom and maybe even learn his techniques for how to teach, heal and even drive out demons.

But Jesus surprises them. After just two short chapters in the gospel, in which the disciples mostly watch Jesus in conflict with the teachers of Israel,

hear him teach in puzzling parables, see him drive out a legion of demons and heal a synagogue leader's daughter and be rejected in his home town of Nazareth, Jesus sends them out just like he said he would.

What a shock this must have been. I suppose they felt a lot like us when we first began our work as catechists whether for children, youth or adults in our parish programs or in RCIA—apprehensive and nervous because they were just ordinary people, woefully unprepared, without any practical experience or top-notch credentials that would make others listen confidently to them, and scared that they wouldn't live up to Jesus' trust in sending them to proclaim God's good news in a way that might really help others.

But take heart! The disciples went out two by two and succeeded beyond their wildest expectations. Why? The Spirit of God and Jesus was at work in them. Their success was not their own doing, not the result of their information or techniques, but rather stemmed from their attention to Jesus and his message and their relationship with him as his faithful followers.

As catechists we can sometimes forget that what we communicate to others is not first of all faith formulas or answers for defending our beliefs, but rather the truth about Jesus and the relationship that each of us must cultivate with him, who is risen and alive in us and in our midst.

As Pope John Paul II reminded us very early in his papacy in his attempt to renew the catechetical role that we all share as Christians, the real goal of catechesis is not information about doctrine but a relationship to Jesus.

“At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a person, the person of Jesus of Nazareth, ‘the only Son from the Father...full of grace and truth,’ who suffered and died for us and who now, after rising, is living with us forever. Jesus is ‘the way, and the truth, and the life,’ and Christian living consists in following Christ....Accordingly, **the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ:** only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.”

—POPE JOHN PAUL II
Catechesi Tradendae, #5

But if by our catechetical efforts we are supposed to put people into intimate communion with Jesus, then we must first learn who he is and be attentive to our own relationship with him. But where and how are we to

discover Jesus, the good news he proclaimed and how we can enter into and maintain a relationship with him?

The answer is the Bible, which is the story of how God desired to enter into a relationship with us humans and how we responded to that invitation. It first tells the story of God's covenant relationship with the Israelites in what we call the Old Testament (an older English word meaning *covenant*). Then in the New Testament we discover the renewed covenant relationship that Jesus inaugurates. In sum, the whole Bible is about our relationship with God as members of God's covenant community. Reading and studying it invites us first to imagine the biblical world which reveals how God wants us and our world to be, and then invites us to strive to make God's dream for this world into a reality in our lives and communities now.

Reading your Bible is an invitation to enter into God's world, to encounter Jesus and his message and learn how to see beyond the surface of our ordinary lives into a mysterious world charged with God's presence and activity. It is a fantastic journey on which you will experience and explore the fascinating world of the Bible and learn about God's always surprising relationship with humanity.

If you want to take up your Bible and travel its pathways, this *Catechist's Guide to Reading Your Bible* will both inform you about the Bible and equip you with the skills needed to read and heed its message. Like any good guidebook, this *Catechist's Guide* will help you prepare for your Bible journey into God's world and make the journey more enjoyable and worthwhile.

Part One, Deciding to Make Your Journey, encourages you to choose this special biblical trip from among the many possible ways you can spend your time. As you progress through this section, you will learn how to overcome your fears, why your Bible is different from other books, and how to approach reading and interpreting the Bible from a Catholic perspective.

Part two, Preparing for Your Journey, helps you get ready for the trip by offering a quick tour through your Bible. This overview explains how the Bible is organized and gives a brief history of the composition and collection of its books. This part of the book also investigates the connection between the biblical authors and their audiences and provides suggestions for possible reference materials to equip you for your journey.

Part three, Making Your Journey, first suggests a practical itinerary for your initial reading journey. This list ensures that you will read every book of the Bible. Then I offer practical helps so that you'll be encouraged to pick up your Bible and actually read it. I suggest an effective reading method that is "as easy as ABC." I then describe how you can get help from Scripture scholars to deal with some problems that arise whenever we read the Bible. Finally, since sharing your journey always makes your trip more enjoyable, I suggest a way that you can bring God's Word to life through small group discussion. At the end of each chapter there are also some suggested questions to use for personal reflection and/or group discussion. The glossary contains some important biblical terms that every catechist should be familiar with.

As we all learn in our work as catechists, although there are plenty of dumb answers, there is no such thing as a dumb question! Since I do not know exactly what your specific questions might be, I hope my *Catechist's Guide to Reading Your Bible* will address many of the problems and concerns that many catechists on whatever level they teach and other adult learners (including parents who we must remember are the first and primary catechists for their children!) commonly face when they begin to read and study the Bible on their own or in catechetical programs or in the RCIA.

Finally, reading your Bible is not so much for gathering information for your catechetical teaching but for your own formation—for your growing relationship with Jesus, especially for your ongoing communion with and conversion into Christ. As a catechist, if you do not know Jesus and his message, then you cannot share it with others. But just as Jesus did, we do not just share an abstract message but also ourselves.

As catechists, what those we teach will remember long after they have forgotten our words is our example. As Pope Francis noted, "Jesus wants evangelizers who proclaim the good news not only with words, but above all by a life transfigured by God's presence" (*The Joy of the Gospel*, #259). So as you make the Bible message your own and take on the vision and values of Jesus both for your own life and your life with others in the community, you will become Christ for others. No catechist could wish for more.