

Bringing
Catholic Youth
and the
Bible
Together

strategies
and activities
for parishes
and schools

STUDY IT

LIVE IT

PRAY IT

Brian Singer-Towns
General Editor

saint mary's press

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Saint Mary's Press®

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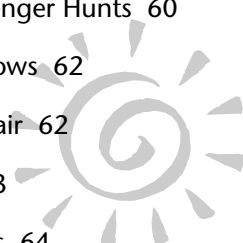
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Introduction

The Challenge of Bringing Catholic Youth and the Bible Together

*A*s a college student in the midseventies, I was part of an ecumenical Bible study. Born and raised Catholic, I attended Mass regularly growing up. I was even a lector in my small country parish as a teen. Yet I had not cracked open a Bible on my own more than two or three times. So my friends in the Bible study had to teach me some basic Bible skills such as how to locate specific passages and how to interpret particular Scripture teachings in light of the Bible's bigger themes.

In many respects you could say I was functionally biblically illiterate. Of even greater concern was my lack of biblically based faith and values. Despite my participation in the Eucharist week after week, I still held the materialistic and self-absorbed values of popular culture. It was my involvement in the Bible study group and my own personal reading of the Scriptures that became the catalyst for a personal conversion to a Gospel-centered spirituality.

Biblical literacy among Catholic youth today isn't much different from my experience of twenty-five years ago. Most Catholic teens cannot name the four Gospels. In a Gallup study in the early 1990s, only 20 percent of Catholic youth, compared with 60 percent of Christian youth from other denominations, claimed to have ever read the Bible on their own.

This is a major evangelization and catechetical challenge for the Catholic community. Those of us ministering to Catholic youth must become more intentional in fostering biblical literacy and biblical spirituality. We are supported in this goal by the Catholic bishops and the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM). A Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) study, which was sponsored by the bishops and the NFCYM, has this major recommendation: "Catholic youth ministry needs to be more persuasive in helping participants understand that reading the

Bible is important for growing in their faith” (Froehle, *New Directions in Youth Ministry*, page 16).

If you read it carefully, this recommendation makes it clear that getting young people to read the Bible is not enough. Helping teens to use the Bible to grow in their faith is also necessary. We must encourage students to pray with the Bible and to live out the Bible’s values. This holistic approach is captured in the Saint Mary’s Press “Pray It, Study It, Live It” Scripture motto. Just as with adults, teens’ minds, hearts, and wills are organically connected. We must find ways to touch our young people’s hearts and wills with God’s word as well as educating their minds about it.

We have two goals, then, if we hope to meet the challenge of bringing Catholic youth and the Bible together. The first is developing biblical literacy in our teens. And the second is helping them foster a biblical spirituality. Accomplishing these goals may require some changes in how we use the Scriptures with young people. For instance, rather than have them read about the Bible in some other book, we must challenge them to plunge into the Bible itself. Rather than teach them what the Bible says, we must help them discover on their own what the Bible teaches. Rather than use the Bible solely as a proof text, we must help them to see the Bible as a living text that can change their life.

Saint Mary’s Press has made a commitment to provide resources and services to help respond to these goals. We want to help young Catholics pray the Bible, study the Bible, and live the Bible’s values and teachings. We believe that by working together with teachers, coordinators of youth ministry, directors of religious education, catechists, and other youth ministry volunteers, we can significantly increase biblical literacy and biblical spirituality among Catholic youth.

In this book youth ministry and catechetical leaders present background and activities for developing biblical literacy and fostering biblical spirituality. The chapters by Bishop Sklba and Margaret Nutting Ralph provide important background on how Catholics approach and interpret the Scriptures. Carole Goodwin and Joe Grant share how the Bible can be a compass for our ministry with young people. Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart shows how to use the ancient prayer form of *lectio divina* with teens. I offer a model for understanding biblical literacy and activities for teaching it. Maryann Hakowski and Tony Tamberino offer a variety of activities for making the people and teachings of the Bible come alive. Michael Theisen provides a fun approach to learning about the Scriptures under the guise of a game show.

The ideas and activities in this book can be used in whatever ministry you have with young people. Keep it handy and refer to it often. Share it with other people in your school or parish who work with youth. Let it spark your own imagination for using the Bible with teens. Listen and learn from others. Be particularly attentive to youth ministers from other Christian denominations whose practical experience in using the Bible with youth often surpasses our own. And most important, let us listen to the Spirit speaking through our young people. Bringing Catholic youth and the Bible together—we can do it!

In the words of Saint Paul, grace and peace!

Brian Singer-Towns
Editor

Reading the Scriptures as a Catholic

Bishop Richard J. Sklba

This brief chapter is taken from a talk that Bishop Sklba delivered to the 1999 National Catholic Youth Congress.

Bishop Sklba reflects on the attitudes that Catholics bring to Scripture study and prayer. These attitudes distinguish us from some fundamentalist Christian approaches to the Scriptures. Bishop Sklba's insights provide a solid foundation for teaching the young people we work with about the Catholic approach to the Scriptures.

*L*ike all other Christians, we Catholics bring our faith to everything we do, namely, the basic conviction that Jesus is the risen Lord, who shares his Spirit with his disciples through Baptism and continues to send us forth to proclaim the Good News. In opening the pages of the Scriptures, we believe that God has chosen a people and guided them through the centuries. As believers, we find biblical witness to all the ways God has loved his people into goodness.

As human beings blessed with intellectual gifts of understanding, imagination, and curiosity, we Catholics, like our Protestant neighbors, also read the Scriptures with eyes, heads, and hearts wide open. We look for everything, somewhat the way a person might read a letter from a distant friend or fiancée, searching for any clue or signal of how things are going.

But besides those attitudes common to most other Christians, we Catholics bring some special perspectives to private Bible study or prayerful use of the Scriptures. Allow me to list a few for the record:

As Catholics we know that the church has placed the Scriptures in our hands. By that I mean that the early Christian community selected those writings believed to be inspired by God. Successive generations carefully monitored the faithful transmission of these works and their translation over the centuries.

On the copyright page, a small cross with the word *imprimatur* and the name of an individual bishop signals the church's formal approval of the faithfulness of the translation we have in hand. Look for it when buying a Bible for someone. It is Catholic to be conscious of the way the church takes responsibility for bringing the word to us.

We Catholics pay special attention to the verbs. Perhaps you never thought about it, but the name of Israel's God is a verb, namely, YHWH (probably meaning, "he will make happen," or "he will call into existence"), and indeed the name of Jesus means, "he will save." Moreover, we regularly recite the creed's list of all God's activities—creating, choosing, loving, redeeming, saving, feeding, healing, and so on.

We expect that our Sunday Eucharist will inspire and energize the rest of the week's work. As a people we sense an obligation to open our lives to God's grace, and to be God's living instruments in shaping a more just and generous world. We are people on the move! Granted, we can do nothing without God's grace, but we are inclined toward activity, so we keep checking out the verbs.

We Catholics look for the "us" in everything. Virtually all the books of the Scriptures were intended to be heard and read by an entire community at prayer. We first heard them at Mass. Almost every time the word *you* occurs, it's actually a plural and probably should be translated "you all" in the manner of our southern friends.

Presume that the text is aimed at the entire community, and only afterward see what it might say to the individual reader. In a similar manner, we always pray, "Our Father," even when we're alone, because we have a strong social sense of community.

We Catholics are always mindful of the different ways of saying things. We believe that God chose to take all human speech, except error, in addressing us. Poetry expresses truth differently than a historical account. A proverb is yet another form of telling the truth about human nature.

Catholics, especially since the teachings of Pius XII, are always reminded to be conscious of the larger picture of each unit and are never satisfied with a phrase or sentence taken out of context. We look for the literary “forms” that surround every phase or story.

We Catholics keep looking for the history of things. We know that every biblical concept or practice has an original context within which it was established, and for which it was intended. When circumstances changed, it made a difference. Things developed. Precisely because we have such a constant sense of history, we stand before the Scriptures as if they were a three-paneled mirror in a clothing store, and we see our church community projected repeatedly into past and future ages.

Finally, we Catholics say, “Thank you.” We always move from listening to the word of God to a solemn prayer of thanksgiving at the Eucharist, joining our voices to Christ’s prayer of thanks and praise to his heavenly Father.

Similarly, every private prayer with the Scriptures should lead us into a prayer of gratitude for all the blessings of life, even those that may seem tough to handle at times. We are grateful people, and we can’t stop saying a word of gratitude to the God of our lives.

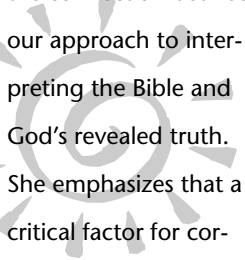
These are some of the distinctive attitudes we bring to biblical prayer as Catholics. Make them your own, and experience the grace and joy of God’s Word.



Bishop Sklba is the auxiliary bishop for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. He has authored several books and articles on the Scriptures and has served on many different committees of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. He is currently the chair of the ad hoc committee for reviewing Scripture translations.

What the Scriptures Say . . . and Don't Say

Margaret Nutting Ralph



In this chapter Margaret Nutting Ralph explores the connection between our approach to interpreting the Bible and God's revealed truth. She emphasizes that a critical factor for correctly understanding biblical truth is exploring the complete context of a particular book or passage. Margaret's insights will help us and the young people we work with avoid common misinterpretations of the Bible's teaching.

Have you ever heard two people who totally disagree with each other use Scripture to “prove” that God is on their side? Instead of letting the Scriptures form their thinking, they use a quote from the Scriptures, often taken out of context, to support their own opinions.

We've probably all done this to some extent. Even expert theologians use Scripture quotes to show that their teaching is rooted in the Bible. But a proper understanding of biblical revelation will challenge us to examine our approach to the Scriptures and overcome any tendency to quote the Bible out of context.

Instead of asking, “Do these words support what I already think?” we need to ask, “What is this passage trying to teach me?” When we recognize what the inspired biblical authors intend to teach, we are opening our minds and hearts to the revelation of the Scriptures.

The revealed Scriptures do not necessarily hold the same meaning we may want to attach to the words. The inspired biblical authors intended to say and teach certain truths, and we need to root our understanding of the Scriptures first and foremost in the intent of the author.

But how do we determine the intentions of an author who lived thousands of years ago in a totally different cultural setting? The church teaches us that in order to understand the revelation the Bible contains, we must learn first and foremost to read passages in the context in which they appear.

What are you reading? One way to safeguard against misunderstanding the intent of an author is to determine the kind of writing the author has chosen to use. Any piece of writing has a particular literary form: poetry, prose, fiction, essay, letter, historical account, and so on. This is as true of the biblical books as of any piece of contemporary writing.

If we misunderstand an author's literary form, we will misunderstand what the author intends to say. In order to understand what we are reading, then, we have to make allowances for the form and change our expectations accordingly.

We do this any time we read a newspaper, for example. As we turn the pages of a newspaper, we encounter a variety of literary forms—news, features, editorials, and so on—and we adjust our idea of what we can expect from the writing for each form.

For instance, after I read a news story, I expect to have the answer to the question What happened? I expect the author of a news story to be objective and evenhanded, to inform me of the facts. If the story is about something controversial, I expect the writer to cover all sides fairly.

When I get to the editorial page, I change my expectations. Now I know that the author is allowed to be persuasive rather than objective. I may find facts that support the author's point of view but nothing that contradicts that point of view.

So if I read an editorial with the same frame of mind with which I read a front-page news story, thinking that the author has responded to the question What happened? I will be misinformed after I finish my reading. It is not the author's fault that I am misinformed. It is my own.

How the inspired author tells the tale. Now let's look at how literary form functions in the Bible. One of the inspired biblical authors—the author of the Book of Job—has written in the form of a debate. This literary form demands that you be as persuasive as possible on both sides of an issue. If you write persuasively on the side you agree with and poorly on the side you disagree with, you have not written a good debate.

The author of the Book of Job lived at a time when people believed that all suffering was punishment for sin. He wrote a debate to argue against

this belief. The author places his debate in the context of a pre-existing legend that establishes at the outset the fact that Job is innocent. So why is he suffering?

The author portrays Job's friends arguing with Job over the cause of his suffering. All the friends think that Job must have sinned or he wouldn't be suffering. They do not know, as does the audience, that Job's sinfulness is not the source of his suffering. The friends are wrong.

Now if you did not know that the Book of Job is a debate, in which some of the characters argue persuasively for the point of view with which the author disagrees, you might read an isolated passage and conclude that the book teaches the opposite of what the author intended to teach. You might think that the friends are teaching a valid message about suffering.

If we look at the book as a whole, we discover that the author places the truth he is teaching not on the lips of Job's friends but on the lips of God. God appears at the end of the debate and responds to the friends' arguments. Obviously, the author agrees with what God has to say. God contradicts the belief that all suffering is punishment for sin.

Because this book is in the canon, we know that it teaches revealed truth. We can only discover this revealed truth, however, if we look at the literary form of the book.

We need to remember, too, that the Bible is actually a "library" of many different books. To say that Job is a debate is not to say that the Bible as a whole is a debate or that a Gospel is a debate or that the Book of Revelation is a debate. The answer to the question What literary form am I reading? will vary from book to book. Often the introduction to each book in a good study Bible will give you the relevant literary form.

Culture in context. We have seen how easy it is to "misquote" the Bible by taking passages out of the context of their literary form. A second context we need to consider is the culture and the beliefs in place when the book was written. The inspired author and the original audience shared knowledge, presumptions, expressions, and concerns that may not be part of our awareness, but may nevertheless influence the meaning of the book or passage.

The inspired author may have applied the revealed message contained in a particular book to a shared cultural setting in order to make the message clearer. People sometimes mistake such applications for the heart of the revealed message. Thus they put the full authority of the Scriptures

behind passages that reflect beliefs of the time rather than the unchanging truth the author intended to teach.

In expressing the revealed truth, a biblical author may show cultural biases and presumptions that later generations know are inaccurate. This kind of misunderstanding resulted in Galileo's excommunication. We know, as biblical authors did not, that the earth is not the center of the universe or even our solar system. We also know that the Bible does not claim to teach astronomy. Rather, the Bible addresses questions about the relationship between God and God's people, about what we should be doing to build up God's Kingdom rather than to tear it down.

A biblical author may also apply an eternal truth to a setting that is important to the original audience but not to us. For example, one of Paul's key insights is that the way we treat every other person is the way we treat the risen Christ. He applies this insight to the social order of his own day, an order that included slavery. We misuse the Scriptures if we say this application shows that God's social order includes slavery. While Paul's core message is eternally true revelation, the application was relevant only in its own cultural context.

Revelation is ongoing. A third context we must be aware of is the place the inspired author's insights have in the process of revelation. The Bible is not a book of bottom-line answers like a catechism.

The Bible is a "library of books" written over a two-thousand-year period. It reflects the process by which the inspired authors came to greater knowledge of God's revealed truth. People who do not realize or do not believe that the Bible reflects this progression take an early insight as the whole truth.

For example, people may make this mistake when arguing over the death penalty. Some people who support the death penalty try to put God's authority behind their opinion by quoting Scripture: An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life.

It is true that the Scriptures teach this (see Exod. 21:23–24). However, the teaching dates to the time of Exodus, about 1250 B.C. At the time, this teaching was an ethical step forward. It taught people not to seek escalating revenge: If you harm me, I can't do worse to you than you originally did to me.

Jesus later challenged people to grow beyond this teaching. He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, . . . Love your enemies and pray for those who perse-

cute you” (Matt. 5:38–44). Jesus did not say that the law was wrong, only that it did not go far enough. Jesus is the fulfillment of the law.

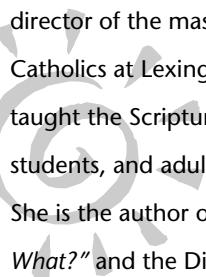
We are misusing the Scriptures if we quote Exodus to support the death penalty and fail to quote the words of Jesus in the Gospels. When we use a passage from the Scriptures to support our side of an argument, we must ask ourselves if the passage reflects the fullness of truth or whether it is a partial truth, perhaps an early insight.

Context, context, context. It is distressing to hear Christians abuse the Bible by quoting it in favor of unchristian positions. It is doubly distressing to realize that we ourselves might be guilty of this.

One way to avoid this mistake is to remember always to consider the context. Determine the place of a passage in its larger context. Ask yourself what literary form the author is using. Explore the beliefs and presumptions the author may share with the original audience. Learn something about the time when the book was written. Know how the author’s insights fit into the process of revelation.

If we do this, we will avoid many a harmful error. We will be less likely to abuse the Scriptures and more likely to hear the revelation of God’s love that the biblical authors intend us to hear.

Finally, invite the Holy Spirit to open up your mind and heart as you listen to the Word. Discerning God’s will in your life will leave you with Christ’s own peace in your heart.



Margaret Nutting Ralph is secretary for educational ministries for the Diocese of Lexington, Kentucky, and director of the master’s degree programs for Roman Catholics at Lexington Theological Seminary. She has taught the Scriptures to high school students, college students, and adult education groups for twenty years. She is the author of the book and video *“And God Said What?”* and the *Discovering the Living Word* series (all from Paulist Press).

Making the Scriptures Your Youth Ministry Compass

Carole Goodwin and Joseph Grant

In this chapter Carole Goodwin and Joseph Grant make a case for integrating the Scriptures into all aspects of youth ministry and religious education. They encourage teachers and ministers to grow in their own use of the Scriptures, and they include some practical suggestions for when and how to use the Bible with young people.

Most ministers and teachers face some common questions in their work with teens:

- How do we help young people live happy, healthy, and holy lives?
- What topics, issues, and concerns should we be talking about with youth?
- How can we reach out to youth who are loosely connected, or not connected at all, to our group or class?
- How can we offer healing and hope to suffering teens?
- What do we say to kids in trouble?
- How do we pray with young people?
- What does God need from me to best serve the youth in my life?

We can respond to these questions in many ways. We look to seasoned ministers and teachers to mentor us. We investigate the popular culture to help set our agenda. We consult the many resources available to help in our planning. We learn from our experiences of teaching and ministering with youth. And of course we look to the Word of God, which has been the source of inspiration, direction, and chal-