

Margie Ralph is a great catechist! Her ability to explain complex ideas in clear, logical, and straightforward ways is unmatched. Not only will you learn a great deal about Scripture, but you will also have extraordinary teaching skills modeled before your very eyes!

✠ **LEIF KEHRWALD**, *General Editor, The Catholic Faith & Family Bible* and currently *Training Services Coordinator for Vibrant Faith*, an ecumenical Christian ministry development group

Ralph writes with exquisite clarity and wisdom, all the while deftly helping the reader understand how the Scriptures are best interpreted and explained within their original contexts. Although written for catechists, this jewel of a book has much to offer anyone who desires a better foundational grasp of our sacred texts.

✠ **NEIL A PARENT**, *author of A Concise Guide to Adult Faith Formation* and former *Executive Director of NCCL*

We have many excellent “what” books that explore the content of the Bible and its many books. Margie Ralph has written a “how” book that presents Catholic approaches and tools to read, interpret, understand, and appreciate the Bible. And she provides practical direction for applying these insights and tools to our lives and to teaching Scripture today. Every catechist and catechetical leader will find her book an essential guide for making the Bible central to faith formation. Her chapter on the use and abuse of Scripture deserves careful reading by everyone!

✠ **JOHN ROBERTO**, *President, Lifelong Faith Associates* and author of *Reimagining Faith Formation for the 21st Century*



The ESSENTIAL CATECHIST'S BOOKSHELF

Scripture Basics

a
CATECHIST'S
GUIDE

Margaret Nutting Ralph

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Why write a book entitled *Scripture Basics* for catechists? After all, catechists are well-informed adult Catholics, motivated to share their faith and knowledge with their students. One might well presume that most catechists know and love Scripture and can share that knowledge and love with their students. However, forty years' experience teaching Scripture myself has taught me that many well-informed adult Catholics do not know what the Catholic Church teaches us about how to understand biblical passages.

This fact was illustrated dramatically several years ago when I was teaching Scripture to a class of adults. After teaching the Catholic approach to Scripture (to be explained soon), I asked if there were any comments or questions. A woman in the class raised her hand and said: "I was baptized Catholic as an infant. I went to Catholic grade school, high school, and college. I have worshipped in a Catholic Church my whole life. And, besides that, I am a nun, and I have never heard what you just taught."

I mention this because it may well be that you will find yourself in this same situation. By reading this book, you may be learning things about how to interpret Scripture that you

have not previously been taught. Even if this is not your experience, it is still important for you, as a catechist, to understand that many adult Catholics have not been taught this information, because you will undoubtedly encounter such people among the parents of students in your religious education classes. It is very important that you be aware of, and responsive to, their situation.

This book addresses two main questions:

- What do catechists need to know about the Bible themselves in order to be able to teach Scripture to any age group?
- What do catechists need to do in order to teach Scripture effectively to others, especially to those who are not adults?

In the chapters in which I respond to the first question (What do we need to know?), I will try to model some important aspects of the answer to the second question (What do we need to do?). It is for this reason that five chapter titles begin with the word *teaching*: I am trying to model how to teach the subjects being discussed. After completing the chapters on what we need to know, we will address the question: What is age-appropriate catechesis when it comes to teaching Scripture? Information that is appropriate for adults is not always appropriate for children. Finally, we will reflect on catechetical methods, on essential components that contribute to teaching Scripture effectively.

Why is it of utmost importance that those of us who have the privilege and responsibility to teach Scripture are knowledgeable and competent? Because correctly understanding Scripture is core to our spiritual lives. Christians believe that Scripture—that is, the writings that appear in the Bible, in both

the Old and New Testaments—contains God’s word for God’s people. For this reason, the Second Vatican Council declared that all Christians are to be “nourished and ruled” by Scripture (see *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, no. 21).

To be *nourished* by Scripture, we must receive the word into ourselves. That is why, as Catholics, we constantly seek to be fed not only at the table of the Eucharist but at the table of God’s word. To be *ruled* by Scripture, we must embrace Scripture as having authority in our lives, and we must correctly understand what Scripture is teaching. To teach Scripture we must know what the Catholic Church teaches about the correct interpretation of biblical passages. This book is written to aid the catechist in all of these areas: to be nourished by Scripture, to be ruled by Scripture, and to be competent in echoing the good news that we have received to those whom we teach.

However, before we do anything else, we should begin our study with prayer. It is very important that your students see you as a person who personally believes in the good news being taught. The prayer with which I like to begin every class on Scripture is a traditional Roman Catholic prayer to the Holy Spirit:

*Come, Holy Spirit.
Fill the hearts of your faithful.
Enkindle in us the fire of your love.
Send forth your Spirit,
and we shall be created,
and you shall renew the face of the earth.
Amen.*

In this prayer we freely acknowledge that we are involved in a process of being created. We are open to new knowledge, to

new understandings, and we call upon the Holy Spirit to be with us and to inspire us as we seek a greater understanding of God's self-revelation to God's people.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

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The Bible and the Lectionary: Why Catechists Need to Know Both

I have often asked Catholics: “Are you familiar with the Bible?” Everyone responds with a firm “Yes!” However, after further conversation, I discover that their familiarity is not with the Bible, but with the Lectionary. They know what the Bible is, but they have never read the Bible. They think their knowledge of Lectionary readings is knowledge of the Bible. To teach Scripture, a catechist must be knowledgeable not only about the Lectionary but about the Bible. Therefore, in this chapter we will address three questions:

- What is the Bible?
- What is the Lectionary?
- Why must a catechist be familiar with both the Bible and the Lectionary?

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

The word *bible* means *the books*. In other words, the Bible is a library with books, not a book with chapters. However, Christians believe that this collection of books is unique because it contains God's self-revelation to God's people. Therefore, if we want answers to theological questions, questions that concern God, God's nature, our relationship to God and to each other, as well as how to live a life pleasing to God, there is no greater source of wisdom on earth than the collection of books that we call the Bible. The Bible teaches us what we need to know for "the sake of our salvation" (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, no. 11).

Christians also claim that, in a sense, God is the author of the Bible. However, this is not a claim that in some miraculous way God wrote the Bible and that we received it as a finished product. Nor is it a claim that God or an angel dictated the text to an individual person and we received the Bible from that person. Rather, Christians believe that the Bible is the end result of a five-step process that took place over a period of two thousand years. The five steps are: events, oral tradition, written tradition, edited tradition, and some traditions becoming canonical.

A FIVE-STEP PROCESS

The first step in the process is that God revealed God's self through events. The events that underlie the Bible started in about 1850 BC, the time of Abraham and Sarah, our ancestors in faith, and ended shortly after the first century AD with the Spirit-filled birth and growth of the early church.

The events that lie behind what we Christians call the *Old Testament* include:

- the chosen people originally settling in the Holy Land

- their exodus from slavery in Egypt some 600 years later (1250 BC)
- their return to the Holy Land where they eventually established a united kingdom under David around 1000 BC
- the split of that kingdom (922 BC), with the ten northern tribes eventually being conquered by the Assyrians (721 BC) and the two southern tribes being conquered by the Babylonians (587 BC)
- the Babylonian exile (587–537 BC)
- the return to the Holy Land, first under Persian rule, then Greek rule interrupted by a short time of self-rule, and finally Roman rule

The events that lie behind the New Testament include Jesus' birth, public ministry, crucifixion, death, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances as well as the birth of the church and the spread of the church throughout the then-known world.

Stories intended to teach what the people had learned about God and their covenant relationship with God through these events were first passed on through oral tradition. The stories were told in a variety of literary forms: legends, birth narratives, parables, allegories, to name but a few (more about this in Chapter 2). The lessons learned were based on the people's experience of historical events, but the stories told were not trying to teach history. Rather, the stories were intended to teach what these events had revealed to the people about the ultimate questions in life, questions that are just as im-

portant for us as they were for our ancestors in faith: Does life have a purpose? Just who is God? What is our relationship to God? What is right living?

Over time, various oral accounts were written down. Different authors emphasized different parts of the stories in order to respond to the needs of their contemporary audiences. With the passage of time, authors combined stories or edited stories in the light of subsequent events, events that had caused them to have questions or to have additional insights about what previous stories had taught.

CANONICITY

The fifth step of the process that resulted in the Bible that we now have is that some of these works became canonical, became part of the Bible, and others did not. The root word for *canonical* means *ruler*, that by which we measure things. If a book is in the canon, that means that the church believes that the book contains revelation and that the authors were inspired.

The books in what we Christians call the *Old Testament* and what we call the *New Testament* became canonical through a process that involved the Spirit working in the community. The books of the Old Testament gradually became canonical after the Babylonian exile. When the people returned to the Holy Land and rebuilt their temple, they were living under Persian rule. They no longer had their king or kingdom. Therefore, their self-identity became focused on their covenant relationship with God (*covenant* and *testament* are synonyms) and on their life of worship in the second temple. The temple priests became their most influential leaders. Gradually, the law (the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament), the prophets, and the writings became accepted as canonical books.

The New Testament books became canonical because the believing community embraced them and began to use them in their worship services when they gathered in each other's homes to celebrate Eucharist. The early church fathers would compare notes to share information about which books were nourishing the worshipping community and faithfully teaching the core beliefs of Christianity. By the end of the second century, the four gospels that we now have were in general use, and, by the end of the fourth century, nearly the whole New Testament was in general use. The official "closing of the canon" did not happen until the sixteenth century at the Council of Trent. During the Reformation, some reformers wanted to remove some of the books that had been used through the centuries. In response to this challenge, the Council of Trent declared that we would neither subtract from, nor add to, the canon as it had stood for 1500 years.

OLD TESTAMENT/NEW TESTAMENT

You may have noticed that I have, on occasion, used the phrases about what "we Christians call" the *Old Testament* or the *New Testament*. There are two reasons for my using this phrase. One is that for several hundred years there was no such thing as a New Testament that was separate from an Old Testament. A New Testament, as distinct from an Old Testament, did not exist, because the events surrounding Jesus Christ were understood to be a continuation of the same story. After all, Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. The second reason is that while all Christians have the same books in the New Testament, we do not all have the same books in the Old Testament. Each of these reasons needs further explanation.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

At the time of Jesus, the books of Scripture were not in codices, that is, in bound books. Rather, they were on scrolls. You will remember when Jesus was in the synagogue in Nazareth and read from the prophet Isaiah, he read from a scroll (Luke 4:17). A collection of scrolls does not have to be in a certain order. However, when codices, bound books, were invented, what had been individual scrolls were transcribed into a format that resulted in a larger whole, an overarching narrative based on the order of the scrolls included.

In the second century, codices that included transcriptions of the canonical scrolls also included Christian writings. There was no division into Old and New Testaments, simply a combining of the overall story in one large volume. It was not until the fourth and fifth centuries, when the Gentile Christian church became progressively detached from its Jewish roots, that Bibles distinguished between an Old and a New Testament. Nevertheless, the Christian Church continued to affirm both Testaments. The New Testament did not replace the Old Testament. Indeed, knowledge of the Old Testament is an essential part of understanding the New Testament.

DIFFERENCES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

While all Christians have a New Testament canon consisting of the same twenty-seven books, Christians do not all agree on the Old Testament canon. Catholics and Greek Orthodox accept some books as canonical that are not included in the Protestant Old Testament. The reason for this difference is not primarily doctrinal, but historical. At the time of Jesus' public ministry, there were two collections of books that were comparable to what Christians now call the *Old Testament*: one in Hebrew, and one in Greek. The Greek version, called the

Septuagint, included a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as some additional books that developed during the Hellenistic period (the time when the Greeks ruled). These additional books, most of which were originally written in Greek, were not in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The early church used the Greek Scriptures. When Jerome translated the Bible into Latin, he included the books that were in the Septuagint, but not in the Hebrew Scriptures. Catholics have continued to include these books, but the Protestant reformers, who wanted to rely on the original Hebrew texts rather than on the Greek translations, did not include them.

The books in question are Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), Baruch, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. To acknowledge that not all Christians accept the books, they are sometimes referred to as *deuterocanonical* books. They are also called *apocryphal* (not part of the canon) by those who do not accept them. However, even when the books are not acknowledged as part of the canon, they are held in deep respect. Often a Protestant Bible will include the Apocrypha along with the Old and New Testaments. This means that the disputed books appear in the text between the Old and New Testaments.

WHAT IS THE LECTIONARY?

The Lectionary is the book that contains the collection of readings that are proclaimed during the Liturgy of the Word when we celebrate Mass. The Lectionary takes biblical passages out of their biblical context and places them into the context of a celebration of the liturgical year. The present collection of readings exists because the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (no. 51) teaches that the "treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that

a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word."

In response to this teaching, the Catholic Church developed a Sunday Lectionary that celebrates the liturgical year in a three-year cycle. In each year (A, B, C) of the cycle, the liturgical year has the same form:

- four weeks of the Advent season, preparing for the coming of Christ
- the Christmas season, beginning with the Christmas vigil and ending on the Sunday after the Epiphany with the Baptism of the Lord
- Ordinary Time, between the Baptism of the Lord and Lent
- Lent, which begins with Ash Wednesday and continues through six Sundays
- the Easter Triduum: beginning Holy Thursday evening and ending Easter Sunday evening.
- the Easter Season, beginning with the Easter Vigil and ending seven weeks later with the feast of Pentecost
- Ordinary Time: extending from the Monday after Pentecost to the First Sunday of Advent

However, each year of the cycle centers on a different gospel: Year A on Matthew, Year B on Mark, and Year C on Luke. This arrangement gives us somewhat continuous readings from these gospels, and so the "treasures of the Bible are opened up more lavishly" for those gathered for worship.

In addition to the gospel reading, most Sundays (outside of the Easter season) also have a reading from the Old Testament and a second reading from the New Testament, but from a book other than a gospel. However, the readings from the Old Testament are not semi-continuous from one book. Rather, they are selected because they have a thematic unity with the gospel. This is because the readings at Mass (the Liturgy of the Word) and our celebration of Eucharist are both part of a single act of worship centered on Christ and Christ's paschal mystery. The Old Testament readings are selected in order to help us understand Jesus as the fulfillment of salvation history.

The readings from some other parts of the New Testament, such as the letters, *are* often semi-continuous. They allow us to see how the paschal mystery was lived out in the early church, and provide us with a model to do the same.

WHY CATECHISTS MUST KNOW THE BIBLE AS WELL AS THE LECTIONARY

Because the Lectionary takes biblical passages out of their biblical context, and because the Catholic Church teaches us that we must consider context in order to understand meaning (to be explained in Chapter 2), it is absolutely essential that anyone who attempts to teach Scripture have knowledge of the Bible, not just knowledge of those out-of-context biblical passages that appear in the Lectionary. Why? Because without knowledge of context, biblical passages can easily be misunderstood and can be used to support ideas that no inspired biblical author ever taught (to be explained in Chapter 6).

Our worship setting is assuming that we have read the Bible and that we bring knowledge of context with us when we come to worship. Otherwise, we often cannot understand what is being proclaimed. Indeed, we cannot truly be nour-

ished and ruled by Scripture—and help others be nourished and ruled as well—unless we have read and understood the Bible.

● *Questions for Reflection or Discussion*

1. How would you respond to the question, “Are you familiar with the Bible?” What opportunities have you had to read various books of the Bible in their entirety? Why do you think the answer to this question is important?
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2. Do you think the Bible contains revelation? What do you mean by the word *revelation*? What have you learned from the Bible that you consider revelatory? Why do human beings need revelation?  
~~~~~
3. Do you believe that, in the past, God has revealed God’s self through events? Do you think God still reveals God’s self through events? In what ways has God revealed God’s self to you?
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4. Have you ever been puzzled by a reading you heard proclaimed from the Lectionary? If so, had you ever read the book in the Bible from which the passage was taken? Why might knowing the biblical context for the reading help you understand it?