

+ A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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The Scriptures: Our Family's Book

by Murray Watson

(Part 1 in a two-part series on the Bible in our lives as Catholic educators, and in the life of the Church)

Do you have a family Bible? January 20, 2021 marked the swearing-in of Joe Biden as President of the United States. When he took the oath of office, his left hand rested on a hefty book lovingly held by his wife, Jill. It was his family Bible, showing all the signs of wear and tear from more than a century of use. While the Bible *may* sometimes serve as a political and cultural symbol, far more important for Jews and Christians is what the Bible means as a *symbol of faith*—the Word of God, which guides the life of those who read it, study it, and pray with it. For billions of people around the globe, the Bible is a book very different from any other.

We may have a cherished family Bible, containing dates of births, weddings and deaths. Often the binding is cracked, and the pages may be yellowed and loose - very different from the fresh and unmarked Bibles we can buy at a bookstore. And we would never consider trading our old ones for even the most beautiful new edition because in these worn and battered volumes, our story as a family is intimately interwoven with the story the Bible tells - *which is our family story, too.*

As Catholic Christians, our spiritual DNA includes the characters and stories of the Bible: Adam and Eve ... the Great Flood ... Joseph and his coat of many colours ... Moses and the Ten Commandments ... Jonah and the whale ... the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus ...

the conversion and preaching of St. Paul. We know those stories from childhood books and songs and from homilies heard at Mass.

But the Bible has shaped world culture as well. Think for a moment of the majestic frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, or Michelangelo's famous "David". We all know Leonard Cohen's classic song "Hallelujah," and the

Christmas carols we enjoy throughout December are peppered with Biblical phrases and images. We use expressions drawn from the Bible almost every day (feet of clay; Armageddon; a Damascus Road conversion experience; forbidden fruit, etc.). A basic biblical literacy is an invaluable tool for anyone who wants to appreciate the rich heritage of global Christianity, which draws millions of people to visit churches, monasteries, art galleries and

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concert halls, to savour how those ancient stories have been interpreted in stone, paint, and song.

Before the invention of the printing press in the 1400s, every copy of the Bible was made by hand - a slow, painstaking, loving process that took teams of monks years to produce. Some of those manuscripts are today artistic and historic treasures, like the famous Book of Kells (kept in Dublin, Ireland). To mark the beginning of the third millennium of Christianity, the monastic community of Saint John's Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota commissioned some of the world's finest artists and calligraphers to produce [The Saint John's Bible](#),ⁱ scribed letter by letter by hand, and lavishly illustrated with masterpieces of traditional and contemporary art. Its seven volumes represent a striking renewal of a venerable artistic tradition.

Why was so much care, attention and cost invested in copying these manuscripts? Because, as Pope Francis said on the Sunday of the Word of God in 2021, the Bible is "a love letter, written to us by the one who knows us best. In reading it, we again hear his voice, see his face and receive his Spirit".ⁱⁱ In the Bible, God reaches out to us in love, speaking to us, encouraging us, challenging us, inspiring us. It is a book at the heart of our relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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And yet many of us can feel uncomfortable in some ways in the Bible's pages. We know that it contains the sacred texts of our faith, and yet we are not always exactly sure how to navigate it - where to begin, how to read and interpret it, and how to connect it to the larger context of our Catholic faith. We can feel hesitant about delving into it on our own. Sometimes we wonder if it is a book better left to religious and academic experts.

But the Bible is at the core of our faith. The first half of the Mass is the Liturgy of the Word. You may have seen Priests and Deacons hold up the Scriptures, incense them, and tenderly kiss them. The prayers of the Mass are a rich tapestry of Biblical verses, images and phrases. Our most-loved daily prayers draw upon the Bible's stories and words, and all authentic Catholic spiritualities and devotions are nourished by its inspired message. The Bible is the well from which all Christians drink (and of course, Christians share the Old Testament with the Jewish people, the people with whom God first entered into covenant relationships):

To the Jewish Scriptures which it received as the authentic Word of God, the Christian Church added other Scriptures expressing its faith in Jesus, the Christ. It follows then that the Christian Bible is not composed of one "Testament," but two "Testaments", the Old and the New ... [The Church] has always affirmed that the Old Testament and the New Testament are inseparable.ⁱⁱⁱ

Especially since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, the Church has been strongly encouraging Catholics the world over to discover the Bible more deeply. In 2010, Pope Benedict XVI wrote, in his exhortation "The Word of the Lord":

I express my heartfelt hope for the flowering of "a new season of greater love for sacred Scripture on the part of every member of the People of God, so that their prayerful and faith-filled reading of the Bible will ... deepen their personal relationship with Jesus" ... Let us renew our efforts to understand deeply the Word which God has given to his

ecclesial activity". God's word, listened to and celebrated ... nourishes and inwardly strengthens Christians, enabling them to offer an authentic witness to the Gospel in daily life.^v

The Bible has always had a central place in Christianity, and it provides the foundations for our understanding of God and His plan, the moral vision we live, and our vocation as Christian believers. But, first and foremost, it is "a love letter, written to us by the one who knows us best". It is a constant invitation to deepen our relationship with God. But it also asks something of us.

If we wish to share our faith effectively with others, we first need to be deeply rooted in the message of the Bible.

To approach the Bible fruitfully requires some dispositions of the heart:



Faith: To most fully understand the message of these 73 books, we need to recognize that this is God's Word ... it is not simply interesting ancient literature, like the texts of ancient Babylon, Egypt or Greece. We come to the Bible as believers, seeking - and finding - enlightenment, guidance and inspiration.



Humility: The Bible comes to us from ancient cultures, and was written in ancient languages, reflecting ancient assumptions that we may not always share ... but we need to be humble enough to allow the Bible to speak on its own terms. We have to try to enter into its world, to understand its message in its own historical, cultural and religious context - which is often very different from ours today.



Openness: When we come to reading, studying and praying with the Bible, we need to open ourselves to the same Holy Spirit who inspired its human authors, allowing the Spirit to guide us and surprise us as we read. We need both intellectual curiosity and spiritual openness, inviting God to enlighten our reading and reflection.



Love: As Christians, our ultimate goal in reading the Bible is always to be nourished in our love for God and for other people. The great St. Augustine once wrote: "Whoever ... thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them, in a way that does not build up the twofold love of God and of our neighbour, does not understand it at all."^{vi}

Reading the Bible, reflecting on it and praying with it is a slow, patient journey; it is the work of a lifetime. Coming to the same passages over and over again, over a period of many years, we discover in them new insights, new riches, new meaning. Portions of the Bible speak to us in different ways in the different seasons of our lives - in moments of joy and celebration, and in times of struggle, confusion and pain. Certain books and verses become favourites, and we find ourselves returning to them again and again for comfort and guidance. As people of faith, the Bible becomes our companion, and we find its stories reflecting the experiences of our own lives.

Our journey into God's Word in the Bible also helps us to better understand Jesus, God's Word-made-flesh. Just as, in Jesus, humanity and divinity are fully united, so in the Scriptures we encounter God's inspired message - communicated to us in human language, through the personalities of its human authors. The Scriptural Word points us to Jesus as God's Son, the Messiah, and the words and example of Jesus shed new light on how the rest of the Bible

should be understood and lived. Our faith in Jesus goes hand-in-hand with the Bible - and leads us back to the Bible, again and again. In the second part of this monograph, "The Word of God Will Stand Forever," we will delve more deeply into the place of the Bible in the life of the Church, and the central place it holds in our liturgical life and personal prayer.

Reflection Questions

As educators, we may ask:

How am I to growing as a Catholic professional, in terms of learning more about the guidance the Church provides for reading and understanding of the Bible?

What are some of the ways that the school community communicates the Scriptures through the use of the arts (including music)? How well do Biblical images displayed in the school reflect the cultural diversity of the student body?

References

- i See more about *The Saint John's Bible* at www.saintjohnsbible.org. At this time, there are three organizations in Ontario that hold a Heritage Edition of *The Saint John's Bible* - Regis College, University of Toronto; St. Jerome's University, Waterloo; and the Diocese of Hamilton, Hamilton.
- ii Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis, Sunday, January 24, 2021, vatican.com
- iii Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible" (2002), 19.
- iv Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, On the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, (2010), 253.
- v Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel, (2013), 174 – 175.
- vi St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book 1.36.40.