

+ A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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The Word of God Will Stand Forever (Isaiah 40:8)

by Murray Watson

(Part 2 in a two-part series on the Bible in our lives as Catholic educators, and in the life of the Church)

For 2,000 years, the inspired words of the Bible - initially the holy books inherited from Judaism, and eventually the Christian New Testament, too - have been at the heart of the Christian community, its liturgy, prayer and belief. At the beginning of his pontificate, Pope St. John Paul II wrote:

“The treasure of the Scriptures, in which is contained the message of salvation given by God to the human race ... has always been deservedly held by the Church in the highest honour and has been guarded with special care. Indeed, from her very beginnings she never ceased to make sure that the Christian people might enjoy the fullest possible opportunity of receiving the Word of God”.ⁱ

In 2019, Pope Francis instituted a new “Sunday of the Word of God” at the beginning of Ordinary Time. At that time, he said that “we urgently need to grow in our knowledge and love of the Scriptures and of the risen Lord, who continues to speak his Word ... in the community of believers ... We need to develop a closer relationship with sacred Scripture; otherwise, our hearts will remain cold and our eyes

shut”.ⁱⁱ For centuries, the Church has emphasized the irreplaceability of the Bible for those who wish to follow Jesus.

As Catholic Christians, that centrality of the Scriptures is expressed in many ways in our daily lives and in the life of the Church. In our classrooms, Bibles have pride of place in our prayer spaces, and they hold an honoured place in many of our homes. When bishops gather for solemn assemblies, they traditionally begin by enthroning the Book of the Gospels in their midst, as a sign of Jesus’ guiding presence at the heart of their gathering. The Gospel book is

incensed and kissed during the liturgy, as a sign of loving reverence for what it contains, and we stand when its words are proclaimed. Often, those books are adorned with our most precious materials, and great artistry goes into their design and binding.

And this love and veneration is not something new. From the earliest centuries of the Church, great Christian figures have fostered Biblical reading,

“How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding ... Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Psalm 19:103-105)

study and prayer as part of a “balanced diet” for Catholic Christians. Consider these examples from our early Christian history:

“We wish you would take care, not only to hear the Word of God in church, but also in your homes to peruse and meditate day and night on the Law of the Lord.” (Origen, Christian theologian from 3rd century, ca. 185-ca. 254)

“Read diligently and learn as much as you can. Let sleep find you holding your Bible, and when your head nods, let it be resting on the sacred page.” (St. Jerome, Doctor of the Church and translator of the Bible into Latin, ca. 340-420)

“‘I am not,’ you may say, ‘one of the monks, but I have both a wife and children, and the care of a household.’ This is what has ruined everything: your thinking that the reading of Scripture is for monks only, when you need it more than they do. Those who are placed in the world, and who receive wounds every day, have the most need of medicine. So, far worse even than not reading the scriptures is the idea that they are superfluous.” (St. John Chrysostom, 4th Century Doctor of the Church)

When Gutenberg invented the process of printing with movable type in the 1400s, the Bible was the first book he printed. It remains the single most printed book in human history, with roughly five billion copies issued over the centuries, in almost every language and medium. There are audio Bibles, picture Bibles, Bibles in Braille, online Bibles - and English-speakers have dozens of excellent translations to choose from, including the New Revised Standard Version that we use at Mass here in Canada.

We may be fascinated by the Bible, curious about it, or even a little intimidated by it. Often, we wish we knew more, and could discuss it more confidently. Fortunately, rooting ourselves in the Bible is the journey of a lifetime - not something we need to complete in a month, or even a year. The Church encourages us to engage on that journey, day by day and week by week, gradually absorbing the message of the Scriptures through slow, attentive and prayerful reading.

For many of us, the main way we will encounter the Bible and its message is at Mass. Especially since the liturgical reforms of the 1960s, the first half of the Mass is a rich banquet of Biblical texts: four Biblical passages (three readings and a psalm) are provided for our nourishment for each Sunday and holy day.

Today, the Biblical readings on Sundays are spread over a three-year cycle (Years A, B and C), each focusing on a particular Gospel (Matthew for Year A; Mark for Year B; Luke for Year C). John’s Gospel is spread throughout all three years, and is especially used during the seasons of Lent and Easter. A similar (two-year) cycle is employed for the readings on weekdays.

Today, a Catholic who attends Mass every day will hear approximately 14% of the Old Testament, and 72% of the New Testament. Those who attend Mass on Sundays and major feasts hear roughly 4% of the Old Testament, and 41% of the New Testament - simply by prayerfully listening to the readings offered during the liturgy!ⁱⁱⁱ

But it isn’t *just* during the Liturgy of the Word that we hear the message of the Scriptures. The entire Mass is a tapestry of Biblical vocabulary, images and verses. Think, for example, of the “Glory to God” (Luke 2:14), the Our Father (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4), and the Lamb of God (John 1:29). Even the greetings exchanged between the Priest and congregation are taken directly from the Bible (Ruth 2:4; John 24:36; opening verses of many of St. Paul’s letters). During the Mass, we are literally immersed in God’s Biblical Word. It surrounds us in our churches in stained glass windows, architecture, painting and banners.

Many of our most beloved Catholic devotions and forms of prayer are richly Biblical. The Rosary is a prayerful meditation on scenes from the life of Jesus and Mary, and the prayers themselves are thoroughly Scriptural. The Stations of the Cross lead us through the last pages of the Gospels, as we spiritually follow Jesus during the final hours of His earthly life. Many

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imagery, or are paraphrases of important Biblical texts.

One of the goals in the preparation of the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was to be more explicit about the Biblical roots of our Catholic faith. In the nearly 30 years since the Catechism was published, all of our faith-education initiatives in Catholic education in Ontario - from student textbooks to Religious Education Additional Qualification courses and other adult faith formation programs - have been deeply and intentionally anchored in the words of the Bible. Its stories are often beautifully and evocatively illustrated in the materials prepared for our students. But the best of textbooks is no replacement for Catholic educators who are themselves personally in touch with the Bible and its message.

As Vatican II said, our goal in Catholic education should always be “to provide the nourishment of the Scriptures for the people of God, to enlighten their minds, strengthen their wills, and set people’s hearts on fire with the love of God”.^{iv} Fortunately, today we have an abundance of resources and strategies that can help us to read and better understand the Bible ourselves so that we can share it even more confidently with others, especially as part of the vocation of a Catholic educator.

Here are four suggestions:



Praying with the readings for Mass: Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that the Church is “the home of God’s Word,” and that the privileged place where God communicates that Word is in the Church’s liturgy. Regularly taking the time to read over, and pray with, the Scriptural readings for Sundays and feast days beforehand allows us to better grasp the spiritual logic that connects those readings, and enables us to hear them more fruitfully when they are proclaimed at Mass.



Owning and using a good contemporary Catholic study Bible: While large parts of the Bible are fairly easy to read and understand, there are sections that can be challenging or difficult, which require informed guidance and helpful background information. Today, there are a number of excellent Catholic (and ecumenical) study Bibles available, which provide introductions, footnotes, and accompanying materials that clarify difficult or obscure passages. These editions of the Scriptures provide the kinds of historical, theological and literary contexts that can enable us to read the Biblical books with greater confidence, understanding and accuracy.



Join (or start) a Bible study program: While reflecting on the Bible as individuals can be a rewarding journey, many people find that reading and studying the Bible together with others is a more enjoyable and ultimately more fruitful approach. Does your parish offer a Bible study group that you could join, or is there a nearby parish offering one? If not, consider working with the pastoral team at your parish to organize such a group. Today, many respected Bible study programs offer online modules with support materials that parishes can subscribe to and use, without the need for a resident Bible scholar in your group.



Lectio Divina: This Latin expression, meaning “sacred reading,” refers to a form of biblically-focussed prayer and meditation that allows a person to “savour” God’s Word in a slow, reflective way that invites the Holy Spirit to lead us more deeply into the meaning of a particular Scriptural text. Rooted in monastic practice, *lectio divina* offers us a wonderful way to slow down and listen. There are excellent introductory Youtube videos that can lead you through this process of opening ourselves to God’s Word for our lives. The practise is also introduced through the elementary religion program *Growing in Faith, Growing in Christ*.^v

The ancient philosophers had a saying in Latin: “*Nemo dat quod non habet*”: You cannot give to others what you do not have. As Catholic educators, the Church has entrusted us with the vital task of helping our students to read, understand and love God’s Word in the Bible. We become more and more able to do so effectively as we ourselves become more and more rooted in that Word as an authentic part of our own prayer and spirituality. We don’t need to be “Bible experts” to lead our students into a meaningful engagement with Scripture, and there is no shame in admitting that we ourselves are

on that journey of learning also. The beauty of the Bible is that there is something in it for everyone, regardless of where we are at on our spiritual journey. St. Augustine is attributed with saying that the Bible is like a pool in which a child may safely wade, and in which an elephant can swim.

There is a reason why the Bible is the world’s most-published and most widely read book. It is a book that speaks to us in our times of joy and our moments of sorrow, when our faith is rock-solid, and when we may be struggling to believe. It is a book that rewards prayerful study and it provides the foundation for our Catholic faith. Taking time for reading, studying and praying with the Bible is an investment that will bear dividends, both personally and professionally, for a lifetime!

Reflection Questions

As educators, we may ask:

What pedagogical resources and strategies are most effective in helping students to become more comfortable with the Bible?

How does the message of the Bible guide and direct planning and decisions at all levels in Catholic education?

References

- i *Scripturarum Thesaurus* (April 25, 1979).
- ii *Aperuit Illis* (September 30, 2019).
- iii Father Felix Just, SJ, “Lectionary Statistics”; online at: <https://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Statistics.htm>
- iv *Dei Verbum* (1965), 23.
- v See *Growing in Faith, Growing in Christ*, (2017) Pearson Canada School, Grade 4, Unit 1.