

Bible Study with Fr. Matthew  
Thursday Evenings on Zoom at 7:00 PM  
A Brief Guide on How to Interpret the Bible

## The Reason for this Guide

When preparing for our weekly Bible Studies, I often ask myself: “What is there about the way that Catholics read the Bible that sets us apart from how most other people (Protestant, secular, or members of other faiths) interpret the text?” One thing that sets us apart, especially from non-Christians, in our reading of the text is that we believe that we encounter Christ in the text in a way that is similar to how we encounter Christ in the Eucharist.

Less doctrinally, however, what sets us apart is that the Catholic Church has clearly articulated a method of interpreting the text that blends literary analysis, with allegories of recurring themes and archetypes, moral lessons, and insights into our ultimate destiny, giving us “the full sense” of sacred scripture rather than reading only parts of the Bible and taking those parts out of context. In other words, ***Catholics have a definite method for reading the Bible***, yet ***few Catholics know what that method is***. One of the objectives of this Bible study is to ***help participants to become more familiar and comfortable with our method of reading sacred scripture***.

Recently, I was looking over an introduction by Scott Hahn and Chris Mitch to the *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible* (Ignatius Press, 2012) that provides an excellent summary of this method. What follows is a slightly edited digest of that introduction. This should be useful to anyone who wants to become familiar with the Catholic method for Biblical interpretation:

## Reading for the Full Sense of Sacred Scripture

**The Literal Sense:** Just as we read any other works of literature, when we read the Bible, we strive to discover the meaning of the words and expressions as people understood them at the time and in the location where the books of the Bible were originally written. This means that we do not interpret the Bible as though the inspired human writers never use figurative or symbolic language.

Fact of the matter is, the language that they use is very often figurative or symbolic. Therefore, we read the Bible according to the rules that govern different literary genres. We don't read everything in the same way. We read narratives in the text as narratives, poetry as poetry, letters as letters, parables as parables, and apocalyptic visions as apocalyptic literature.

The reason why the Church encourages us to read the Bible with an appreciation for different literary genres is so that we will properly understand what the human authors of the inspired work were trying to explain to God's people.

**The Three Spiritual Senses of Sacred Scripture:** While the literal sense of sacred scripture describes a historical reality (such as a fact, precept, or event), the spiritual senses reveal to us the deeper mysteries underlying these historical realities. As the soul is to the body, so the spiritual senses of sacred scripture are to the literal sense. You may try to distinguish the soul from the body or the literal sense from the spiritual senses of the Bible but if you actually try to separate them from each other the person or the text will die.

When we read the Bible, we search for what the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us beyond what the human authors of the text are consciously aware of. The Catholic Church recognizes three spiritual senses of sacred scripture that stand upon the

foundation of the literal (literary) sense of the Bible: the allegorical sense, the tropological or moral sense, and the anagogical sense. Let's examine each of these three spiritual senses of the Bible.

**The Allegorical Sense:** this sense unveils the *spiritual and prophetic meaning* of biblical history. Allegorical interpretations reveal how persons, events, and institutions in the Old Testament point beyond themselves toward greater mysteries yet to come. In the New Testament, they display the fruits of mysteries already revealed.

When reading allegorically, ask yourself this: How is the mystery of Christ in the New Testament hidden in the Old? How is the full significance of the Old covenant finally made manifest in the New? How do the life and deeds of Jesus recorded in the Gospels prefigure what he continually produces in the Church through grace?

The allegorical sense of reading the Bible builds up the virtue of faith within us.

**The Moral or Tropological Sense:** this sense of reading the Bible reveals how the actions of God's people in the Old Testament and the life of Jesus in the New Testament *prompt us to form virtuous habits in our own lives*. When reading tropologically ask: What warnings does this offer against sin and vice? How does this offer inspiration to pursue holiness and purity? The moral sense of reading the Bible is intended to build up the virtue of charity within us.

**The Anagogical Sense:** this sense of reading sacred scripture *points upward to heavenly glory*. It shows how countless events in the Bible prefigure our final union with God in eternity and how things that are "seen" on earth are figures of things "unseen" in heaven. When reading anagogically, ask: How does this lead me to

contemplate my destiny? The anagogical sense of the Bible is meant to build up in us the virtue of hope.

### Guidelines for the Study of Sacred Scripture

1. We must ***be attentive to the content and unity of the whole scripture***. Ask yourself this: what is the literary context of every verse, including not only the words and paragraphs that surround it, but also the entire corpus of the biblical author's writings and the span of the entire Bible? No book of the Bible can be fully understood apart from the wider context of the entire Bible (CCC 112).
2. We must ***read the scripture within the living tradition of the whole Church***. The Bible is located within the context of a community that treasures a "living tradition". That community is the People of God down through the ages. Reverence for the Church's tradition protects us from chronological or cultural provincialism that become fads one day and are discarded the next (CCC 113).
3. We must ***be attentive to the analogy of faith***. Scriptural texts must be read within the framework of faith. If the scriptures are divinely inspired they must also be internally coherent and consistent with all the doctrines that Christians believe. The Church's dogmas are not added to scripture, they are the Church's infallible interpretation of scripture (CCC 114).