

# HOW DO CATHOLICS READ THE BIBLE?

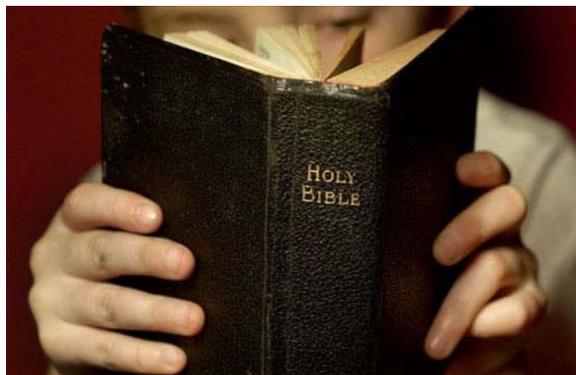
## Spiritual Question No. 2

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### HOW DO CATHOLICS READ THE BIBLE?

People often joke that Catholics don't read the Bible. Or people say that Catholics don't know where to find anything in our Bibles—or even where to find a Bible. People sometimes make it seem as though the Bible is not really even a Catholic book.

But the truth is very different.



### DAILY SCRIPTURE

First of all, Catholics read the Bible every day—at church. Go to any Catholic church—or any chapel at any installation during a Catholic Mass (service)—and you will hear several passages read from the Bible.

### KNOWING YOUR BIBLE

Second, while most Catholics would have a hard time telling you where something is in the Bible—the

story of the Prodigal Son, for example—many Catholics know the stories in the Bible, or at least part of the stories. Most know “the Prodigal Son” story. Or what happened with Adam and Eve. Or about Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt. Or of Jesus' birth.

Catholics don't read the Bible “chapter and verse.” That is, we don't read the Bible to memorize the chapter and verse numbers of a story. So we might not know that the Prodigal Son story is found in Luke 15:11-32. Instead, we learn the story.

If we have paid attention when the Bible was read at church—or if we've been to a really good Bible study—we will also know what the stories in the Bible have to do with each other. We will know, for example, that Moses leading the Hebrews through the waters of the Red Sea to freedom is connected to Jesus leading us through the waters of Baptism to freedom.

### EVERYTHING'S CONNECTED

Third, we read the Bible as one book. We read with the understanding that everything in the Bible is connected to everything else. Even though the Bible is made up of many books, we read the Bible as one book—one book that testifies or tells us about Jesus.

The Bible was not written by one person—it is made up of many books, poems, letters—but we read the Bible as one testament to Jesus, as one witness to Who He Is: God made man.

## **OLD AND NEW**

There are two main groupings of the books of the Bible: the books of the Old Testament and the books of the New Testament.

The Old Testament is made up of the writings (or scriptures) that the Jewish people were using at the time of Jesus. Jesus used these writings when He read scripture and when He prayed.

The New Testament is made up of the writings that Jesus' followers wrote to tell others about their experiences with Jesus.

The Old Testament writings prepared people to meet Jesus. And the New Testament tells us about meeting Jesus.

And because both Testaments are testifying about Jesus, we read them together, as one collection of writings about Jesus.



## **THE CHURCH'S FAMILY ALBUM**

Fourth, we read the Bible as the Catholic Church's own collection of writings, because it is the Catholic Church that put all these books together into one Bible. We get the Bible from God through the Church.

The Catholic Church was started by Jesus, and most of the earliest members were Jewish. For those reasons, and because the Old Testament prepared the way for Jesus, the Church has continued to use the Old Testament books.

(When some Christian groups left the Catholic Church in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century in protest of some things they did not like—we call these Christians Protestants—they decided to use the Old Testament books that Jews of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century used. This is why some Bibles are missing some Old Testament scriptures.)

But obviously, the Church could not inherit the New Testament from the Jews. Where did the New Testament scriptures come from?

## **THE "GOOD NEWS"**

At the time of the early Church, many people wrote about Jesus. Some wrote in a style of writing called a "gospel"—kind of like short biographies testifying to someone's greatness. There were many gospels written about Jesus. Others wrote long letters about Jesus and the early Church. And there were still other writers and styles of writing.

But how did the Church know which of these writings were trustworthy accounts of Jesus and his teachings—and which were not?

We believe that precisely because Jesus is the One in Whom God is revealed to us—“I am the Truth,” Jesus said—and “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father,” He told St. Philip—precisely for that reason, He left us a way to know him, to know the truth, forevermore.

He left us his Apostles and their successors, the Pope and Bishops of the Church.

They are our shepherds, and they will both guide and guard God’s flock. They guide us by ensuring that we learn Who Jesus is and what He said and did. And they guard us by ensuring that we do not stray from Jesus and his Church.

One way the Pope and Bishops have guided and guarded the Church was by coming to understand at several Councils (meetings of Bishops) in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century which writings about Jesus are from God—and which are not.

Those that they came to understand are from God joined the Old Testament scriptures and are known as the New Testament. And God gave us the Bible through the Catholic Church.

## **SCRIPTURE & TRADITION**

Fifth, we, like the Bishops, interpret the meaning of the Bible within the Tradition of the Church.

Jesus warned us against following the “traditions of men.” He warned us not to misinterpret what we read in the Bible or what He taught us because of human tradition.

We all live according to some human tradition. Our traditions are part of our culture, our laws, our country. Human traditions can be good or bad.

One evil tradition our country followed in the past was slavery. We could misunderstand a lot that we read in the Bible if we grow up in a tradition that thinks that slavery is okay.

So how do we know that we interpret the Bible correctly?

Along with the Bible, which tells us about preparing for Jesus and then about encountering Jesus, we have “Sacred Tradition,” the Tradition handed down to us from Jesus through the Church.

Tradition comes from the Latin word “tradition,” which means to hand on. St Paul told the early Church to hold fast to what the Apostles handed on to them “by writing and by speech,” in scripture and in tradition.

This Tradition that was handed on from the Apostles included many things that Jesus said and did that were not written down. St John refers to these words and acts of Jesus at the end of his Gospel about Jesus.

If we are tempted to interpret the Bible against Tradition, we know that we have misinterpreted it. The Bible and Tradition are one “deposit of

Faith,” in the traditional words of the Church—they are one gift of Faith, deposited with the Church, like a treasure deposited in a bank. And the Church safeguards this deposit.

## **WITH AND WITHIN THE CHURCH**

Sixth, we read the Bible with and within the Church.

It is the Catholic Church that safeguards our reading of the Bible and ensures we read what God means to say. The Church safeguards the correct reading of the Bible by the ministry of the “Magisterium.” Magisterium comes from the Latin word for teacher, “magister”. And the Pope and Bishops are the teachers in the Church who have Christ’s own authority to teach. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, they will not lead the Church astray.

It is Christ alone who is the Teacher—only He can teach us about God. The Magisterium’s role is not to come up with their own teaching but to continue to teach Jesus’ teaching throughout history.

God gave us the Bible through the ministry of the Magisterium—and through their ministry He continues to give us the Bible.

## **HEAVEN-SENT**

Seventh, we read the Bible as a book given to us by God.

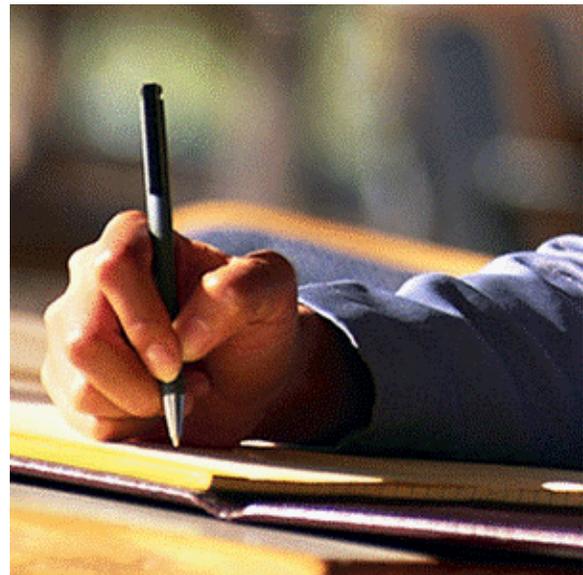
While it was men, many men, who wrote the Bible, they were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write. That means that they co-operated with God to

write those truths that God wanted to have written down, so that we might be saved.

This does not mean that the men who wrote the Bible were not true authors. God did not “take them over” when they wrote. They were not simply hearing words and writing them down. God does not work with people like that.

The human writers wrote with the full use of their minds; and they freely worked with the Holy Spirit to write.

So the human authors used their own languages (Hebrew and Greek) and wrote using expressions and symbols that men and women of their time and culture would understand.



This is why we find expressions like “from the rising of the sun to its setting,” in the Bible—not because God wants us to believe that the sun rises and sets, literally, but because to the men and women of ancient times,

who did not know how the sun moved around the earth, this expression meant “the whole world,” wherever the sun shines.

In modern English, we might use an expression like “its raining cats and dogs,” not because pets are falling out of the sky but because it means “its really raining hard.”

This is why even though God is the One Who inspired the writers of the Bible, we find phrases that seem a little odd to us—and why we need to understand ancient languages and cultures to better understand the Bible.

But... the bottom line is that God did inspire the writing of the Bible—so everything we read in the Bible is true. The Bible is “inerrant,” meaning without error, because God does not make mistakes.

The Bible is a work of God and man—and a work of God and man that tells us the truth about both being God and being human—because it’s a testimony to Jesus Who is God and the perfect man.

And Jesus came to us as a work of God and a woman: Mary. Jesus was conceived in Mary’s womb by the power of the Holy Spirit when Mary freely co-operated with God. Similarly, the writings of the Bible were conceived in men’s minds and then on their paper by the power of the Holy Spirit when they freely co-operated with God.

## ENCOUNTERING JESUS

So, eighth, Catholics read the Bible as an encounter with Jesus.

We venerate (treat with great honor) the Bible as we venerate the Body of Jesus. This is not because the Bible is Jesus’ Body—or even that Jesus is present in the Bible in the same way that He is present Bodily. But the Bible does present Jesus to us. We do encounter Jesus when we read the Bible.

And so we read the Bible not only to learn more about Jesus. St Jerome, an early translator of the Bible, said that “ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Jesus.” We read the Bible to encounter and come closer to the Jesus we learn about.

Encountering Christ in the Bible, we can enter into a dialogue with God. “We speak to him when we pray,” said St Ambrose, “we listen to him when we read (the Bible.)”



## REFLECTION

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1. What verses or book(s) of the Bible particularly appeal to you? Why?
2. Many pray these simple words before reading or studying scripture: “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” (Do you know where it comes from in the Bible?\*) Reflect on these words, thinking about why they have come to be used in this way.

\* I Samuel 3 — These are the words that the young prophet Samuel addresses to God, who is calling him.

Bible Alone?” (Note: You need to register on this site before you can download these talks, but the few moments it takes to do that are worth it—these are good resources, and they’re free.)

## NOTES

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP

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1. Get a copy of a good Catholic translation of the Bible, for example, the New Jerusalem Bible, which has good footnotes and introductions to books of the Bible. Delve deeper into the notes for a particular book or passage that you’d like to become more informed about. Then take some time to reflect and pray about it.
2. Check out a great online resource of MP3 downloads at [www.biblechristiansociety.com](http://www.biblechristiansociety.com). Look under “Apologetics” and click on the MP3 downloads. You may want to listen to the talk titled “Catholics and the Bible” or “Sola Scriptura—the