

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
December 6, 2020
Spiritual Ponderings
Bible Compass

For the month of December, I thought I would take a closer look at the Bible as a whole with the help of another book by Edward Sri. This book is called: *The Bible Compass: A Catholic Guide to Navigating the Scriptures*. I hope that my reflections on Edward Sri's thoughts on the Bible will help all of us grow to appreciate the gift that the Sacred Scriptures are to us in an even deeper fashion. Quotes from his book will be in bold and my reflections will be in a normal font.

The Bible is often considered “the greatest book ever written.” At first glance, however, it does not appear to be a book at all. It looks more like a library, for it is a collection of seventy-three different books authored by many different people over the course of many centuries. These books were written from various locations to diverse audiences and in three different languages (i.e., Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek). Moreover, the seventy-three books of the Bible reflect a wider range of literary genres: historical narratives, poetry, proverbial sayings, genealogies, personal letters, laws, and prophecy for example.

So why do we consider these many, varied works to be a single great book? Because they all have one very important thing in common—namely, a common author God. And it is this divine author who through these varied books of the Bible, tell one overarching story—the drama of his plan of salvation.

If you were to go into my office right now and survey all the books that I have on my bookcases, you would discover that many of them have to do with theology/religion. There are also books that have to deal with hobbies like cooking, woodworking, and storytelling. In addition, one would find quite a few historical fiction books dealing with topics of Native Americans, the Civil War, and Fantasy Adventure. It is my hope that when people see the different books, I have collected they see a well-rounded individual. I also hope that a person would not try to read my fantasy adventure books with the same intensity that they may read one of my theology books because they are two different genres.

In the same way, I do not approach all the books of the Bible as if they are all from the same genre. I do not read Genesis with the hopes of finding scientific truths about the beginning of the universe. I do not read the book of Psalms (which is a collection of hymns that were sung in the Jewish Temple) as I would read the Gospel of Luke.

This does not mean God is the only author of Scripture but rather that he is the primary author. Christianity has always recognized that human authors were involved in the writing of the Bible as well. Men such as Sts. Peter and Paul composed sacred books and acted as true authors under divine inspiration. The human writers made full use of their own freedom, creativity, and writing style to communicate their message to their particular audience.

As Catholics, our religion is all about God “incarnating” himself into our world out of love for us. Just as Jesus was true God and true man, we believe that the Scriptures are authored by both God and man. We do not mean that God dictated the Scriptures to the authors but rather that He inspired them to write what they wrote. It is important therefore to try to understand what God intended by the Scripture passage we are studying and the idea of what the human author was trying to communicate to his original audience.

The Church teaches that God positively influenced the writing of the text; thus, the words of Scripture are truly God's words. Vatican I made this point, teaching that the Church holds these books as sacred and canonical, not because “they contain revelation without error, but because having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and as such they have been handed down to Church itself.,

The Scriptures are one of many ways that God wishes to unveil himself to us. As we read the Scriptures, we gain more and more knowledge of the one (God) who wrote them. For, example hearing the story of creation and how God spoke and the world came into being, reveals to us just how powerful God is. For no ancient pagan myths had a creation story that took place in this way. Their creation stories always involved a conflict between good and evil with the evil god being killed, and transformed into creation.

As Vatican II taught, “It is clear, therefore, that in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without

the others. Working together, each in its own way, under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.”

Cardinal Rigali, the bishop who ordained me to the priesthood, once told me that the “Holy Spirit never contradicts itself.” That one line, has helped me discern God’s will more times than I can count. As Catholics we believe that Tradition (with a capital “T”), Sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church are all inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit and therefore they will never contradict each other. If it seems that they are doing that, we must go back to the drawing board and discover where we made our mistake.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

December 13, 2020

Spiritual Ponderings

Bible Compass

Have you ever been in a conversation with someone who is not a good listener? The other person may think he understands you, but he really is not paying close attention to what you are trying to communicate. Maybe he only hears part of what you are saying. Maybe he even cuts you off before you finish your sentence. Perhaps he is too quick to relate everything you say back to his own experience or ideas. Talking to someone who listens poorly can be quite frustrating!

I want to be a listen better to God so I have been reading Edward Sri’s book called: *The Bible Compass: A Catholic Guide to Navigating the Scriptures*. I hope that my reflections on Edward Sri’s thoughts on the Bible will help all of us grow to appreciate the gift that the Sacred Scriptures are to us in an even deeper fashion. Quotes from his book will be in bold and my reflections will be in a normal font. In a particular way, let us look at the Five Keys for interpreting Scripture in a Catholic Context.

The First Key: Discover the Author’s Intention

First, we must consider the text’s historical context. As the Catechism explains, “In order to discover the sacred author’s intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture.” Certain words or actions reported in the Bible may have a particular meaning in the original ancient culture. The more we factor in the historical context in which the text was written, the better we understand the author’s intended message. But when we read texts completely divorced from their original context, we may make an erroneous interpretation.

Growing up, I had a hard time understanding why everyone seemed so down on tax collector’s in the New Testament because a classmate’s father worked for the IRS and he seemed to be a nice guy. Only when I began to understand what it meant to be a tax-collector at the time of Christ did I begin to understand the stories of Matthew and Zacchaeus.

A second way to discern the human author’s intention is to respect the literary genre he employs. The Bible use a variety of literary forms.

I do not read a cookbook the same way that I may read a theology text book or a fun fiction book. I am able to find many more spiritual insights reading the Book of Genesis instead of trying to find historical and scientific facts about the creation of the universe. I have read a non-fiction book by Stephen Ambrose called *D-Day* and a historical fiction book by Jeff Shaara called *The Steel Wave*. Both books were amazing reads but they each had different goals. Ambrose’s book was meant to tell me historical facts about the invasion of France and Jeff Shaara’s book was meant to entertain me and so he included made up dialogue into his story.

A Third way to discern the human author’s intention is to take in account the modes of feeling, speaking, and narrating used in biblical times. The way ancient people reported history, told stories, or wrote letters is often very different from the way we do so today. They did not always give straightforward, chronological “play-by-play” accounts of history but organized material by themes and employed elaborate literary techniques what involving reception, parallelism, allusion, and alliteration-- artistry that modern reader sometimes. Miss.

In the seminary, my New Testament professor stressed what he called the “Reader Response Method.” The idea was simply that in order to understand any passage of Sacred Scripture, we needed to try to understand how the author’s original audience would have understood the phrases and images the author uses in the Bible story. For example, in

Luke chapter 7 we learn about a Roman Centurion approaching Jesus. There are many things in this story that I feel we 2,000 years later take for granted but Luke's originally audiences would have found jaw dropping. For example, the very idea that a Roman Centurion would approach anyone respectfully would have surprised Luke's original audience listeners. Centurions were not known for being nice. The centurion goes a step forward and respects the Jewish customs of the rabbi and does not force him to enter into the centurion's house. This was so shocking that the early Christians included as a part of their liturgy.

A few years ago, I hosted a seminarian from India for a year at my rectory. He spoke English great, but I quickly learned how many idioms and figures of speech I used each day. Figures of speech (like "waiting for the other shoe to drop") were phrases that need more explaining to him than what I was used to.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

December 20, 2020

Spiritual Ponderings

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I want to understand better the way God speaks to me through the Sacred Scripture so I have been reading Edward Sri's book called: *The Bible Compass: A Catholic Guide to Navigating the Scriptures*. I hope that my reflections on Edward Sri's thoughts on the Bible will help all of us grow to appreciate the gift that the Sacred Scriptures are to us in an even deeper fashion. Quotes from his book will be in bold and my reflections will be in a normal font.

The Second Key: Be Attentive to the Unity of Scripture

As we have seen, understanding the human author's intention is an important first step in biblical interpretation. But since Scripture also has God as its author, there is a second vital principle for interpreting the Bible correctly: "Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written." This principal reminds us that the Bible is not merely a human document written long ago by people far removed from our lives. The Bible is God's timeless word to his people throughout history—a divine word originally spoken through human writers to a certain audience at a particular moment in time, but echoing through the centuries with profound implications for each new generation of Christians. Since the human writers of Scripture were inspired by the same Holy Spirit who continues to act in the Church and in our lives today, the Bible continues to be a personal word from God spoken to each new Christian.

One can watch anyone of the Marvel super hero movies by themselves or within the context of the larger Marvel universe. When one watches them in the context of the larger Marvel Universe you can see how each individual movie event takes on more meaning in the light of the *Avengers Infinity War* and *Avengers Endgame*. In a similar way thing in Sacred Scripture begin to take on more powerful meaning in the light of God's entire plan of salvation. For example, Joseph of the Old Testament and all he went through to save people from famine foreshadows all Jesus the suffering Jesus will endure to save us from sin and death.

The Third Key: Read Scripture Within the Living Tradition of the Church

Have you ever found the Bible difficult to understand? The eighth chapter of Acts of the Apostle tells the story of an Ethiopian man who struggles to comprehend the meaning of a certain prophecy from Isaiah. This man was a sincere believer in the God of Israel, traveling home after worshipping in the Temple, but he could not grasp the meaning of the Scriptures on his own.

Just at that moment, the Holy Spirit sent Philip to meet this traveling Ethiopian. Philip asked him, "o you understand what you are reading?" and the Ethiopian replied, "How can I, unless some one guides me?" (Acts 8:30-31?). Philip joined him in his chariot, told him the Good News of Jesus Christ, and explained how Jesus was the fulfilment of the prophecy he was reading. As a result of Philip's explanation, the Ethiopian came to understand the meaning of the Scriptures and asked to be baptized into the Christian faith.

This story exemplifies one of the difficulties we face when the Bible is read in isolation from the community of believers. The Bible is mean to read in the context of "the living Tradition of the whole Church." If we try to read the Bible on our own, a part from the tradition that gave birth to the Scriptures, we will fail to understand its meaning. Like the Ethiopian, we need a guide.

There are four key areas where Sacred Tradition manifests itself in our Church. The first is in our Church's doctrine. The second place where Sacred Tradition manifests itself is in the life of the Church – the lives of the saints, religious movements, popular devotions, and common practices that have gained acceptance in the Church. The third place we find it is in the Church's worship especially in the Church's liturgies. Finally, the Church believes that Sacred Tradition is manifested in the Early Church Fathers

They (the early Church Fathers) are the principal witnesses to the Church's living Tradition, not only because of their closeness to the apostolic era, but also because of how their writings systematized, deepened, and greatly shaped the Church's understanding of the Apostolic Tradition.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

December 27, 2020

Spiritual Ponderings

Bible Compass

I want to pray better and learn more about the way God speaks to me through the Sacred Scripture so I have been reading Edward Sri's book called: *The Bible Compass: A Catholic Guide to Navigating the Scriptures*. I hope that my reflections on Edward Sri's thoughts on the Bible will help all of us grow to appreciate the gift that the Sacred Scriptures are to us in an even deeper fashion. Quotes from his book will be in bold and my reflections will be in a normal font.

The Fourth Key: Read Scripture within the Symphony of God's Revelation.

This beautiful harmony between Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium lies at the center of our fourth key for interpreting the Bible: being attentive to the analogy of faith." An analogy of faith refers to the harmonious agreement between all the truths of the faith revealed by God and entrusted to the Church: the truths written in Scripture and the truths handed on through Sacred Tradition. Both Scripture and Tradition flow from the same divine source. Therefore, God is the source of all revealed truth, Scripture can never contradict the elements of Christian faith such as the Creed or Church teaching, and similarly the Christian faith itself can never be at odds with Scripture. In sum, the analogy of faith is "the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of Revelation."

Someone who had never watched *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* could never appreciate the character of the evil Emperor in *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* as someone who had seen *Return of the Jedi*. In the same way, the more we know about the Bible the more the stories come alive. Scott Hahn in his book *Hail Holy Queen* points out how four characters; Eve, Bathsheba, Rahab, and Rebecca can give us insight into the Blessed Virgin Mary.

We also learn through Tradition that Mary was Assumed into heaven body and soul. Sacred Scripture does not tell us this but at the same time it does not contradict this statement of faith.

The Fifth Key: Use the Four Senses of Scripture

The four senses of Scripture provide us with our fifth interpretive key for unlocking many spiritual treasures in the Bible. This key can help us draw vital connections between the Old and New Testaments, the Catholic faith, and our own spiritual lives. With this approach, the people, places, and events of the Bible go from being distant realities, far removed from our day-to-day experiences, to being relevant to our own lives and serving as models for us pilgrims on the Christian path.

Traditionally, there are four senses of Scripture, which are outlined in the Catechism, nos 115-119."

(1) Literal Sense; "The meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture" The actual person, events, place, or thing described in the biblical text. The literal sense gives rise to the following three "Spiritual Senses".

(2) Allegorical Sense: How those persons, events, places, or things in the literal sense point to Christ and his work of redemption.

(3) Moral Sense: How the literal sense points to the Christian's life in the Church.

(4) Anagogical Sense: How the literal sense points to the Christian's heavenly destiny and the last things.

The Bible is a very interested way to communicate with us because God can pack so much into it. Knowing the four senses of Scripture helps me to unlock more of what God wants me to understand and it allows me to grow deeper in my friendship with Him.

We need to recognize, however that the connections between the Old and the New—between the past, present, and future—are not arbitrary but are rooted in God’s plan of salvation. In other words, the four senses of Scripture are no mere metaphorical associations. This method of interpretation is not a creative enterprise in which one looks for nice images from the Old Testament that can help explain the Catholic faith. Rather, spiritual exegesis uncovers the great unity in God’s salvific plan as carried out in history.

The God who created this amazing universe also created an amazing plan to save us from our sins. He also created the best way possible to communicate to us through prayer and it includes the use of Holy Scripture. God’s effort that He has put into Sacred Scripture is one more proof of just how amazing our God is but also how much He loves you and me.