



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE BIBLE

In the past years more and more Catholics are reading and studying the Bible. In this column I will share with you an article I wrote on *The Catholic Church and the Bible* about fifteen years ago.

Two Different Approaches to the Bible

Most of us were raised to read the Bible *literally*. For example, when we read Genesis, Chapter 1, we assumed that the Genesis account of creation was *scientifically* accurate. In other words, we assumed that the *apparent* meaning of that particular Scripture text was the meaning *intended* by the sacred writer. In a similar way, we assumed that the Jonah story was *literally* true, that a real historical figure named Jonah spent three days in the belly of a whale.

People who read the Bible literally are called "*Biblical Literalists*." *Biblical Literalists* (and Fundamentalists) usually assume that the *apparent* meaning of a Scripture text is the meaning *intended* by the human author. They impose a 21st Century, western mentality on a piece of literature that was written in a historical and cultural setting completely different from ours. They tend to think of divine inspiration as the Holy Spirit sitting on the shoulder of the human author dictating to him God's Word and preserving him from all error -historical or scientific. The *Literalist* approach is very attractive to people seeking certainty and security about things in an age where everything, including the Bible, is being questioned and called into doubt.

The Historical-Critical Approach

In the last century a new approach to the Bible emerged called the *Historical-Critical Approach*. It is called "*historical*" because it focuses on the original historical setting of a biblical passage and "*critical*" because it applies reason to the books of the Bible and makes judgments about them. The purpose of the *Historical-Critical* method is to understand what a text or passage was saying to its *original* audience and to make clear its significance then and now. Scripture scholars who follow the *Historical-Critical* approach to the Bible use every means of research available to them to "get into" the minds of the original authors. They study "the times" in which the original authors lived, the cultural and historical setting, the questions and issues of the day, the languages they used, their manner of speech (i.e.,

literary forms), how they used words, etc. In other words, they do not impose their own 21st Century mentality on literature written in another age and setting very different from their own. Scholars from the *Historical-Critical* school realize that God used a particular people living in a particular age with their own manner of speech to convey a timeless message to people of every age and place.

Four Examples of how the Historical-Critical approach to the Bible has enhanced our understanding of God's Word.

1) *The difference between the apparent and the intended meaning of a Scripture text.*

If I wrote in my journal that it "rained cats and dogs" in Melbourne, Florida, on January 28, 2007, you would know that my *intended* meaning was that we had torrential rain. But if someone living hundreds of years from now read my journal, he may accept the *apparent* meaning (that it actually rained cats and dogs) as the *intended* meaning. He would make that gross mistake because he was unfamiliar with my figurative way of speaking. In a similar way, we could easily confuse *apparent* and *intended* meanings in the Bible. The *intended meaning* of Genesis, chapter one, is to tell us that in the beginning the world was created good by God. Rather than plainly saying, "In the beginning God created all things good," the ancient author borrowed what's called a "creation myth" story to convey his message. His intention was not to tell us *how* God created the world. Such scientific information was not available to people living three thousand years ago.

In Luke 6:20-26, Jesus says, "Blest are you poor" and "Woe to you rich." The *apparent meaning is that poverty is a blessing and riches are a curse*. Luke's *intended meaning* is: "You are blest if you trust completely in God. On the other hand, you are cursed if you place your security in material riches."

2) *The difference between the "timeless" Word of God and the "time-bound" words of people living in a particular age and time.*

Scripture passages and stories about God's love, mercy, his ability to draw good out of evil events, the danger of material riches, his concern for the poor, the destructiveness of sin, the reality of evil, etc. are all examples of what's called "timeless texts" that need to be believed and acted on in *every time* and *place*.

Examples of “culturally time-bound texts” are the practice of polygamy in the Old Testament, Paul's exhortation to slaves to obey their masters (Ephesians 6:5), and his directives about how women should dress and behave in church (1 Timothy 2:9-15).

3) *The difference between the direct and the indirect will of God.*

The ancient Israelite did not make a distinction between the direct and the indirect will of God. Where we, of a western, 21st Century mentality, would say that God *permitted* something to happen, the Hebrew mind in biblical times would say that God *directly caused* such-and-such to happen. This distinction is very helpful when we come across verses in the Bible where God is seen as the direct cause of some evil behavior. For example, Exodus 11:10 states, "God made Pharaoh to resist his will..." Because we today believe that human beings have a free will to cooperate with God or resist his will, we'd say something like, "God *permitted* Pharaoh to resist his will." We wouldn't blame God for Pharaoh's stubbornness. In reading the Bible it is important that we use our common sense. When we come across verses like the above one which some would say that God caused Pharaoh's heart to be stubborn, we need to ask: "Does that seem characteristic of a God of unconditional love? Surely the *apparent* meaning of this verse is not the meaning God *intends* us to accept."

4) *Recent biblical scholarship throws light on violent images of God in the Old Testament.*

The Old Testament contains many bloodthirsty and violent images of God, which if taken literally, would leave us with a negative and destructive image of God. For example, in 1 Samuel 15:2-4. God tells Saul to carry out the horrible custom of "the ban," which involved destroying all life human and animal in a village after a battle. How can we explain this seemingly horrible command of God? Massacring a whole village after a battle was *normal behavior* in those days. The Israelites *assumed* that their god would want them to do what their neighbors believed their Gods expected of them. Also, in those days wiping out whole villages was sometimes seen as the only sure way to protect oneself from the pagan influences of one's neighbors. All of the above sounds horrible and indeed it is. Yet even today, in our supposedly sophisticated 21st Century, many "very good" Christians will do everything possible to keep "certain types of people" out of their neighborhoods. And in recent years we have had many sad examples of “ethnic cleansing”. Finally, in reading the Old Testament, we must never forget that the people of those times were living with very imperfect images of God.

When Jesus came he revealed fully the mind and heart of God. (Hebs 1:1-4)

Three Questions on the Historical-Critical Approach to Scripture.

• *How does our church authority feel about the Historical-Critical approach to the Bible?*

In 1943, Pope Pius XII, in a well-known letter on the Scriptures, gave the green light to Catholic scholars to utilize the modern means of research to help them search out and better understand the *intended meaning* of Scripture passages. In his letter the Pope stated:

Let the interpreter... with all care and without neglecting any light derived from recent research, endeavor to determine the peculiar character and circumstances of the sacred writer, the age in which he lived, the sources, oral and written, he had recourse to, and the forms of expression he employed.

Our bishops assembled for Vatican Council II (1962-66) reiterated Pius XII's endorsement of the scientific methods of doing biblical research. (See their document on *Divine Revelation*, Article 12.)

When approaching the Bible, we need to be aware that there are two basic approaches to the Scriptures. Both approaches are very different and usually there is very little room for dialogue between the students of the Literalist or Fundamentalist approach and students of the Historical-Critical approach. Both bring to their study of Scripture a very different set of assumptions.

• *How can we trust what Scripture scholars tell us? Can they get out of line and undermine our faith in God's holy Word?*

Recognized Scripture scholars are men and women who have dedicated their lives to the study of God's holy Word. Invariably, they are people of prayer, faith, and, in our tradition, people who will submit to the church's ruling on their findings.

Can they ‘get out of line’ and, for example, undermine the historicity of certain events in Scripture? It's possible. In the Catholic Church there is an official teaching office, the *Magisterium* (from the Latin word *magister* = teacher). This official teaching office encourages sound scholarship in all areas of the church's life. But it also monitors such research to make sure that the faithful are not led into error. Faith-filled theologians usually do not have a problem submitting their viewpoints to our church's highest teaching authority. One theologian whose writings were censured by the *Magisterium* said, when asked how he felt about Rome's

action, that he 'would prefer to walk with the mind of the church rather than to walk alone with his own theology'. It should also be noted that our church's official teaching office rarely interferes in the research of theologians. Also, she rarely, if ever, comes out and states that *this and only this* is the meaning of a particular text from Scripture. In her wisdom Mother Church knows that the Holy Scriptures, like their Divine Author, are inexhaustible and contain infinite riches.

The Holy Spirit, true to the promise of Jesus, leads each generation to an ever deeper understanding of God's holy Word (John 16:12-13). The church's *Magisterium* wishes to facilitate and not hinder this ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

- *Does one need to be a Scripture scholar to understand and appreciate the Bible?*

Of course not, just as one does not have to be an expert in musical composition to enjoy music, neither does one have to be a Scripture scholar to receive spiritual nourishment from our reading of Scripture. Yet just as courses in musical composition and appreciation would enhance our appreciation of music, so would courses in Scripture enhance our appreciation of God's Word. It is wise to have close at hand sound commentaries that will enhance our understanding of the various books of the Bible.

A Bible and Tradition Church

When Jesus walked in our midst, he taught the people of his time a new way of living life in relationship to God and one another. Before he returned to his Father, he told his Apostles, "Make disciples of all the nations...and teach them to carry out all I have commanded you." Also Jesus promised to be always with his Apostles and their successors in their work of preserving and transmitting the message and vision of life he had entrusted to them. (Matthew 28:19-20). Most, if not all, Protestants believe that the message of Jesus is preserved and transmitted in the Bible *alone*. A favorite slogan of Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, was "*sola scriptura*" (Scripture alone). He looked to the Bible *alone* as the source of Divine Revelation.

On the other hand, Catholics look to the Bible *and* Tradition as the source of Divine Revelation. The Vatican Council II *Document on Divine Revelation*, Article 7, states:

Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture are like a mirror in which the pilgrim church on earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything.

The word "tradition" is derived from the Latin "traditio," meaning "what is handed on." In Catholic theology, Sacred Tradition refers to the process by which God's revelation of himself to us is handed on from one generation to another. Sacred Tradition also refers to the *context* in which the Bible was written, lived, interpreted and transmitted down through the ages. Tradition is not something dead. Rather it is living, dynamic and ongoing. We especially see this when we understand that Tradition is the ongoing way that the church interprets, lives and applies the Word of God to a wide variety of pastoral situations.

Sacred Tradition, Oral and Written

Sacred Tradition is both *oral* and *written*. During the first decades of Christianity, the vision and message of Jesus was kept intact and transmitted by *oral* tradition; i.e., by the preaching of the Apostles, the celebration of the liturgy, and, of course, in the hearts of the people as they tried to live Jesus' vision of life. It was four decades after the death of Jesus before the oral Gospel started to take on a *written form*. Mark's Gospel was written around 70 A.D. It was about 125 A.D. before all 27 books and letters of the New Testament were written. And it was 397 A.D. before a church council decided which writings authentically captured the vision and message of Jesus and also served to nurture the faith life of the first generations of Christians. It seems that sometimes "Bible-only Christians" are either unaware of or they conveniently forget that during those early centuries of Christianity, Christians couldn't "quote the Bible" or say, "I only believe what's in the Bible," since the Bible was still being written. And after it was written, it was available to very few people.

So during those early centuries of Christianity where did Christians look when they had questions about what was authentic belief? They looked to their local church and especially to their church leaders. Therefore, when Catholics today continue to look to their church, more than to the Bible, for what to believe, they are not doing anything that the early Christians didn't do. Needless to say, the church's guidance for her people is firmly rooted in the Scriptures.

While the Israelites, like most ancient peoples, preferred an *oral* tradition (it was more dynamic) to a written one, a *written* form of the vision and message of Jesus did emerge. As the first generations of Christians started to die, it was especially important to have a *written form* of the Gospel.

While the written account of Jesus' vision and message became central to the life of the church, it was never meant to *replace* the oral tradition. Rather, it was meant to complement it. When the church recognized the 27

books of the New Testament as the inspired Word of God, she never intended to say to her contemporaries and future generations, "You must *only* believe what is explicitly stated within the pages of these books." It seems St. John realized that no book, or set of books, could fully capture within its pages the total vision and message of Jesus. He concluded his Gospel with these words:

There are still many other things, which Jesus did, yet if they were written down in detail, I doubt there would be room enough in the entire world to hold the books to record them. John 21:25

The Primacy and Centrality of Sacred Scripture

While the Catholic Church is not a "Bible only" church, when it comes to God's revelation, she does recognize the absolute centrality and importance of the written Word of God to her life and mission. In fact, anything in our tradition, which contradicts Scripture is regarded as false. The Catholic Church realizes that she must always purify her traditions to make sure that they reflect the true spirit of Sacred Tradition. On the other hand, the Catholic Church can and does accept beliefs that are *not explicitly* stated in Scripture but which are in *harmony* with the spirit of Scripture.

So Catholics look to Scripture *and* Tradition as the source of their beliefs and practices. As I have said, we are not a "*Bible only church*;" rather, we are a "*Bible and Tradition church*." Sometimes you will hear people say, "I don't believe such and such [e.g., the practice of infant baptism] because it's 'not scriptural.'" Protestants believe something is "not scriptural" if it is not stated *explicitly* in the Bible. Catholics, on the other hand, believe something is "not scriptural" only if it is *out of harmony* with what is taught in the Bible. So the fact that the practice of infant baptism is not stated in the Bible is not a problem for us. The Bible does not forbid infant baptism. It is an ancient practice in our church that doesn't *contradict* biblical teaching.

Similarly, Catholics have certain beliefs that are not stated explicitly in the Bible; e.g., beliefs about the seven sacraments, the papacy, Mary, or purgatory. Catholics hold that these beliefs are either hinted at or implied in Scripture or they have evolved over the centuries as a result of the church's ongoing meditation on Scriptures. These beliefs must, of course, be in harmony with the spirit of the Bible, and the church must believe that such beliefs are a part of the message of the Gospel (oral, if not written).

Reading the Bible within the Church

If you take an album of my family, look at the pictures and read accounts of the events that make up my

family's story, you will no doubt catch a glimpse of our history. But if you look through that album with members of my family, your understanding and appreciation of our story will be greatly enhanced and at times clarified. As you move through the album, their comments will greatly enhance your understanding and appreciation of my story. Looking through the album *alone* and in isolation from members of my family, you will not only not fully understand and appreciate my family's story, but you may easily misunderstand and misinterpret parts of it. On the other hand, the more you immerse yourself in my family's story, its traditions, beliefs and manner of speech, the less you will need others to help you understand and appreciate it. In fact, as time goes on, you will be so steeped in our story that you will be able to take on the role of teacher and help other interested people to understand and appreciate my family's story.

So it is with each of us and the Bible, which is the family book of God's people. It is full of pictures (e.g., parables) and stories of God's relationship with his people and how they responded or failed to respond to his invitation to enter into a loving relationship with him and with each other. When you first pick up that album (i.e., the Bible), you will need help from others who have immersed themselves in our Catholic Christian story. They are the people who can best help us to understand and appreciate that story, especially the parts of our story that may be difficult for us to understand; e.g., how does our all-loving God allow bad things to happen to good people? Also, good teachers will keep us from misunderstanding our story and reading it out of context.

We have now seen the special role of the church's Magisterium and Sacred Tradition when it comes to the Bible and God's revelation. As Catholics, when it comes to discovering God's revelation, we look not only to the Bible but also to Sacred Tradition and the church's Magisterium. All three work hand-in-hand as the Vatican Council *Document on Divine Revelation* testifies:

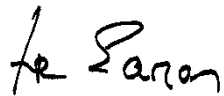
Sacred tradition, sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the church, in accord with God's most wise designs, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls (Article 10).

Book: A Catholic Guide to the Bible

The above named book by Fr. Oscar Lukefahr (Liguori Publication) is an excellent guide to the Bible for

beginners and most of us are beginners when it comes to the Bible. The first three chapters give us general information that will be helpful as we read the Bible. The following eight chapters do an excellent job of introducing us to *each* of the 72 books of the Old and New Testament. *A Catholic Guide to the Bible* will give the reader an excellent 'big picture' or overview of the Bible. From there one can begin to study in more detail individual books of the Bible. This \$8 book is available at the Parish office or in church for \$5. Consider getting a copy for friends who love reading and studying the Bible who live elsewhere and may not know about this Catholic guide to the Bible.

Have a good week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.