

from Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. (2005) *How Do Catholics Read the Bible?* A Sheed & Ward book: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. ISBN: 978-0-7425-4871-8

The following twenty-five statements can serve as both a summary of the principal points in this book and an outline of **the distinctively Catholic approach to reading and interpreting the Bible**:

1. From the beginning the Bible and the church have existed in a circular or symbiotic relationship.
2. The Bible is best understood as the word of God in human language.
3. Catholics follow the larger Old Testament canon adopted by the early church, while Protestants and Jews limit their canonical Old Testament to the Hebrew Bible. [Note: *The O.T. adopted by the early church is from the Greek translation called the Septuagint. The Orthodox churches also use this source.*]
4. Catholics follow the traditional twenty-seven book canon of the New Testament along with other Christians.
5. The canonical writings serve as the rule or norm of faith and practice for Catholics, though they do not regard the Bible as the only source of divine revelation.
6. Catholics regard Scripture as the privileged witness to divine revelation and an occasion for divine revelation.
7. Catholics regard Scripture as written by human authors under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
8. Catholics regard Scripture as a trustworthy and inerrant guide on the road to salvation.
9. The kind of religious imagination nurtured by the Catholic tradition is especially helpful in entering into how the Bible communicates.
10. The Bible is available to Catholics in modern translations, accompanied by reliable introductions and notes.
11. Historical-critical analysis, properly understood and shorn of rationalist or positivist philosophical presuppositions, is the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of a biblical text.
12. Catholics read the Old Testament for its wise teachings about God and human existence, and as preparation for and a witness to Jesus Christ.
13. Catholics view the Gospels as the product of a complex process of tradition from Jesus through the early church to the Evangelists, while providing an honest and true account of Jesus Christ.
14. Although the Gospels are not anti-Jewish in themselves, they are potentially anti-Jewish when taken out of their historical context.
15. In telling the story of the origin and growth of the church, Acts and the Epistles offer advice, consolation, and challenge to Christians in every age.
16. The Catholic reading of Scripture has been enriched by insights from philosophical hermeneutics about authors, texts, readers, and the effective history of texts.
17. The literal sense of Scripture is the meaning that has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors.
18. The spiritual sense of Scripture is the meaning that is expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ and of the new life that flows from it.
19. The fuller sense of Scripture is the deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human author.
20. Scripture and tradition flow from the same divine wellspring, and form a single deposit of the word of God which is entrusted to the church.

21. All Catholics should have easy access to Scripture, and all preaching and teaching in the Catholic Church should be nourished and ruled by Scripture.
22. Though the Magisterium is not above the word of God expressed in Scripture and tradition, it may on occasion serve as the final arbiter in resolving conflicts about biblical interpretation pertaining to faith and morals.
23. To actualize Scripture means to bring its meaning into the present time through theology, preaching, teaching, group Bible study, various artistic expressions, and so on.
24. Inculturation involves communicating the word of God in such a manner as to reach people in their own place and cultural context.
25. *Lectio divina* – with its steps of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation and/or action – is a simple and proven method for reading, interpreting, and praying on Scripture in the Catholic tradition.

### Modern Catholic Documentation

Pope Leo XIII's 1893 encyclical letter of the study of Scripture is known as *Providentissimus Deus* (The God of all Providence.) It makes many points that have become part of later official Catholic teaching about the Bible and its interpretation: the divine origin of the Scriptures, the positive value of the history of biblical interpretation, the inerrancy of Scripture, the primacy of the literal sense and the legitimacy of the spiritual sense, the contributions made by studying biblical and ancient Near Eastern languages and cultures, the need for well-trained biblical scholars, and the importance of the Bible in every phase of church life.

Pope Pius XII's 1943 encyclical letter promoting biblical studies is referred to as *Divino afflante Spiritu* (Inspired by the Divine Spirit) moved Catholic biblical scholarship forward by embracing the scientific methods being used by Catholics and other biblical scholars. It praises the achievements of archaeologists in illuminating the world of the Bible. It points to progress in the study of ancient languages, textual criticism, and philology. It emphasizes the importance of establishing the literal sense of biblical texts as the foundation for drawing out their spiritual senses. It insists on the need to determine "the peculiar character and circumstances of the sacred writer, the age in which he lived, the sources written and oral to which he had recourse, and the forms of expression he employed." It stresses the value of entering into "the mentality of ancient writers, as well as their manner and are of reasoning, narrating, and writing." In particular, it recommends that special attention be given to the study of the literary forms or "the modes of speaking writing in use among the ancients: as a way of understanding better the truth of the Bible.

This encyclical from Pope Pius XII set in motion full Catholic participation in modern biblical scholarship, while insisting on the Bible as the word of God and on biblical study as a

*The Pontifical Biblical Commission* is an international group of Catholic biblical scholars chosen by the Vatican to offer their learning and advice on matters pertaining to the Bible and its interpretation. In 1964 the Commission issued its "Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels" known as *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* (Holy Mother the Church.) It was occasioned by the confusion being caused by errant interpretations of the Gospels emanating from several different sources.

In response to these aberrations, the Commission insisted on the positive value of the scientific methods outlined in Pope Pius XII's encyclical. It also contended that to be understood properly the Gospels must be read

and interpreted at three levels or stages in the process of their transmission and composition: Jesus (A.D. 30), the earliest churches (30-70), and the Evangelists who put the Gospels into their final forms (70-100.) While assuming a basic continuity throughout the three stages, the document also indicates the distinctive contributions that were made at each level. It notes especially the many literary forms that the tradition about Jesus took in the early church and the constructive role played by the Gospel writers in integrating these traditions into their narratives and in responding to the pastoral needs of Christians in their own times.

The most synthetic and authoritative Catholic statement on the Bible and its interpretation comes from the Second Vatican Council held in Rome from 1962 to 1965. Among the many documents produced at Vatican II, one of the most important is the Dogmatic Constitution of Divine Revelations known as *Dei Verbum* (the Word of God). Any dogmatic constitution emanating from an ecumenical council is an official document enjoying the highest authority. This document went through several drafts. Indeed, the rejection of its first draft marked a decisive moment in the history of Vatican II. That first draft was rather traditional and defensive restatement of scholastic theology on divine revelation, more in tune with *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) than with *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943). Many of the council participants wished to move forward on the topic and to respond better to the needs of their time. The version of *Dei Verbum* that emerged from what was a long and often difficult editorial process remains the most authoritative source for learning what Catholics believe about the Bible.

*Dei Verbum* is important first of all for its insistence on the primacy of God's personal self-revelation: "It has pleased God in his goodness and wisdom to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will." Another significant development appears in the treatment of the relationship between Scripture and tradition, which has long been a topic of theological controversy between Catholics and Protestants. While holding firm in its defense of tradition as a source of divine revelation, the document emphasizes the close relationship between Scripture and tradition, and describes them as "flowing from the same divine wellspring."

*Dei Verbum* addresses the need to read and interpret Scripture "in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written." It also emphasizes the lasting value of the Old Testament books. While admitting that in some respects these books contain "what is only incomplete and provisional, nevertheless [they] demonstrate God's true way of instructing." *Dei Verbum* as part of a "pastoral" council is even more vigorous than the earlier documents in its insistence that all the faithful must have easy access to the Scriptures and that the Bible must play a central role in all areas of theology.

After Vatican II the *Pontifical Biblical Commission* underwent some changes in its mission and a restructuring. It now works on topics of special concern to the pope and to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It is an advisory or consultative body, and its documents do not have the official ecclesial authority that council documents and papal encyclicals have. In 1993 it offered *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* which was warmly received by Pope John II. The document deals with methods and approaches for interpretation, hermeneutical questions, characteristics of Catholic interpretation, and interpretation of the Bible in the life of the Church. It goes deeply into the process of biblical interpretation and offers balanced judgments on what constitutes biblical exegesis today. Along with *Dei Verbum*, it provides the most up-to-date and comprehensive source for learning about how Catholics read the Bible today.

Source: Harrington, Daniel J. *How Do Catholics Read the Bible?* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.

## Bible Study Glossary

**biblical theology** – the study of religious concepts or themes found in individual biblical texts, whole books of the Bible, or the Bible as a whole.

**canon** – list of sacred writings whose content provides the rules or norms for Christian faith and practice

**canonization** – the process by which the books of the Bible were recognized officially as providing the rules or norms for Christian faith and practice.

**Christology** – the study of how the person, titles, and significance of Jesus have been and are now understood.

**Dead Sea Scrolls** – the ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts discovered at sites near the Dead Sea in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

**dynamic equivalence** – the translation philosophy that is concerned with conveying the sense or meaning of biblical texts without being excessively constrained by their original wording and syntax.

**Essenes** – a Jewish religious movement active in Israel from the second century B.C. to A.D. 70, which is generally regarded as the groups behind the Qumran settlement where many of the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.

**exegesis** – a careful analysis of biblical text in order to arrive at the literal sense of Scripture. This approach makes use of all the resources of literary and historical research, with a view to defining the literal sense of the biblical texts with great possible accuracy. To this end, the study of ancient literary genres is particularly necessary.

**exegete** – one who explains and interprets biblical texts, with attention to their literary, historical, and theological meaning.

**formal equivalence** – the translation philosophy that seeks to reflect the wording and syntax of biblical texts insofar as this is possible within the limits of proper English.

**fundamentalism** – the approach to approaching the Bible that stresses its inerrancy in matters not only of faith and morals but also of history and science.

**gnostic** – derived from the Greek word “to know,” and referring to persons who claim to have esoteric knowledge about God, the world, and the human condition.

**hermeneutical** – pertaining to the interpretation of the meaning of texts and their significance for people today.

**historical-critical method** – the way of investigating biblical texts that attends especially to their original historical settings and that they meant in those contexts.

**inculturation** – the process of communicating the word of God in such a manner as to reach people in their own cultural contexts.

**inerrancy** – the understanding of Scripture as conveying without error the truth that God wished to be recorded for the sake of our salvation

**Inspiration** – the understanding of Scripture as written down under the guidance of the Holy Spirit

**Kingdom of God** – God’s reign or rule over creation, which is to be fully revealed and acknowledged at the general resurrection and last judgment.

**Lectio divina** – a method for reading and praying on Scripture, consisting of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation and/or action.

**Lectionary** – a book or list of Scripture readings to be used at liturgical services.

**Literal sense\*** – the meaning of Scripture expressed directly by the inspired human authors.

\*the literal sense is not to be confused with the “literalist” sense to which fundamentalists are attached. It is not sufficient to translate a text word for word in order to obtain its literal sense. One must understand the text according to the literary conventions of the time. When a text is metaphorical, its literal sense is not that which flows immediately from a word to word translation (e.g., “Let your loins be girt”: *Luke 12:35*), but that which corresponds to the metaphorical use of these terms (“Be ready for action”) When it is a question of story, the literal sense does not necessarily imply belief that the facts recounted actually took place, for a story need not belong to the genre of history but be instead a work of imaginative fiction. The literal sense of Scripture is that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors. Since it is the fruit of inspiration, this sense is also intended by God, as principal author.

**Magisterium** – the official teaching office of the Roman Catholic Church consisting of the body of bishops headed by the pope as the bishop of Rome

**New Testament** – the second part of the Christian Bible, consisting of the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles, and Revelation.

**Old Testament** – the first part of the Christian Bible, consisting of the Pentateuch, the Historical Books, the Prophets, and the Wisdom Writings.

**Paschal mystery** – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and their significance for human salvation.

**patriarchal** – pertaining to family and social structures where the real power and authority are assumed to reside in the husband or father or other males.

**Patristic** – pertaining to the Church Fathers and their writings, from the second to the seventh century A.D.

**Pontifical Biblical Commission** – the team of about twenty Catholic biblical scholars from all over the world charged with advising the pope and other Catholic Church officials on biblical matters.

**postexilic** – the period in Jewish history after the exile of its political and religious leaders to Babylon in the early sixth century B.C.

**Q (Sayings Source)** – the (hypothetical) collection of Jesus’ sayings used independently by Matthew and Luke in addition to Mark’s Gospel.

**rabbinic** – pertaining to Jewish teachers and their teachings from the second to the seventh centuries A.D., preserved in the Mishnah, the Talmuds, and the Midrashim.

**revelation** – the understanding of the Bible as a witness to God’s self-communication and to the decrees of God’s will.

**Sensus plenior** – the “fuller sense” or deeper meaning of biblical texts, intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human authors.

**Septuagint** – the oldest Greek version of the Old Testament, traditionally said to have been produced by seventy or seventy-two Jewish scholars at the request of the Egyptian ruler Ptolemy II in the third century B.C.

**Soteriology** – the study of salvation (*soteria* in Greek) with special reference to the effects and significance of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection for humans.

**spiritual sense** – the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read under the influence of the Holy Spirit in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and the new life that flows from it.

**Synoptic gospels** – refers to the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark and Luke; “taking a similar view”; from the similarity in these Gospels in content, order and statement.

**Tradition** – every resource that helps God’s people to live in holiness and to grow in faith, as this is handed on not only in Scripture but also in creeds, liturgy, conciliar and papal definitions and decrees, and so on.

**Trent** – the place in Italy where an ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church met between 1545 and 1563 to define church doctrines and to combat the Protestant Reformation.

from John J. Pilch. *Choosing a Bible Translation*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000.

In general, there are two kinds of Bible translations: a **word-for-word (literal, or formal correspondence) translation** and a **meaning-for-meaning (literary, or dynamic equivalence) translation**.

**Word-for-Word (literal, formal correspondence) Translations:**

**The Revised Standard Version (RSV)**

- Most often recommended for study purposes
- Very faithful to the original biblical languages
- Has a certain adherence to tradition “Bible English.”