

# How to Read the Bible? – Catholic Approaches to Biblical Interpretation

## The Challenge of (Protestant) “Fundamentalism”

- Five “Fundamentals” of Christian Doctrine (from the “Fundamentalist Congress” of the 1890’s)
  1. **Inerrancy of the Bible** (interpreted *literalistically*)
  2. Virgin birth & deity of Jesus
  3. Substitutionary atonement (Jesus’ death)
  4. Bodily resurrection of Jesus
  5. Imminent return of Jesus
- Popular Appeal of Fundamentalism
  - Offers *simplicistic* answers to complex questions; people crave *certainty*, don’t like complexity or ambiguity

## Five Principles of Catholic Biblical Interpretation

1. **“Both/And” Approach** (vs. one-sided over-emphases of any type)
  - The Bible is *both* the Word of God (divine inspiration) *and* written by human authors (language limitations)
  - The Bible contains *both* Old *and* New Testaments; we *both* study it academically *and* read it prayerfully
  - Catholics interpret the Bible *both* literally *and* spiritually (christologically, morally, anagogically)
  - *Caution:* We read the Bible *literally* (as “literature”), but not *literalistically* (as if it were mere “facts”)
2. **Incarnational Principle** (vs. bibliolatry, over-emphasis on the Bible as text)
  - The Word of God is not just a book, but primarily **JESUS**, the Pinnacle of God’s Self-Revelation
    - “God sent his only begotten *Son...*” (John 3:16), *not* “...his only begotten book!”
  - Incarnation: “The Word became Flesh...” (John 1:14) → Jesus is *both* Son of God *and* Son of Mary
    - Word of God (when God *speaks*, things happen; cf. Gen 1)
    - Word made Flesh (God speaks to us in *human* languages, despite their *limitations*)
3. **Ecclesial Guidance** (vs. individualistic misinterpretations)
  - Jesus, Spirit, Disciples, Church: all came *before* the Bible was completed and compiled!
    - The Church (guided by the Holy Spirit) created the Bible, *not* vice-versa!
  - The community helps us understand the text (Homilies, Commentaries, Bible Study, Scripture Sharing)
    - One’s personal/individual interpretation should not conflict with long-standing Church Tradition
    - Our Popes and Bishops are the guarantors of this Tradition (assisted by theologians and biblical scholars)
4. **Literary Genres** (vs. modernist/historicist assumptions)
  - “GENRE” = category/type of literature (*art, music, etc.*) characterized by a particular form, style, or content. Some publications contain multiple genres:
    - Ex: **newspapers** have news, editorials, comics, sports results, financial reports, ads, obits, etc.
  - Similarly, the **Bible** is not just one “book,” but a whole “library,” containing many *different* literary genres:

### Hebrew Bible Genres:

- **Myths & Legends** (Gen, parts of Exod, Num, Deut)
- **Legal Codes** (Lev, parts of Exod, Numb, Deut)
- **Genealogies** (parts of Genesis, much of Numbers)
- **Annals** (Josh, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, etc.)
- **Prophetic Books** (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc.)
- **Psalms/Odes/Songs** (Psalms); **Prayers/Laments** (Lam)
- **Proverbs** (Proverbs); **Wisdom Literature** (Job, Wisdom, etc.)
- **Apocalypse** (Daniel)

### New Testament Genres:

- **Gospels** (Mark, Matthew, Luke, John)
- **Acts** (Acts of the Apostles)
- **Letters** (esp. Paul’s); **Epistles** (1 & 2 Peter)
- **Sermon** (Hebrews); **Wisdom Collection** (James)
- **Church Orders** (1 Timothy, Titus)
- **Testaments** (2 Timothy & 2 Peter)
- **Apocalypse** (Revelation to John)
- many more sub-genres, esp. in the Gospels

5. **Historical-Critical Exegesis** (vs. fundamentalist/literalist fallacies)
  - Foundation of **Ex-egesis** = “leading out” (drawing the intended meaning *out of* the text)
    - Contrast to *eis-egesis* = “leading into” (reading your own opinions *into* the text)
    - Catholics accept *many different methods* of exegesis: historical, literary, sociological, canonical, etc.
  - Multiple levels of **Content**:
    - Literal/Historical Content (*original meaning*) *and* Spiritual/Theological Content (*enduring meaning*)
  - Essential Role of **Context**:
    - Literary/Canonical Context (surrounding *texts*) *and* Cultural/Historical Context (surrounding *world*)
  - Consideration of **Historical Development**:
    - From *oral* preaching/tradition to *written* texts/scriptures; growth in understanding/application over time

## Official Church Documents explaining Catholic Bible Interpretation

- Pope Pius XII: Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943)
- **Second Vatican Council**: “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation”: **Dei Verbum** (1965)
- Pontifical Biblical Commission: “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (1993)
- **Catechism of the Catholic Church**: Part One, Section One, Chapter Two - §§51-141 (1994, 1997)

## How to Read the Bible? – Plans for Choosing Which Texts to Read

### Canonical Approach:

- Reading the whole Bible *from beginning to end* (from the Book of *Genesis* to the Book of *Revelation*).
  - Reading thirty or more minutes each day, or one or more chapters each day, throughout the year.
- Various plans for reading the whole Bible in one or more years are available in print or online.
  - *Daily Scripture and Catechism Devotional* – 1-year plan, by the “Coming Home Network”
  - *How to Read the Bible Every Day: A Guide for Catholics* – 1-year, 2-year, 3-year plans; by Carmen Rojas
- This is probably *not* the best method, especially not for beginners, since the Old Testament (OT) is so long and many parts of it are quite difficult; you might give up long before you even get to the New Testament (NT).

### Christo-centric Approach:

- Reading the Bible one book at a time, but focusing on Jesus and seeing the relation of all the books to Jesus.
  - Begin with one of the Gospels, for the basic story about Jesus (start with Mark, the oldest & shortest Gospel).
  - Then read some NT letters, followed by another Gospel; then the Acts of the Apostles, and more NT letters; then also some OT books, to learn about the history, culture, and theology of the Jewish people.
- You may want to read OT or NT books around the time when they occur in the *Lectionary for Mass* (see below).
- There are many good commentaries on each book or section of the Bible, to help guide your study and reflection:
  - *Collegetown Bible Commentary* and *New Collegetown Bible Commentary* series – by The Liturgical Press.
  - *Little Rock Scripture Study* – by the Diocese of Little Rock, Arkansas, and The Liturgical Press.
  - *Six Weeks with the Bible: Catholic Perspectives* – by Loyola Press.
  - *Paulist Bible Study Program* – by Paulist Press.

### Thematic/Theological Approach:

- Reading portions of the Bible that are related to some theological, ethical, spiritual, liturgical, or other theme.
  - For example, reading texts related to Jesus’ resurrection, or to an issue of social justice, or to Mary, etc.
- Various booklets and guides for finding biblical texts related to certain themes are available in print or online.
  - *Threshold Bible Study* – thematic studies presented in short workbooks; from Twenty-third Publications.
  - *Scripture from Scratch* – short flyers appropriate as bulletin inserts; from St. Anthony Messenger Press.
  - *Interfaces* – a new series of short commentaries on certain biblical characters; from The Liturgical Press.

### Liturgical/Lectionary Approach:

- Reading the short biblical selections that are used for daily and/or Sunday Mass, as found in the Lectionary.
  - Several Catholic publishers put out monthly booklets with the liturgical readings, along with commentaries, prayers, and/or study aides: *God’s Word Today*; *Living with Christ*; *Magnificat*; *The Word Among Us*; etc.
  - Readings for Mass are available on the US Catholic Bishops’ website: <http://www.usccb.org/nab/>
  - See also the *Lectionary for Mass* section of my website: <http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary>.

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## Reading the Scriptures *Prayerfully*: A Brief Introduction to *Lectio Divina*:

### Overview:

- *Lectio Divina* is a “Vital Encounter with the Lord,” not just “Bible Study”
  - It is meant to be enlivening, existential, transformative, and uniting for individuals and communities.
- *Lectio Divina* is not just for monks and religious, but for all believers:
  - **Individuals:** use and adapt *Lectio Divina* flexibly to one’s own needs and personal prayer style.
  - **Groups:** provide a regular pattern of scriptural prayer to build openness and trust in a community.
- “The Church in America should give high priority to prayerful reflection upon the Sacred Scripture by all the faithful. This Bible reading, accompanied by prayer, is known in the tradition of the Church by the name *Lectio Divina*, a practice that should be encouraged among all Christians.” (John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 1999, p. 31)

### *Lectio Divina* Process: (flexibly adapt the following steps, as needed, for individuals and groups)

1. **Reading** (*lectio*) – hearing God’s Word in the Bible as I/we read it aloud
  - What does the biblical text say?
2. **Meditation** (*meditatio*) – reflecting on the meaning of the text that I/we have read
  - What is God saying to me/us through this text?
3. **Prayer** (*oratio*) – speaking with God in praise, thanksgiving, contrition, and petition
  - What do I/we say to God in response to this text?
4. **Contemplation** (*contemplatio*) – listening to God more quietly in the silence of our hearts
  - How does this text make me/us feel in my/our relationship with God?
5. **Action** (*actio*) – letting the encounter concretely affect our daily life and work in the world
  - How will I/we change what I/we do today in response to hearing this text?