

Catholics. Disciples. Missionaries - Revelation

By: Fr. Frank DeSiano, CSP

Revelation, the process by which God communicates with humankind, is one. It begins with creation itself, for nature speaks of God's love and life.

It expands with the emergence of religion, and takes on particular force with the revelation made through the Jewish people which began 3,500 years ago. This Jewish revelation was brought to completion with the revelation that was Jesus Christ, God's definitive Word spoken to humankind.

The Jewish Scriptures contain a record of God's revelation through Jewish history; the Christian Scriptures contain a record of Jesus' revelation to his first followers, through the Holy Spirit. Together, these compose the Christian and Catholic Bible.



These are simple concepts, but they are still hard for Catholics to absorb; they still remain quite uncomfortable with their bibles. Ask a Catholic to look up a passage; one usually receives a look of dread and confusion. "Where do I find that in the Bible?" they will ask. "Is it in the Old Testament or the New Testament?" It's not hard to make Catholics feel lost when it comes to the Bible. A friend of mine has spent a long time searching for a community of faith. He has gone to many different churches, with many different approaches to the Bible. Although he knows the Bible with a thoroughness that would make most other Christians blush, he nevertheless loves to tell the joke about the

man who was looking for guidance in life. So he decides he will open his bible and follow whatever the first sentence he sees will tell him. He flips through the Bible and finds the phrase: "Judas went out and hanged himself." Puzzled, he tries again, flipping through the pages. Now the chosen phrase reads: "Do and do likewise." Confused even further, he tries again. This time he reads: "Do what you will do quickly." My friend uses this humorous story to emphasize what he has come to realize: that the Bible is not to be read as history, science, personal therapist, or a magic book. Rather, we read the Bible as a collection of writings, over a long period of time, which illuminate God's relationship with us, our relationship with God, and our relationship with each other as a result of God's love for us.

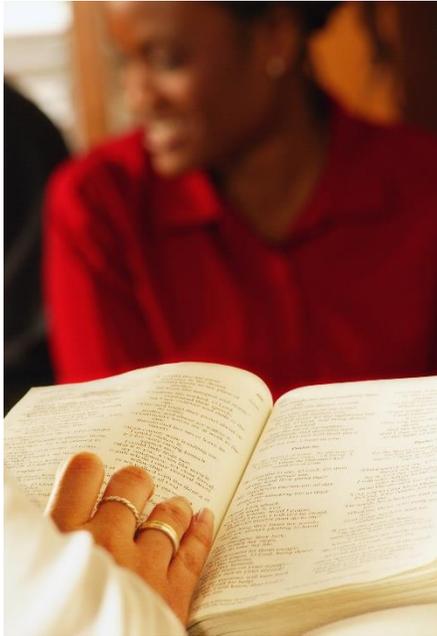
Indeed, the Bible can be intimidating because, in addition to its thousand-plus pages, it contains so many references that seem obscure, difficult, or even contradictory. In the last several centuries, we have learned to read the Bible in its context—how it was shaped through history—better than at any other time in Christian history. Advances in language and archeological studies have aided this development. So modern bibles often contain notes that help the reader understand the context. Nevertheless, the most important perspective for interpreting the Bible remains this: how it sheds light on God's love for us, and our corresponding love for God. Although Catholics seem reluctant when it comes to the Bible, they know and absorb much more of it than they realize. Another friend of mine lectures widely on this theme. She points out that, for Catholics who go to Mass regularly, the main parts of the Bible have been read every three years. We've been doing this since 1970—so that means we've heard these passages more than fifteen times. My friend asserts that you can ask almost any active Catholic about a passage in the Bible, and you will get a thoughtful response about the passage, its spirituality, and what it has come to mean in someone's life. This is particularly true when it comes to the New Testament, but it also extends to key passages in the Old Testament.

The Bible, then, deepens and develops the relationship that we have with God—giving us the language, feelings, opportunities, and possible failures in terms of how we accept this offer of love from God. Revelation brings depth, nuance, power, and drama to our relationship with God. It gives us the words and the confidence we need to address the Mystery of Love that is behind us, beyond us, beneath us, and before us. It can cause ecstasy, when we are drawn outside ourselves; and also brings that quiet stillness which abides deep within us.

How do we Catholics, missionaries, grow using the Bible? How do we keep from being overwhelmed by it?

We realize that the Bible has two chronological, and religious, steps: what God did with the Jewish people, and what God did in and through Jesus and his followers. These parts are called the Old Testament (for the Jewish Scriptures) and the New Testament (for the Christian Scriptures). However, it is important not to separate these steps in God's action: as St. Paul says, God's covenants are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29). What God began with the Jewish people he completed in Jesus. Jesus' frame of reference was the Old Testament. There is a continuity in the one loving act of revelation, and salvation, from God.

Looking at a Bible, you can see the Old Testament is much larger than the New Testament. The Jewish Scriptures encompass almost two-thousand years of experience, from the time of Abraham to the time of Jesus. The New Testament encompasses about one-hundred years of experience, from the time of Jesus to the end of the age of the Apostles.



How do we approach the Bible? With two realizations.

The first one calls us to realize the Bible is unlike any other book we will read. It was not written by a single human who had information to communicate. It was, rather, inspired by God through the history, experience, songs, culture, and language of the Jewish people. God is the author, but God uses many "pens," so to speak: story, genealogy, poetry, records, and styles—composed over a thousand years—to communicate God's relationship with humankind in and through the Jewish experience. As we will see in our next section, one way to focus this complex of writings is to think of Mount Sinai, where God was revealed to Moses and the notion of covenant began.

We also realize that the New Testament also contains different kinds of writing from different perspectives, but it all centers on Jesus Christ. If we can think of Mount Sinai in the Jewish context, we can think of Mt. Calvary—where Jesus was crucified—as the central figure in Christian experience. This helps us not to approach the Bible as if it were a newspaper or historical book. We see the Bible as a collection of books that collect many different kinds of writing—but all of it to advance revelation:

God's relationship with humankind.

The second realization involves our appreciating how the Bible operates at various levels in Catholic experiences. The General Directory for Catechesis (1997) taught us about the various ways the Word of God operates in our Christian lives. It talked about five dimensions of the Word: (1) call; (2) initiation; (3) ongoing education; (4) liturgy; and (5) theology (cf. #51). This is a way for us, as disciples, to structure our own relationship to the Bible.

We can use these five elements to expand the various ways we can approach the Scriptures.

1. The Bible is always calling us to conversion. As we read the various passages, we constantly ask ourselves how the Scriptures are inviting us to yet deeper change and fuller acceptance of God's Word in our lives. Our conversion, our evangelization, is never completed.
2. The Bible is always tying us more completely to Christ and his people, the Church. As we are called, we continue our progress in following Christ by studying his words, absorbing the social and moral implications of his teaching, and praying for continued growth.
3. The Bible calls us to expanded understanding of ourselves, and our world, in relationship to God. If our conversion is never complete, neither is our education. The Bible demands study in itself, as we continue to absorb God's Word and the context in which it came. But the Bible demands study of all human experience with reference to God's abiding love. All of history, social interaction, science, psychology, and art can somehow be related to the Bible. The perspective of God's love for humankind comes to illuminate all the truths other than what we have come to learn.

4. The Bible leads us to prayer. Prayer, as we will later see, opens us to the dimensions of God that are all around us, bringing us into intimate communication with God. It also brings believers together, to strengthen our relationship with God by our sharing with others, especially in the great worship of God in the Eucharist. Every time we read from the Bible, we need to let those words lead us into quiet prayer, or expressive prayer, because once we have seen how God touches our lives, we want to respond as fully as we can with our own love and thanksgiving.

5. The Bible, finally, calls us to study God, and God's relation to all of creation, and all of human experience. The fancy word for this is theology; while some people become experts in theology, most of us will just try to do what St. Anselm spoke about: faith seeking understanding. As questions arise, as issues puzzle us, as one idea nudges another, we pursue our reflection, thinking, study, and conversation to come to a better grasp of the wonder of God. In some way, all of us do this whenever we hear or read from the Bible. The Word of God encourages this growth in knowledge.

What advice can we give each other about the Bible? Don't be afraid!

We approach the Bible together. Many of us hear the Scripture, study it, and proclaim it; we are one in doing this. We all can open our Bibles, get the big picture, find the important and favorite passages; and then let these seep into our hearts.

Begin with a little, and let it take you further and further.

Exercise

Open a bible to the beginning of the Gospel of John. Slowly read the opening verses and let them resonate in your heart. Take at least 5 minutes for this.

Reflect on the Word that always is, and that always is God, and always is with God.

Reflect on the Word creating you, those you love, your life, and your world.

Embrace the Word becoming flesh.

Pray a spontaneous prayer to Jesus as God's Word in our midst.