

Chapter 2

Why Read the Bible?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that the Church “forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful . . . to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Philippians 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures”¹ (133). But why is it important to be a frequent reader of the Bible? The answer to this question must take into account the divine nature of the Bible. The Bible is not just any book; it is unique among all books. So to answer the question, “Why read the Bible?” we must also answer the question, “What is the Bible?” We have several ways of describing the Bible’s uniqueness, and each description gives us some insight into why it is important to read its pages.

The Word of God

We often call the Bible the Word of God. But the Word of God is not limited to Sacred Scripture. In Pope Benedict XVI’s apostolic exhortation *The Word of the Lord* (*Verbum Domini*), he describes the Word of God as a divine symphony, “a single word expressed in multiple ways” (7). We hear God’s Word through the wonder and majesty of creation, we hear it through human reason and conscience, we hear it through the prophets of the Old Testament, we hear it through the teaching of the Apostles and their successors, and we hear it through the words of Scripture. And what is the single word expressed through these multiple voices? It is Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the full manifestation of the Word of God (see John 1:1–14). Jesus said at the Last Supper, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (verse 9). We can only know the fullness of God’s love and his saving plan by coming to know Jesus Christ. So one important reason for reading the Bible is because it helps us get to know Jesus. “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ” (Saint Jerome).

One Mode of Divine Revelation

We also describe the Bible as one of the privileged modes of Divine Revelation. Christ charged the Apostles to “go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20). Through

Hands-on Activity

Closing Prayer

Within this simple structure, which follows the PREP formula, you will be offering your students the riches of Scripture that meet their needs for preparation, reading, education, and practice in Christian living.

the power of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles taught others the fullness of the divine truth that had been revealed to them, both orally and in writing. Today, through the popes and the bishops of the Church, this truth is passed on to us in two modes: Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture.

Because of this, we have confidence that through the words of Scripture God reveals himself to us in a unique and special way. This Revelation is not abstract or theoretical. When we read the Bible in faith, God touches our minds and our hearts. When we approach the words of Scripture prayerfully, the Holy Spirit gives us an intimate connection with our loving Creator. So another important reason for reading the Bible is because it leads to intimate communion with God.

Divinely Inspired

Finally, we believe the Bible is divinely inspired. This means that ultimately God is the author of the Bible. The human authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit to put down in words the truth God wished to reveal for the sake of our salvation—that is, so that we might be restored to full communion with him. Most Christians understand this dimension of divine inspiration, but there is another dimension to divine inspiration that is frequently overlooked. The same Holy Spirit that inspired the original authors of the Bible's books also works within us when we read their words. Saint Jerome tells us, “We cannot come to an understanding of Scripture without the assistance of the Holy Spirit who inspired it” (*Verbum Domini*, 16).

So another reason to read the Bible is to give the Holy Spirit a chance to work in our lives. When we read Scripture, the Holy Spirit comforts us in our difficulties, challenges us to grow in holiness, and calls us to become more perfect disciples of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. All the saints testify to this power of Scripture in their lives.

So why read the Bible? We do it in order to know Jesus Christ, to have an intimate relationship with God, and to allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives. These are three pretty good reasons for being a frequent Bible reader! A love for Scripture, expressed in frequent reading of God's Word, is the legacy we are privileged to hand on to our children.

Chapter 3

Biblical Literacy and the Teaching of Scripture

As a teacher or catechist of Catholic children, you know the power that Scripture has to touch children's hearts and inspire their moral and spiritual lives. To remind us to draw upon this power in catechesis, the Church's teaching documents always call us to make the Bible an integral part of our ministry:

Catechesis should take Sacred Scripture as its inspiration, its fundamental curriculum, and its end because it strengthens faith, nourishes the soul, and nurtures the spiritual life. (*National Directory for Catechesis*, p. 70)

Likewise, the holy synod forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful, especially those who live the religious life, to learn "the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine scriptures. (*Dei Verbum*, 25)

Through your catechetical ministry with children, you equip them with the essential knowledge and skills required for their lifelong journey of faith. When it comes to the Bible, you want to begin teaching the knowledge and skills that will help the children to ultimately become biblically literate adults. So let's start by describing biblically literate adults.

Biblically literate adults are comfortable in reading and using the Bible. They know how the books of the Bible are arranged and how to quickly and easily locate a specific book or passage. They have a solid understanding of the biblical story of salvation history. They are familiar with key people and events of salvation history and can tell how God's saving power worked through those people and events. These biblically literate adults understand that any book or passage from Scripture must be understood in its proper context. When reading the Bible, they consider things like the literary genre, the culture of the time, the original author's intended message, how the message fits into the bigger picture of salvation history, and how the passage is understood in the Church's Tradition.

We can help children to become such biblically literate adults by working on these three catechetical goals:

- A. Our ministry with children should help them to become knowledgeable and comfortable in using the Bible.

- B. Our ministry with children should help them to know and understand the biblical story of salvation history.
- C. Our ministry with children should help them to understand how to interpret Bible books and passages in their proper contexts.

Goal A is the **Access** goal. Goal B is the **Big Picture** goal. Goal C is the **Context** goal. Taken together, these can be called the ABCs of biblical literacy.

The ABCs of Biblical Literacy

The three goals of biblical literacy follow a certain progression. The **Access** goal is the most basic goal; its competencies create a foundation for working on the **Big Picture** and **Context** goals. The **Big Picture** builds on the **Access** competencies and creates greater knowledge that the **Context** competencies can build on. All three goals are closely related; working on any one goal usually reinforces the others.

As a general guideline, with elementary-age children, your primary focus should be on the **Access** competencies and introducing some **Big Picture** knowledge. You will probably not focus on the **Context** competencies because they require more abstract reasoning than most young children are capable of. However, you will use specific **Context** skills and knowledge competencies as you teach children about the meaning of specific Bible stories.

Let's take a closer look at these three goals and how you can help children to develop the competencies needed to become proficient in them. (For a more detailed look at these three goals, read *Biblical Literacy Made Easy: A Practical Guide for Catechists, Teachers, and Youth Ministers*, Saint Mary's Press, 2008.)

Implementing the Access Goal: Helping Children to Become Comfortable Using the Bible

Many children do not know how to use the Bible. They may have heard Bible stories, and maybe they were even given a Bible for their First Communion. But they do not know how the Bible is structured or how to find specific passages or stories within it. By focusing on the competencies of the **Access** goal, we can help the children we teach to become more familiar and comfortable with the Bible.

The most critical practice for achieving the **Access** goal—a practice so basic that many people overlook it—is simply having the children *use* the Bible. Too often children read Scripture passages as quotations in their textbooks. There may be only one Bible in the classroom, so the catechist looks up the passage and then hands the opened Bible to a young person to read. These practices do not encourage children to learn

basic biblical literacy skills. If young Catholics are to become comfortable in accessing the Bible, they must use it regularly in our programs. Every classroom or meeting space must have enough Bibles for each student to use. When a Scripture story is referred to in a textbook, we can then have all the children look it up and read it from the Bible. What we model as important has a much greater impact than what we say is important!

To help children become comfortable in using the Bible, we can teach them two important competencies.

Knowing the Bible's Structure The Bible is not one book; rather it is a collection, or even a small library, of books and letters. These books are organized in a specific and intentional structure, sort of like books might be grouped in sections on a bookshelf. At the beginning of *The Catholic Children's Bible*, these sections are briefly explained and visually presented in the section called "The Bible Is Like a Bookshelf." Here is a slightly more detailed explanation of those sections:

- **The Old Testament** is the first major section of the Bible. Its books are primarily about God's relationship with his Chosen People, the Israelites (or the Jews).
 - ◆ The first part of the Old Testament is called the **Pentateuch**. The stories in these books are the heart of the Old Testament.
 - ◆ The second part of the Old Testament is called the **Historical Books**. These books recount how the Chosen People settled in the Promised Land and how they eventually became a kingdom ruled by great and not-so-great kings.
 - ◆ The third part of the Old Testament is called the **Wisdom Books**. These books teach some of the collected wisdom of the Israelites.
 - ◆ The fourth part of the Old Testament is called the **Books of the Prophets**. These contain the warnings and consolations of some of Israel's prophets.
- **The New Testament** is the second major section of the Bible. Its books tell how God fulfilled the Old Testament promises by sending us the Savior, Jesus Christ.
 - ◆ The first part of the New Testament is the four **Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles**. The Gospels have the stories about Christ's life and teaching, and the Book of Acts tells us about how the Church spread after Christ's Ascension.
 - ◆ The second part of the New Testament is the Letters. Early Church leaders sent these letters, some to specific individuals and others to specific Christian communities.
 - ◆ The last book of the New Testament is the **Book of Revelation**. It is a unique collection of prophecies and symbolic visions.

Refer to these sections when the children look up passages in the Bible. Say things like, "This Bible story is from the Book of Exodus, which is in the Old Testament of

the Bible,” or “This Bible story is from the Gospel of Mark. The Gospels have stories about the life of Jesus and the things he taught.”

Locating a Passage in the Bible The system for finding a particular passage in the Bible is simple and explained in the beginning of *The Catholic Children's Bible* in the section called “How to Find a Bible Passage.” After explaining this system to the children, help them to develop the skill of locating Bible passages through practice, practice, practice! This skill will take time for children to master, but it is a crucial skill for lifelong Bible reading. You will find help in teaching navigation skills to children, including practice exercises, in chapter 5 of this guide, “Helping Children to Navigate the Saint Mary's Press® *Catholic Children's Bible*.”

Implementing the Big Picture Goal: Helping Children to Know and Understand the Biblical Story of Salvation History

Because of our lectionary-based liturgies, Catholics are often familiar with most of the important people and stories of history. But if liturgies are a person's only contact with Scripture, she or he may not see how those individual stories fit into the overarching biblical story of God's covenantal relationship with the human race, which we also call salvation history. Much of Catholic theology is based on the presumption that we know and understand the overarching story of salvation history.

Salvation history is often organized into different periods to help us understand God's saving work. In all Saint Mary's Press resources eight historical periods are named to describe the arc of salvation history: Primeval History (the figurative stories in the Book of Genesis), the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), Egypt and the Exodus (Moses and the desert experience of Israel), Settling the Promised Land (Joshua and the Twelve Tribes of Israel), the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel (the time of the Prophets), Exile and Return (the Babylonian Captivity and restoration of the Temple), Life of Jesus Christ, and the Early Christian Church.

Understanding how each biblical book's story fits into this bigger history is the mark of a truly biblically literate person. This kind of knowledge grows with repetition and review. You can best help young children to develop this knowledge by exposing them to key people and events in Scripture. *The Catholic Children's Bible* helps you to do this by focusing on 125 key people and events in the Featured Stories on two-page spreads. Using these Featured Stories consistently with children will provide them an excellent foundation for knowing and understanding salvation history.

Implementing the Context Goal: Helping Children to Understand How to Interpret Bible Books and Passages in Their Proper Contexts

The **Context** goal is more subtle and complex than the **Access** and **Big Picture** goals. Catechists would typically not work on the skills required to master this goal with young children. It requires a level of abstract thinking that they are not yet capable of. However, catechists need to understand this goal in order to teach children the correct interpretation of the biblical stories they read.

This excerpt from the Second Vatican Council document *Dei Verbum* describes how to correctly interpret the Bible:

Seeing that, in sacred scripture, God speaks through human beings in human fashion, it follows that the interpreters of sacred scripture, if they are to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, the meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words. (12)

This quotation states that we must do two things when interpreting a Bible story or teaching. First, we must seek to understand what the original human author intended to communicate. The Church Fathers called this the “literal sense” of Scripture. Second, we must seek to understand what God is revealing through the story or passage. The Church Fathers called this the fuller sense or the “spiritual sense” of Scripture. Often the literal sense and the spiritual sense of a passage are closely related. But in some Scripture passages, God reveals, through the spiritual sense, a deeper and more universal truth than the human author originally understood or intended.

Paragraphs 109–119 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* further explain how to apply these principles. These paragraphs describe the contexts we must consider when interpreting any particular passage of the Bible, which is why we describe this as the **Context** goal.

- **Historical context** To understand the full importance or meaning of a certain event, we need to know the larger historical situation the event occurred within.
- **Cultural context** Sometimes the true meaning of certain actions or words makes sense only when we understand the cultural practices or beliefs of the time.
- **Literary genre** The Bible is composed of many different types of literature. We must know which type we are reading and realize that each genre has its own rules for interpretation.
- **Unity of the whole Bible** When taken as a whole, God’s revealed truth is presented in the Bible without error. This is the case in many Old Testament

passages, whose Christian meaning can be completely and accurately understood only in light of the New Testament revelation.

- **Living Tradition of the Church** To fully understand some Bible passages, we must take into account how the Magisterium—the official teaching authority of the Church—has interpreted the meaning of those passages.
- **Coherence of the truths of faith** When it comes to religious or moral truth, the Bible cannot contradict itself or any other revealed truth of our Tradition.

If we do not interpret the Bible using these contexts, we could easily misinterpret God's Revelation. This is the danger of biblical fundamentalism, an approach to biblical interpretation that Catholics are cautioned to avoid. In its extreme forms, biblical fundamentalism leads people to false beliefs, such as the belief that God created the universe in six twenty-four-hour days.

Even though you will not necessarily mention these different contexts when working with young children, the Featured Stories in *The Catholic Children's Bible* provide trustworthy tools to help children correctly understand the contexts of 125 Bible stories. The engaging art provides strong visual cues about the human author's intention. The Tell It! panels provide children the opportunity to retell the story using the visual prompts so that they begin to process its meaning. And the short Understand It! panels explain what God is revealing through the story, drawing upon the contexts of the unity of the Bible, Tradition, and the coherence of the truths of faith.

The Dark Passages of Scripture

In helping children to read and understand the Bible, catechists and teachers must be aware that some Bible stories are not child-friendly. The accounts of incest, rape, genocide, and holy war in the sacred pages of Scripture can come as a surprise for many beginning Bible readers. In his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini (The Word of the Lord)*, published in November 2010, Pope Benedict XVI calls these stories the “dark” passages of the Bible. Here is what the Holy Father says regarding these passages:

In discussing the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments, the Synod also considered those passages in the Bible which, due to the violence and immorality they occasionally contain, prove obscure and difficult. Here it must be remembered first and foremost that *biblical revelation is deeply rooted in history*. God's plan is manifested *progressively* and it is accomplished slowly, *in successive stages* and despite human resistance. God chose a people and patiently worked to guide and educate them. Revelation is suited to the cultural and moral level of distant times and thus describes facts and customs, such as cheating and trickery, and acts of violence and massacre, without explicitly denouncing the

immorality of such things. This can be explained by the historical context, yet it can cause the modern reader to be taken aback, especially if he or she fails to take account of the many “dark” deeds carried out down the centuries, and also in our own day. In the Old Testament, the preaching of the prophets vigorously challenged every kind of injustice and violence, whether collective or individual, and thus became God’s way of training his people in preparation for the Gospel. So it would be a mistake to neglect those passages of Scripture that strike us as problematic. Rather, we should be aware that the correct interpretation of these passages requires a degree of expertise, acquired through a training that interprets the texts in their historical-literary context and within the Christian perspective which has as its ultimate hermeneutical key “the Gospel and the new commandment of Jesus Christ brought about in the paschal mystery.”¹ I encourage scholars and pastors to help all the faithful to approach these passages through an interpretation which enables their meaning to emerge in the light of the mystery of Christ. (42)

In this teaching, Pope Benedict emphasizes the following points:

- The Bible does not shy away from telling about the worst things that humans do to one another—these are the very things that Jesus Christ came to save us from. Unfortunately, these evil acts continue even into our time.
- The biblical author does not always explicitly say that a particular action is immoral; at the time he was writing, these actions might not have yet been seen as immoral (such as the killing of whole groups of people) or because the biblical author presumed the reader knew that these were immoral actions (such as Lot’s daughters having sexual relations with their drunken father). Because God’s Revelation is “manifested *progressively*” and “is accomplished slowly, *in successive stages*,” the preaching of the prophets and ultimately the teaching of Jesus Christ helps us to see the true moral meaning of these actions.
- To properly understand these passages requires the help of people trained in biblical interpretation, such as pastors and biblical scholars.

So what does this mean for you as a catechist or teacher of young children when it comes to these dark passages of Scripture? The best advice is to avoid these passages completely because these stories can be too disturbing and confusing for young and innocent minds. *The Catholic Children’s Bible* does not use any of these stories in the Featured Stories, so you do not have to worry about coming across any dark stories when you use these special two-page spreads!