

# Introduction

What this Bible Study is designed to do is to provide either groups or individuals with a guided tour of Salvation History, from Creation all the way through to the infancy of the Catholic Church. The aim is to establish an overall familiarity with the framework of the Father's unfolding plan to save all of mankind in his Son through the Holy Spirit. The ultimate hope in this effort is that as we grow in our knowledge of the Bible "*a more penetrating knowledge will in turn call forth a greater faith, increasingly set afire by love*" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 158).

In this introduction we will first refresh ourselves as to *why* we ought to read and study the Bible. Secondly, we will recollect *what* the Bible is. And lastly, we will consider *how* we ought to read and study the Sacred Scriptures.

## 1. Why read and study the Bible?

If we had to boil down our response to this question into one simple answer, we would have to say that, ultimately, *we read and study the Bible because we want to know Jesus*. When we prayerfully approach the Scriptures, particularly the Gospels, we encounter Jesus. Praying over the Scriptures means that, as we read and study, we consciously come into the presence of Christ. We can sit at his feet and listen to his word, much like Martha's sister, Mary. Through the inspired word of God written in human language, we come in contact with the living and incarnate Word of God. We become increasingly acquainted with the personality, character and qualities of Jesus. We learn to anticipate his thoughts, feelings, and expectations with that uncanny perception that spouses often have of each other. This personal knowledge is not reducible to a collection of facts about a person, but it is an experience of a personal presence. We are developing

a friendship with Christ. The Biblical language of “knowing and being known” is sometimes used to describe the relationship between two people who have joined themselves in a covenant. In this deeper sense, “to know Jesus” is to be in a covenantal communion with him. The more we know Jesus, the more our Divine Friend becomes the constant companion of our souls, and an ever-present source of support, strength, wisdom and peace. The more this relationship touches our daily lives, the less we would ever want to imagine life without Jesus. We are beginning to learn the lesson that Jesus was trying to teach Martha, and each one of us, that “*only one thing is needful.*” When we sit at the feet of our Lord, and listen to him, we too have “*chosen the better part.*” Our desire to read and study the Bible ought to spring from the same source that moved the prophet Hosea to exclaim “*Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord*” (6:3).

As with any personal relationship, an essential part of knowing Jesus is knowing who he is. The first type of knowledge, “*knowing the person*”, is more subjective and experiential, while the second, “*knowing who the person is*”, is more objective and intellectual. The distinction is subtle, but important. In the first case we *know someone*, and in the second we have *knowledge about someone*. Knowing Jesus, and knowing who he is, are bound up with each other. Many will perhaps claim they know Jesus, but can they answer the question “***Who is Jesus?***” Consider for a moment the implications of the answer to this question. Is there a more decisive question for the whole human race? All of human history hinges on the Christ Event. We Christians are claiming that a man from Palestine two thousand years ago was the Son of God, and the unique Savior of the world, who conquered sin and death. Because of our faith in Christ we have hope, and yet St. Peter exhorts us: “*Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you*” (1 Peter 3:15). If someone asked you “*Who is Jesus?*” could you answer the question satisfactorily? In the summer of 1989 I was walking down the beach with a Jewish friend of mine, when suddenly, out of the blue, he asked me “*What’s the deal with Jesus?*” Here was an opportune moment to share the message of salvation, but instead, I stammered in response “He’s the Messiah. He died for our sins. He’s Jesus, the Son of God. He’s the Messiah. He’s Jesus...He’s...” Even though I would have claimed I knew Jesus, I was disturbed by the fact that I was unable to answer the simple question “*Who is Jesus?*” I was ignorant of the Scriptures. A subtle look of

disappointment came over his face, and my hunch is that he had posed the same question to others and received the same response. Of the Christians he inquired with about Jesus, no one seemed *prepared to offer an account for the hope that was in them*. The current successor of St. Peter, Pope John Paul II, echoes his predecessor when he exhorts us in a similar fashion: *“Our Christian identity requires us to make constant efforts to train ourselves more and more thoroughly, since ignorance is the worst enemy of our religion. How can one claim truly to love Christ if one is not committed to knowing him better?”* (Agenda for the Third Millennium, 23).

***“Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”*** The truth of these well known words of St. Jerome is confirmed by Christ himself in chapter 24 of Luke’s Gospel. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus were dejectedly walking away from Jerusalem after Jesus’ passion and death. They understood neither the Scriptures, nor who Jesus was. However, the risen Christ walked with them and *“interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.”* Later on *“They said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?’”* It is no different for us today. If our hearts are to *burn within us*, then we must walk the road to Emmaus with Christ. Their hearts were set on fire when the Lord explained the Old Testament to them. They saw the tremendous convergence of prophecies and prefigurements on Jesus. His coming was announced in a hidden way through the words, deeds, events, and signs of the Old Covenant: He is the Word through whom all things were created (John 1:3); the Image of the invisible God (Col 1:15); the new Adam (Rom 5:14); the High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, who offers the sacrifice of his body under the form of bread and wine (Heb 5:7-10); he is the Sacrificial Offering of the Eternal Father foreshadowed by Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah (Gen 22); the new Joseph, who was betrayed, but then miraculously raised by God to the highest office in the land, so as to nourish God’s people not with mere earthly bread, but Eucharist; he is the Lion of Judah (Gen 49:10); he is the Passover Lamb of the Exodus (1 Cor 5:7); the “prophet like Moses” who was foretold to come (Deut 18:15-19); the new Joshua who would lead his people into the true promised land of heaven; the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed heir to the throne of David that God promised to establish forever (2 Samuel 7); the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, who bears the sins of the people (Isaiah 53:10); the Son

of Man coming on the clouds of Heaven (Dan 7:13; Mt 26:63-64); he is the Temple of God (John 2:19-22); Emmanuel born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14); the Heavenly Bridegroom (Jer 3:20; Mt 9:15); the True Vine (John 15:1); the Stone that the builders rejected, which has become the corner stone (Ps 118:22; Mt 21:42); the Shepherd of Israel (Ezekiel 34:15; John 10:11); a Light for the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:6; Luke 2:32); etc. He is infinitely more than simply a “great moral teacher.” His Paschal mystery is the true Exodus from the captivity to sin and death, which has enslaved all mankind. He is the “Way Out!” Moreover, all the mysteries of our faith will come alive when we understand how they are connected to Christ, who is “*the center of the revealed mystery*” (CCC, 158). When we read and study these sacred writings we gain “*a lively understanding of the contents of Revelation*” (ibid.). Our faith in Christ can be augmented marvelously when we increase our knowledge “*The Church forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful to learn the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures*” (CCC, 133).

According to the Catechism “*it is intrinsic to faith that a believer desires to know better the One in whom he has put his faith and to understand better what he has revealed*” (158). As St. Anselm said in the 11<sup>th</sup> century “*Faith seeks understanding.*” The more we investigate the mystery, the more invested we can become. Two of the main reasons people have lukewarm faith are: #1 they are unwilling to allow the life of faith to impinge upon their moral life; and #2 they lack a lively understanding of the contents of Divine Revelation. There is a natural sequence or cycle to our ongoing conversion. Deepening our understanding of what we profess to believe leads to a more fervent faith, the outgrowth of which is usually an increasingly upright moral life. Generally speaking, understanding leads to faith, which then leads to charity. Our life of conversion ought to be continually circulating between all three of these dimensions. We know that charity is the most all important of these three, and is the ultimate goal we are striving for, but it is very difficult to love like Jesus loves without strong faith. Furthermore, it is also very difficult to believe strongly without a lively understanding. If the congregation is simply exhorted to live the life of charity week after week without growing in their knowledge and faith, their hearts will usually just grow colder. If we neglect any of these dimensions we will eventually short circuit the conversion process.

Many Catholics in America have been saying in recent years that there has been a neglect of either preaching or teaching of the contents of Divine Revelation. This has contributed to a widespread erosion of faith. When the early Church was persecuted by the State, there were huge numbers of Catholics who apostatized when faced with imminent torture or death. That was the litmus test of faith then, but for us, the litmus test of faith is the moral life. When Catholics are polled today, there is usually a unanimous affirmation of the basic elements of the Creed. When asked, most Catholics will adhere to the doctrine of the three Divine Persons in the One God, but they will radically differ in responding to questions regarding the moral life. In recent days a poll stated that Catholics only differ from the general populace over the stem cell debate by 1%. We are virtually no different in our moral persuasions than the public at large. Jesus speaks of a type of person who *“has no root in himself.”* Their faith may *“endure for a while,”* but, *“when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.”* (Mt 13:21). We have to be rooted in our knowledge of Christ if our faith is to last. Our Lord is telling us that our faith has to be rooted in a lively understanding. What was perhaps the primary occupation of Jesus during his public ministry? Jesus was addressed as Rabbi or Teacher, and it is interesting that his activity in the Gospels is referred to as “teaching” 45 times, and “preaching” only 9 times. Jesus gives a high priority to forming the understanding of his followers *“again, as his custom was, he taught them.”* (Mk 10:1).

We already heard the exhortation of the prophet Hosea *“Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord,”* but let’s reflect on what he says later in the very same verse *“he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.”* (6:3). Palestine was a heavily agricultural area, and the spring rains played an important role in the yearly cycle of farming. Israel had two major rainy seasons. One was during the spring, and the other in the fall. The spring rains were very heavy at times, and this helped break up the topsoil, preparing it to receive the seeds. Jesus’ teaching prepares the soil of our hearts to receive the seed of faith, much like the spring rains. We read and study the Bible because we desire to know Jesus personally, and as we walk along with him on the road to Emmaus, we are inviting him to loosen our hearts with the spring rains of his teaching.

One more important reason to soak ourselves in the Bible is because it will enable us to enter into the Liturgical and Sacramental life of the Church in a more profound way. There are many signs which are embedded throughout the history of Salvation which are taken up by Christ and brought to their fulfillment. The greatest of these is the Passover and the Exodus. If we aren't familiar with the different signs, symbols, deeds and words within Salvation history we will have difficulty understanding not only who Jesus is, but how to enter into the sacred mysteries ourselves "*For this reason the Church, especially during Advent and Lent and above all at the Easter Vigil, re-reads and re-lives the great events of salvation history in the "today" of her liturgy. But this also demands that catechesis help the faithful to open themselves to this spiritual understanding of the economy of salvation as the Church's liturgy reveals it and enables us to live it.*" (CCC, 1095).

## **2. What is the Bible?**

Here again, we may think we know what the Bible is, but what if someone asked us "*You're a Christian aren't you? What exactly is the Bible anyway?*" Could you reply satisfactorily? Perhaps the very word "Bible" stirs up certain associations or feelings based on our background. Maybe we have had negative encounter's with "Bible thumpers." We might even feel a bit intimidated by the Bible. In this portion of the Introduction we clean the slate, and come back to the Bible in a fresh way.

To begin with, where does the word "*Bible*" come from? The Hebrew Scriptures were originally written on Papyrus scrolls. The Papyrus plant was something like a reed, and it grew along the Nile river. The pulp inside the stalk was removed, pressed into long strips, which were then overlapped and pressed again to produce sections of scroll, which were linked together and dried in the sun. The pulp within the Papyrus stalk was called *biblos* in Greek. Eventually the scrolls made from Papyrus were given the same name as the pulp from which they were made. If you had many scrolls, the plural form of *biblos* (scroll), became *biblia* (scrolls). The Fathers of the early Church who wrote in Greek began to refer to the sacred writings of the Old and New Testament's as the *Biblia*. This word was then imported into the Latin language by later Fathers of the Church who wrote

in Latin. When the word *Biblia* became a Latin word it was no longer a plural word, but became a singular word. From the Latin *Biblia* we get the English word *Bible*. So, we refer to the Bible as a singular book, but it is actually a compilation of many scrolls, a whole “library.” In the Catholic Bible there are 46 Old Testament books, and 27 New Testament books, which together total 73 books.

Most of us immediately associate the word *Testament* with a “*Last Will and Testament*”, but the word *Testament* actually means *Covenant*. We must not mistake the word “*Old*” in this case as meaning “*Void*” (cf. Lk 16:17). The Catechism declares that “*The Old Testament is an indispensable part of Sacred Scripture. Its books are divinely inspired and retain a permanent value, for the Old Covenant has never been revoked*” (121). The Old Testament and the New Testament form one organic whole. Jesus himself proclaims in the Sermon on the Mount “*Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them*” (Mt 5:17). The two Covenants go together like the stem and the flower. The two Testaments ought to be read together, as the famous words of St. Augustine bear witness “*The New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.*”

Within the pages of the Bible are many different kinds of writing: historical narrative, laws, prophecy, psalms, proverbs, poetry, songs, letters, apocalyptic literature, etc. It is not necessarily meant to be read from cover to cover as one would read a novel. There is the common thread of a story woven throughout these separate books, but they ought to be read and studied in a selective and strategic manner. In our particular Bible Study we are concentrating on those books which contain the narrative history of salvation. After surveying the full scope of these select readings one can then read many of the other books within their proper context with greater appreciation.

To someone who knows their way around it, the Bible can become like a beautiful garden, where one can stroll from one area to another as the Spirit leads. Perhaps it might more closely resemble an English garden than a geometrically precise, perfectly manicured garden like the famous gardens surrounding the palace in Versailles, France. That was a garden which clearly expressed the rationalist spirit of the Enlightenment, whereas the English gardens were the outgrowth of the Romantic reaction to Enlightenment thinking. English gardens, while having a logic and order of their own, are

left in a somewhat natural and wild state, and yet are extremely imaginative and creative. They grow up organically, surrounded by a certain measure of freedom. This may be a more apt description of the way in which the *Biblia* gradually grew up. The scrolls are the fruit of an ongoing and developing personal relationship, an interaction and dialogue between God and mankind.

The variety of authors and styles that make up the Bible may confuse some of us. We might wonder why God didn't just drop a manual out of the sky like the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas. However, we ought to marvel at the richness and beauty of these writings. Perhaps the mysterious salvation he has wrought is so profound that it requires a wide assortment of different types of writing and various authors to convey the message properly. The Gospels themselves are like four different portraits. They are all true representations of the life and mission of Jesus. A helpful analogy is the idea of a symphony. There are many different instruments, but they are all harmonized, and follow the same melody.

In addition to the challenge of reading so many authors, we must also bear in mind that many were writing in different times, places, cultures, and languages. However, the Bible has a universal aspect that allows peoples from all times, places, cultures and languages to hear God's saving message. The Scriptures were not written simply for an elite sect. It is not an esoteric revelation for a select group of "illuminati." The whole Bible is written by one principal author, the Holy Spirit, and God is ultimately concerned with addressing the whole human race. The Holy Spirit writes through the human authors as his instruments. This dual authorship of Sacred Scripture is similar to the dual natures of Christ, human and Divine, which exist simultaneously within the same Divine Person. As Jesus is of both human and Divine origin, so, in analogous fashion, the Bible is of both human and Divine origin. The way the Spirit of God inspires the human authors to write leaves intact their own culture and background, their personality and style, as well as their languages.

The two principal languages of the Bible are Hebrew and Greek. Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, with some portions in Greek and Aramaic, and the entire New Testament was written in Greek.

Admittedly, any human language has limits to what it can express. If human language will always fall short in merely describing the beauty of a sunset, how much more will it struggle to express who God is? The Saints who have had mystical encounters with God in deep contemplative prayer have been reluctant to describe the experience in words for this very reason. St. Paul spoke of a vision he had where he was “*caught up into Paradise*” and “*heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.*” (2 Cor 12:1-4). The Bible records mysterious encounters with God in ways that might seem a bit odd to us, but sometimes the human author is trying to describe something that is ultimately beyond his powers, (e.g. Abraham with the smoking firepot and the flaming torch (Gen 15:12-21), Jacob wrestling with a man all night (32:22-32), or any of the apocalyptic literature, e.g. Ezekiel, Daniel, Revelation, etc.). However, human language can act as a spring board towards knowledge of God and his ways. We are given a trajectory towards God through these inspired words. Even if limited by both the medium of language and our own capacity to understand, the Scriptures convey Divine Truth and lead us in the way of salvation.

The Bible is Divine Revelation. To reveal is to “pull back the veil.” Before the fall of mankind we lived in a state of personal intimacy with God. This was symbolized in Genesis by the garden. God walked and talked with us “*in the cool of the day.*” After the first man and woman sinned, there was a radical disruption of this relationship. Being expelled from the garden symbolized this separation between God and the human race. Our sin had placed a veil between God and mankind. However, God never stopped seeking us. He continued to pursue us and reveal himself to us. This was entirely his initiative. Our response to God’s initiative is a “religious act”. The word religion literally means to “re-legion,” “re-join,” or “re-unite” what has been separated. If God had not “pulled back the veil” that separated us, and initiated this “re-union,” our knowledge of God and his ways, and indeed of our very selves, would be severely limited. Out of love for us, he condescended to reveal himself to mankind in ways suited to our limitations. He communicated to us gradually, in stages, through words and deeds. Slowly he guided his saving plan “*to communicate his own divine life to the men he freely created, in order to adopt them as his sons in his only-begotten Son*” (CCC, 52).

### 3. How do we properly read and study the Bible?

It has to be stressed at this point that the two most important pillars which ought to support our reading and study of the Bible are: *prayer and the living Tradition of the Church*.

Prayer must always be part of our approach to the Sacred Scriptures. For believing Christians, the Word of God is infinitely more than an interesting historical document, which records the interaction between God and people long since gone from our world. The Bible opens us to an encounter with Jesus Christ, who is “*the same yesterday and today*” (Heb 13:8). In this Bible study, as we trace the journey of God’s people through Salvation History, we are providing ourselves with superabundant nourishment for the life of prayer “*The tradition of Christian prayer is one of the ways in which the tradition of faith takes shape and grows, especially through the contemplation and study of believers who treasure in their hearts the events and words of the economy of salvation, and through their profound grasp of the spiritual realities they experience.*” (CCC, 2651).

Furthermore, the Bible belongs to the whole Church, and one ought not try to interpret it entirely by oneself. The idea of “the Bible alone,” was never part of the mentality of our Jewish forefathers. They referred to Tradition as the Talmud, and it was seen as a part of revelation, which functioned for the Rabbis as a “hedge around the Torah.” The Word of God was impressed on the heart of the early Church by Jesus himself, and later by the preaching of the Apostles. In time some of this preaching was recorded in written form. However, the early Church was first formed by the oral proclamation of the Gospel. This early formation equipped the Church with a certain “lens.” When the New Testament began to be put together, the Church was already formed to read it in a certain way. For example, they were taught by the Apostles to understand and believe that Jesus was fully Divine. When later heresies arose that denied the divinity of Christ, and which claimed the support of a particular interpretation of Scripture, the Church rejected their claims, because only those formed by the original preaching of the Apostles could authentically interpret the Bible. This “lens” of the Church sharpens its focus over time. As our Lord promised us, the Church’s

understanding of what has been revealed becomes increasingly clearer as she studies, prays, and meditates on God's Word "*I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth*" (John 15:12-13).

For our purposes, what this means is that we seek to be guided in our study of the Bible primarily by the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Therein you will find, in the most distilled form, the authentic and authoritative source for understanding what God desires to reveal to us for our salvation. The Scriptures are cited in the Catechism over 4,000 times in 688 pages, along with abundant citations from Councils, Pontifical Documents, Canon Law, Liturgical sources, Ecclesiastical writers, etc. There is presently no better compendium of the Catholic Faith. Questions that arise in the course of reading the Bible could be referred to the Catechism. The Bible and the Catechism ought to go together like "horse and rider." The index of Scriptural citations in the back is helpful in seeing how particular passages have been employed by the teaching Church, or one could search through the topics in the subject index. The Catechism can be easily found on the internet (NewAdvent.org), where there is a search engine which can find words or phrases. If you have not already done so, you are encouraged to read through paragraph's 1-184, which only represents about forty pages, before beginning to study the Bible.

One essential insight into the Bible that one must always bear in mind as one reads these sacred books is that they are primarily concerned with *religious history*. In ancient Greece, the person who ventured out into uncharted territory and reported back what he had seen was called a *histor*. Doing "*history*" necessarily involves personal view points, perspectives, and interpretations. The "*historian*" is inevitably going to depict history with a view towards what he thinks is most important. Probably the majority of historical works that we have been exposed to were primarily concerned with politics, economics, and wars fought over politics and economics. While ostensibly the Bible seems to consist of much of these things, what the sacred authors are primarily concerned with recording are God's saving words and deeds in history, and our response to him. We may become frustrated because the text seems sparse at times, and may not fill in all the details and facts that we think are important to satisfy our own curiosity. The question we must always return to in order to properly interpret the Bible is, "What are the intentions of

both the human author and the Holy Spirit?” What details, facts, events, themes, people, words, truth, dramas, etc., do they think are important and interesting? The Bible is truly a historical work, but it is ultimately the history of the relationship between God and mankind. It is “*Salvation History*.”

As the inspired word of God, the Bible is a totally unique book. The Holy Spirit is the principal author, and the human writer is the instrumental author. Because it has two authors, there can be many layers of meaning within a single passage. It is not necessarily the case that every word, phrase, sentence, etc., has multiple meanings, but at times the Holy Spirit, for the sake of revealing a deeper meaning, transposes or overlays a more profound sense to a text.

The meaning of the words of Scripture, which were intended by the human author, is referred to as the *Literal Sense*. The term “literal” actually signifies “the meaning of the letters,” which in Latin are called the “litera.” The key to interpreting the real literal meaning of Scripture is determining not simply what it means to us, but what the author meant. The real literal meaning is not always and in every case the plain meaning of the text itself, taken at face value, as it appears to us in English, in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Every text was written with some intention in mind by the human author, therefore every single word and sentence has a literal meaning. Scripture Scholars spend a lifetime learning the ancient biblical languages, and other near-eastern languages, as well as studying archeological findings, etc., to try and trace the origin of the text, situate it in its historical, cultural, religious, political, geo-physical context, and analyze the meaning of the words and the grammar. Only then do they attempt to determine what the human author really meant. It may sound strange to hear that as Catholics we believe in interpreting the Bible “literally,” but this is only because of the confusion about what that means. The primary emphasis in interpreting the Bible is not on how we understand the passage, but on what the sacred author intended to mean. The classic illustration of this confusion is over how to interpret the events in the first three chapters of Genesis. Did Creation take six 24 hour periods, and was there a “talking snake in a tree,” or was the sacred author deliberately employing figurative language to describe a profound event that actually occurred in history, but which is so deeply theological that it was more fitting to shroud it in mysterious symbolism? The wrong approach is to bypass the human

author's intention and read the text as though it were recording the events of Creation and the Fall through a video camera.

An additional meaning intended by the Holy Spirit is referred to as the *Spiritual Sense*. According to an ancient Catholic tradition, within this sense there is a threefold subdivision: the *allegorical*, *moral*, and *anagogical* senses. The Bible can be interpreted allegorically when there are people, events, actions, practices, or objects that function as signs, that convey a deeper symbolic meaning, which is truly intended by the Holy Spirit. God does not have to speak to us only in spoken or written language, for he can convey his saving message by means of these signs or figures. The New Testament is replete with examples of how Jesus and the Apostles interpreted the Spiritual Sense of the Old Testament. Jesus explains to us that “*as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*” (John 3:14-15). He also implies that the Temple in Jerusalem was a sign of his earthly body when he says “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up... but he spoke to them of the temple of his body*” (John 2:18-21). Furthermore, referring to himself Jesus declared that “*something greater than the temple is here*” (Mt 12:6). These realities within the Old Testament like the bronze serpent or the temple we refer to as *types* or *figures*. They have a literal meaning in their own right, but they also point to something beyond themselves. St. Paul refers to Adam “*who was a type of the one who was to come*” (Rom 5:14). In seeking to discover the real and intended allegorical meaning of the Bible we are simply following the lead of Christ, the Apostles and the Tradition of the Church. Secondly, the moral sense teaches us how to act. St. Paul draws out the moral meaning of the temple when he says “*Shun immorality... Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?*” (1 Cor 6:18-19). And lastly, the anagogical sense refers to the eternal significance of these realities and events. For example, “*the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem*” (CCC, 117).

One way to keep focused on the overall intention of the human and Divine author's is refer what we are reading to the “big picture.” Our reading and study of the Bible will prosper to the extent we gain facility in changing back and forth from the zoom to the wide angle lens. With the zoom lens we can analyze the text itself in determining what

type of writing it is (e.g., historical narrative, proverb, prophecy, etc.). Then we can attempt to situate it in its proximate historical or temporal setting. Who wrote it? When was it written? What was the intended audience the human author was writing for? (e.g., God himself, the leadership of Israel, a neighboring nation or leader, the rich or poor, the faithful or the wicked, the people at large, etc.). What effect was he trying to bring about in his listeners? What is the immediate context that would bear upon the meaning of the passage? Etc. But, switching to the wide angle lens, we try to see how this passage relates to the larger scheme of Salvation History. How does it relate to: God's original plan for creation? His original will for mankind? The disruption of his plan through the sin of our original parents? The ultimate driving purpose behind God's activity in the world of fallen mankind? The life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ? The complete realization and consummation of this purpose in Heaven? Etc. In this way a passage is situated in its largest context, which will often lay bare its broadest spiritual interpretation. Once again, the primary purpose of this particular Bible Study is to gain a broad sweeping "bird's eye view" of God's unfolding plan, therefore we ought to place a special emphasis on seeing each of the major biblical events and characters, etc., within this larger context. The tendency for many of us may be to read along with only the zoom lens, and there just isn't enough time within the scope of this approach to studying the Bible to deal adequately with the number of questions that would be generated, which are usually of less overall importance anyway. We are studying the Bible in large portions, and so we are primarily after the "big picture."

One way to help keep us in the "big picture" is to look for patterns and repetitions. We may begin to notice that certain symbolic objects, places, actions, numbers, words or phrases keep popping up: wells, shepherds, the Temple, the Jordan river, blessings, anointing, God changing people's names, oaths, 40 days, etc. Certain pregnant themes may consistently arise: the heart; tests and trials; idolatry; the nations; prophets; sacrifice; chastisements; God's choice of the weak things of this world; etc. We may begin to make connections between various texts from elsewhere in the Bible, and especially between the Old and the New Testaments. Now the juices are starting to flow. We are noticing how things relate to Christ and the Church. We can start to see more

clearly how all of this relates to ourselves as Catholics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is when the study of the Bible starts to get really exciting.

An important reality to bear in mind as we read along is that this is our family history. We are part of the human family, and the story of Salvation History involves all of mankind throughout all time. People generally love to feel connected to their ancestors. It gives one a feeling of being *rooted*. Most of us Americans can perhaps chart our ancestor's to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> generation and then it starts getting blurry. People in older countries than ours may be able to trace their ancestry back to the Middle Ages. Our Catholic heritage extends to the very beginning of time. In order to grasp this we need a spiritual vision of the world and human history. The clearer our vision of faith, the more we see true reality. The deeper we go in seeking the answer to the question "*Who is Jesus?*" the deeper we go into the meaning of the universe. It is then that we begin to discover our truest selves. In studying Salvation History we are tapping something primal and cosmic.

One special quality about the Bible is the naked humanity of its characters. Little effort is made to hide the blemishes, warts, issues, sins, problems, etc. of many of its most important figures: Abraham is curiously deceptive about refusing to let Pharaoh know that Sarah is his wife; Jacob deceives Isaac, and is aided in this by Rebekah; Joseph's brothers are jealous and sell him into slavery; Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and seduces Judah; Aaron and Miriam get headstrong and resentful and are rebuked by God for it; Moses tries 6 times to get out of God's mission for him, and later distrusts God and strikes the rock twice; David commits adultery with Bath Sheba and then kills her husband to cover it up; Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss and Peter curses and swears at the maid "*I do not know the man.*" We could go on and on. If you try reading the Bible with rose tinted glasses on, expecting to find superhuman characters like Hercules, Thor, or the Lone Ranger, you will be disappointed. Even the great Elijah at one point is afraid of Jezebel, and hides under a broom tree feeling inadequate and sorry for himself. There are tremendous heroes and heroines throughout, but they are usually people we can identify with and learn from in some way. We will profit greatly from our reading if we empathize with the characters in their courage or cowardice, their zeal or waywardness, their tenderness or cruelty, their humility or pride, etc. The Bible is the

story of an *epic struggle*. It is a struggle we should all be able to relate to. God is trying to get us to see the futility of our sinful ways, and the desirability of his ways. As we read and study, before we pass judgment on our ancestors, we ought to let the Bible probe and scrutinize our own consciences “*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.*” (Hebrews 4:12-13).

The great Hero of the Bible is God. He is there at every stage, in every scene, episode, and event. He is the Protagonist of Salvation History. Human characters come and go, history ebbs and flows, but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is always present and active. His patience with our failings, fickleness, foolishness, and fragility is truly amazing. He bears with us like a parent raising a small child. His steadfast love endures forever. His plan moves forward despite our weaknesses, or the efforts of some to even foil his plan. His plan is unstoppable. It will move forward with or without any of us. We can get on board with his plan, or get left behind. He is so all-powerful and ingenious that he uses his enemies to accomplish his will in mysterious ways. His ways are analogous to the form of karate known as *Akito*. God is the ultimate “Master of *Akito*.” He remains seemingly passive to an aggressor, but then uses the force and momentum of his opponent against him. If the Lord has singled out Joseph to play an important role, but his brothers decide to “upset the apple cart” and sell him into slavery, God’s plan of salvation goes forward anyway. If God sends his Son to the world as it’s Messiah, those who would try to thwart his plan by killing him, only succeed in accomplishing our very redemption. As the famous Jewish Rabbi named Gamaliel, who once disciples Paul, declared before the Sanhedrin in the Acts of the Apostles “*if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!*” (5:38-39).

The God we encounter in the Bible is both *transcendent* and *immanent*. He is beyond our ability to fully comprehend, and “*dwells in unapproachable light*” (1 Tim 6:16), but he is also so intimate with mankind that he shares with us his own Name. He does not remain aloof from his creation, like some “divine clock-maker,” who winds up the

machine and has nothing more to do with it. He is involved and engaged with it. A good illustration of this is found in the two creation narratives in Genesis 1-2. In the first account we have the transcendent God who creates through his word in a perfectly ordered and rationally configured way. God is referred to in this account by the less personal term Elohim, which translates as God. In the second account God is immanent and involved with his creation. He is down on his hands and knees in the mud forming man. He walks and talks with Adam and Eve in the garden. He is referred to as Yahweh Elohim, which translates as the Lord God. This includes the more personal name of Yahweh, that is revealed to Moses in his encounter with the burning bush. Throughout the Bible we see both aspects of God's divinity. It is a "both/and" reality. The Lord God is separate from his creation. He is totally sovereign over the universe. The best way to understand how radical the monotheistic (one God) theology of Judeo/Christian religion is is to contrast it with a pagan polytheistic system. For instance, according to the ancient Greeks, are the gods transcendent in the way the Lord God of our faith is? How is Zeus different from Yahweh? Is Zeus separate from the universe? Is he sovereign over all that is? Our God has no beginning or end. He existed before there was a universe. He is the source of all being. He Is. But Zeus has a Mom and Dad, Kronos and Rea, who themselves are the offspring of Ouranos and Gaia. Ouranos and Gaia is the furthest traceable origin of the gods in the Greek system. Ouranos is heaven and Gaia is earth. The heaven and the earth is really the summary of all that is. These are the two final brackets of the universe. In polytheistic systems the gods come from within the brackets. They are not separate from the universe. They did not create the world out of nothing. Therefore they are not ultimately sovereign over the heavens and the earth. However, the very first words of Genesis state that "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*" The very first verse of the Bible sets it apart from mythology. Mythology has a great deal to do with how the gods came into being. The longer a pagan polytheistic religion has been around the larger the family tree of the gods becomes. Soaking in the awesome reality of the Lord God's holiness, his utter separateness from, and total sovereign dominion over all of creation, will help us understand how abhorrent pagan idolatry was to the Israelites. Yahweh's Being is derived from himself and not from the world. However, he freely chooses to "pull back the veil," enter our world, and

orchestrate his saving plan. Our God is transcendent and immanent “*Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down upon the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap*” (Psalm 113:5-7).

The Bible is particularly provoking for many of us who have a hard time with *miracles*. There has been a great deal of debate amongst scholars of the Bible about what is the rhetorical embellishment, symbolic imagination, or religious reflection of the human author, and what are truly supernatural occurrences in history. We would all agree that by job description God is all-powerful. He who created the universe out of nothing can divide the Red Sea, rain down manna from heaven, or command the sun to halt in its path through the sky. If we deny the supernatural elements of the Old Testament, what about the miracles of Jesus and the Apostles? History or myth? The answer to the dilemma is to be found somewhere between the two extreme views.

On the one hand there is the fundamentalist approach, which is flawed in its method of interpretation, because it lacks the “lens” of Tradition, and it attempts to determine the meaning or truth of a passage as it appears on the page to them at face value. They sometimes mistakenly identify biblical texts as straight historical narrative, that were not intended to be read in this way. We should not flatten all literary forms by reading them in the same way. Are there times that the human author may legitimately make use of literary techniques which employ hyperbole or exaggeration to make a point? Doesn't fiction give the appearance of history sometimes? Can God even reveal himself through fiction? Do good Christian writers, such as C.S. Lewis, convey divine truth through the use of fiction? Why couldn't the inspired authors of the Bible use the legitimate literary form of fiction? Are the stories of Tobit or Job necessarily written as historical narratives? If they are ultimately fictional in nature, does that mean they can't still be inspired? Did Jesus intend the parables of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son to be read as historical narrative? These are fictional stories that convey divine truth. This is why sound principles of biblical interpretation are essential. Great caution has to be exercised in making a determination about the literary form being used by the authors of Scripture. We have to determine the intention of the human author, and we need the guidance of the Church's living Tradition, which is guided by the same Spirit that inspired the Bible.

On the other hand, there are those who read the Bible with an excessive skepticism. They are quick to cast a shadow of doubt on anything that is outside the bounds of their own experience, or which lacks a scientific explanation. They are suspicious of the supernatural elements of revelation, and see themselves as the great “de-mythologizers” of Scripture. For them, it is naïve to put much stock in the historical reliability of the Bible when it comes to matters of faith. They will claim there is a “skeleton” of real history, but it is hidden under all the supernatural embellishment that must be stripped away. They might “wink over” the ancient writers, as though all they were doing was describing what still remained “outside the light of their own campfire.” Eventually, when they have exhausted this process of “literary deconstruction”, they will oftentimes attempt to then “bracket off” the issue of historicity, and consider the Scriptures of both Testaments as simply “stories about the faith of God’s people.” While that may sound nice, it makes no sense unless we understand that the Bible is first and foremost about God’s mighty words and deeds in human history. We ultimately do violence to the Bible if we make a radical separation between faith and history. Our faith is about the mystery of how the supernatural became entwined and bound up with the natural. We know that the biblical writers were neither writing modern historical or scientific treatises, or trying to outright deceive us. Salvation History is not merely a “pious fiction,” nor is it a hoax. The Holy Spirit, as the principal author of Sacred Scripture, is he who can neither deceive nor be deceived. The Bible, as God’s Word in human language, is supremely trustworthy. If the author meant to record a historical event, then that event is a historical fact. Christianity is rooted in real historical events. It is not just a bunch of humanly contrived religious doctrines. God has chosen to reveal himself through his saving words and deeds in history. He could have dropped a book of doctrine out of the sky, but he did not. The historical basis of our faith is essential. As was stated earlier, these real historical events are the substratum of revelation. This is how we come to an understanding of who Jesus is, and what our Catholic faith is all about. These real historical occurrences, such as the Exodus and the Passover, are taken up by God as signs, which find their fulfillment in Christ. St. Paul spiritually interprets real historical events when he says to the Corinthians *“I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate of*

*the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ.”* (1 Cor 10:1-4). What he wants to show is that these events were signs that foreshadowed Christian baptism and the Eucharist, and that the Rock which provided water in the wilderness was a figure or type of Christ. It is not merely Paul’s own “religious reflection” about events that either never really happened, or that were so embellished and exaggerated that they have become simply myths. He himself is inspired to interpret the spiritual sense of the events recorded in the book of Exodus, because this was a real meaning intended by the Holy Spirit. St. Paul could interpret the Bible effectively because he had eyes of faith. Without faith it is virtually impossible to properly interpret the Bible. In asserting this we have the confident assurance that Jesus and his Apostles read the Bible in this manner, as well as the teaching Church.

We must have faith, but it must be *intelligent faith*. We have to avoid both misguided faith, and mistrusted faith. We have to read the Bible intelligently, taking into consideration modes of thinking and expression which may be unfamiliar to us. If the sacred author inserted a literary form into what seemed to be a purely historical narrative, he could either assume it would be obvious to the reader, or leave clues as to his true intent. This often happens with numbers. For the Israelites, numbers conveyed a deeper meaning, and it was often expected that some numerical figures were meant to evoke something in the reader, or cause them to make certain connections or associations. We need childlike humility to read the Bible intelligently. To avoid errors in our thinking we must be on guard against presumption. We should exercise caution with things that are unclear to us, and be prepared to admit that we just don’t understand a certain passage. However, this is no excuse not to “roll up our sleeves” and dig for an answer. Check the Catechism, or a Bible Dictionary or Commentary, etc. The safety net we have under us is the totality of our Catholic Faith. Beginning with our Creed, and extending to all the various truths that have been revealed, and which come down to us through the teaching of Mother Church, we can confidently approach the Sacred Scriptures. Our Catholic Faith rests in the authentic interpretation of the Bible. This ought to be our constant reference point to turn to when difficulties arise in our reading and study. If the Bible confuses us into thinking that God is cruel, we know that God is Love and that his judgments are true.

If the text seems to imply that Jesus had immediate siblings, we know that this is not the case either.

The *violence and scandal* that we frequently find in the Bible can be very troubling for some of us. This is particularly the case in the Old Testament, but occasionally there are shocking stories in the New Testament also. For example, in chapter five of the Acts of the Apostles, Ananias and Sapphira drop dead when they are rebuked by Peter for being stingy with their property. However, by and large, it is the Old Testament that contains some of the harsher realities of Salvation History. One of the most extreme cases is the genocide that God seems to authorize in the book of Joshua. This can present a real challenge to our faith, and it requires all the principles that we have been laying out previously in order to properly understand and accept this as the inspired Word of God. One point we ought to start with is that this past century was in some respects the most violent in the history of the human race. We are not much different in our own day. We should avoid “chronological snobbery.” We also need to realize that God is supremely holy, and he calls his people to be holy. That means we are to separate ourselves from sin. The One God is also Lord of the universe. The practice of idolatry is particularly heinous for Israel. The more deeply we reflect on God’s sovereignty and holiness, and Israel’s exalted vocation, the more we can perhaps begin to understand the severity in the Bible towards blasphemy and other abominations. An important principle of interpretation regarding some of these problematic texts is to bear in mind that, in the language of the Bible, it may seem at times that God is committing evil acts, but we know that this is simply a manner of expression that was commonly accepted, and maybe even expected, which was also based on a much more limited concept of God and his ways. God permits or allows evil, but this is not the same as God causing evil. We know that God is Love. Every act of God throughout the whole of Salvation History is an act of Love. The Lord God has chosen, in his wisdom, to reveal himself progressively. He gradually leads us to knowledge of his ways. As he works in human history to accomplish his plan, he condescends to speak to us in a manner that we can understand and relate to. The words of Holy Scripture are written by human authors who were steeped in “*the modes of feeling, speaking, and narrating then current*” (CCC, 110). This sometimes means that God must bear with us when we lack the theological

sophistication, moral refinement and ethical formation which he intends to instill in his people over the course of time. He is raising Israel like a small child. To some extent Parents must put up with various types of foolish behavior at the different ages of their children. Any parent understands that there are periods their children go through that require temporary interventions, rules, or guidance that is suitable for that particular stage. We do not have to harp on our teenage son to take his thumb out of his mouth, but we also do not hand over our car keys to the three year old, and grant him a ten o'clock curfew on Saturday night. Genocide, polygamy, divorce, or slavery were never part of God's original plan, but he is patient with us. There are many provisional or transitory phases throughout Salvation History, which will only reach its final fulfillment in Heaven where "*there shall be no night*" and "*nothing impure shall enter*" (Rev 21:25-27).

Let's face it, reading the Bible is not easy. It seems strange and different to most of us. We need to align our expectations with reality. This is not a John Grisham novel. It is an ancient text. If we are going to develop a taste for Scripture we need to relax and loosen up. If you are a beginner at golf you know that it can be tremendously frustrating. You should not be too hard on yourself, or chances are you will give up. You just have to keep playing golf until you get a feel for the clubs, and your swing becomes more natural. Most people need to tune into the golf channel, pick up a golf book or magazine, and get a few lessons from a pro. If you survive the initial "break in period" you might develop a real taste for the game, or maybe even an insatiable craving for it. It is the same with the Bible. We can't tighten up every time we don't understand something, or feel confused (e.g., "C'mon, did the people in Genesis really live for hundreds of years?"; "I can't keep my Meshechs, Methusalehs, and Mephibosheths all straight!"; "Who the heck is Baal, anyway? And, why doesn't he just take his Asheroth and beat it out of town!?!"). With the particular approach to Bible study that we are using here, our main goal is just to read the text. It is a barnstorming tour, and we don't have time to answer every question that can be raised. We have to selectively let go of some questions we want answered. This time around just enjoy reading for the story. Appreciate that you are coming in contact with something unique and profound. Think of all the hours that Jesus spent reading these same texts. Mary pondered the word of God in her heart. The Apostles, Doctors, Fathers, Saints, and theologians of the Church have all poured over the same passages you will be

reading. The Bible has been the world wide best seller ever since the printing press was invented. Relax and enjoy it.

An important aspect of being properly formed in our understanding, so as to dispose our hearts to receive the gift of faith, is having an *expectation*. If we don't expect to find something, we won't look. Who would waste money on slot machines unless they expected to win at some point? No one will read and study the Bible unless they expect to discover something worthwhile. We have a name for the person who has no expectation to learn something new, a "know it all." This person presumes he already understands. The presumptuous person remains unteachable. *Presumption* is one of the chief enemies of a lively understanding. St. Thomas Aquinas calls it the "Mother of all error." Another mortal foe of a lively understanding is *sloth*. The slothful person doesn't want to be "disturbed" by Christ. St. Augustine definitely has an insight into this phenomenon when he describes the process of his conversion "*the thoughts with which I meditated upon You were like the efforts of a man who wants to get up but is so heavy with sleep that he simply sinks back into it again.*" (Confessions, 8, 5).

Our intellects have been darkened as a result of original sin. We have difficulty knowing truth. This is especially the case with divine truth. It is a serious case of "fog on the brain." Our religious concepts tend to dry up if we sit still. When it comes to our grasp of spiritual realities, we are always on a downward escalator. We become distracted by the noise of everyday life, and the cares of this world. It takes persistent effort to remain somewhat recollected in our Christian identity. Our knowledge of God and his ways tends to want to settle on the bottom of our souls. We have to keep stirring it up. This Salvation History Bible Study is designed as a systematic recollection of the foundation of our Catholic faith. To recollect something is to come back to it again in a fresh way. There was a scene from the movie *Dead Poets Society*, where Robin Williams is an English teacher who has his students take turns standing on his desk and looking back at the room from a different vantage point. The message he was trying to send to his class was to see the need to always work to broaden and stretch our concepts of reality. We can't rest in our knowledge, but continually work to expand it. We may think we know certain things, but we have to expect that there is always more. We must look at our Catholic Faith from different angles and perspectives in an attempt to hone in on the

truth, and penetrate deeper into the mystery. We will get out of this Bible Study what we put into it. If we approach the contents of Divine Revelation with a fresh new enthusiasm and zest, we can expect that God will not let us down “*Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*” (Lk 11:9).

#### **4. Practical Suggestions:**

The recommended way to go about tackling each individual segment in this Bible Study is to begin by reading the Catechism Connections and Further Considerations. This will “prime the pump,” and help focus in the reading of the primary text of the Bible in bold print at the top. Lastly, the biblical texts in parentheses below the primary text act as supplemental reading, which can shed further light on the primary text. The Catechism encourages us to “*Be especially attentive to the content and unity of the whole Scripture. Different as the books which comprise it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God’s plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart, open since his Passover*” (112). Highlighters or under liners can be very helpful in remembering where certain texts are. Marking up the text provides for some a feeling of personal ownership of their Bible. It can give the pages of Scripture a kind of topography or landscape. You may want to jot down notes or questions within the pages of the Bible Study materials, or elsewhere. Check the reference tools found in the Reading List at the back. It is advantageous to have a Bible Dictionary, one volume commentary, or Bible Atlas, etc., on hand. In general, you will get out of Bible Study what you bring to it. An inscription on the façade of Union Station in Washington DC reads “*In traveling, the man must carry knowledge with him if he would carry home knowledge.*” However, it is better to have a firm grasp of a few key interpretive principles, themes and concepts, accompanied by a prayerful heart, than a lifetime of study in ancient near eastern languages. In the carpentry trade, old timers may remember the days before power tools and nail guns when a good carpenter could build almost anything with a framing square, saw, hammer, and level. The quality of our knowledge is more important than the quantity. We have a life time to fill out our tool box, but we can make a beginning in Bible study with the bare essentials outlined in this Introduction.