

3. The Bible

When the bishops of the world gather around the Pope at a General Council to discuss the teaching, worship and organization of the Church, an open Bible stands high in the midst of them during their discussion. This is to remind them that the Church looks to the Bible in her teaching. She is always pondering the Bible. With this book in her hand and its words on her lips, the Church is the great teacher delivering God's message to man. Not all her teachings are mentioned explicitly in the Bible, because any written record needs constant interpretation and commentary in succeeding ages. Yet, this written record itself, is vitally important as a permanent and unchanging testimony of the Church in the days of the Apostles.

It is impossible to give an account of the Catholic Religion without referring constantly to the Bible. It seems best to say at the start what the Bible is and how it came to be written.

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The Living word

The word Bible comes from a Greek word meaning "The Books". The Bible therefore in some ways is not one book, but a whole library for it consists of a collection of 73 books. It took more than a thousand years to reach us in its present form. It is written in three ancient languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek and many authors have contributed to it, men varying in background from common labourers to sheltered scholars and mighty kings. At first glance it might appear to be a hotch-potch of history, scraps of battle songs, poems, family trees legal codes, plays, short stories, prophecies, political speeches and sermons. But, throughout the whole of the Bible is this startling fact, there is a unifying thread which draws the whole thing together.

The Bible is the story of God's activity in human history. A little corner of the Middle East was the workshop in which God was to hammer out his plan for man's salvation by preparing man for the coming of Christ and his Church. All this we can see from the Bible. God revealed himself to man, not suddenly or completely but step by step, a little at a time, as his people were ready for it. This gradually developing communion with God is found recorded in the pages of the Bible.

The Bible is divided into two parts, called the Old Testament and the New. It is not merely a record of ancient events and teachings but is the inspired, living word of God containing his message to men of all times. God himself inspired

men to write the books of the Bible and through them he continues to enlighten men's minds to know him better and move their hearts to love him more.

The Bible is in unique way the Church's own book, and to understand it correctly it must be considered within the framework of the Church, the People of God. The Old Testament belonged to and was produced by the then People of God, the chosen race of Israel, God's Church before the coming of Christ. It cannot be understood correctly apart from that framework. So also the New Testament must be seen and considered within the framework of the New People of God, the Church established by Christ which produced it and to which it belongs. Both Old and New Testaments now belong to the Church, for the Old is perfected and fulfilled in the New.

A testament or covenant is an agreement between two parties, as when husband and wife at their marriage promise each other love and co-operation, or a conquering king promises rights and protection to a nation in return for its service.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament is mainly concerned with God's covenant with his people before the coming of Jesus Christ. It tells how, about nineteen hundred years before Christ, God prompted Abraham to leave the pagan city of Ur in Mesopotamia and go into a district now called Israel and Jordan. God promised to favour and guard him and his descendants and make them great and numerous if they honoured and obeyed him. They were at first a group of Semitic tribes wandering about Palestine. Then famine drove them to Egypt. There they became rich and numerous, but under later kings, who disliked the Semitic peoples, they were treated as slaves.

The book of *Exodus* tells how God raised up the great prophet Moses to lead them out of Egypt in spite of opposition from the Egyptian king. He led them across the Sinai desert back to their own land.

The Covenant

At Mt. Sinai in the desert God made a covenant with his people. They witnessed a terrifying display of his power in thunder, lightning and eruptions of the mountain. They gathered in worship below as Moses went up to be alone with God. There he was given a deeper insight into the nature of God and his will for his people. Under the direction of Moses laws for divine worship and right living were drawn up. A short summary of God's Law in ten statements was engraved on two tables of stone. There are called the Ten Commandments. The people

promised to serve the one, true God and keep his commandments, and God promised to help and save them. This covenant was sealed in blood. The life of an animal was offered to God and its blood was sprinkled in the presence of God.

They ceased to be a band of runaway slaves and marched bravely under God's guidance and protection to take possession of their own land and set up a state, called the State of Israel, with its own government, laws and place of worship.

Kings and Prophets

God acted continually upon his Chosen People through kings and prophets whom he enlightened and guided. The greatest of the kings was David, who lived about 1000 B.C. He planned to build a place of worship, the Temple, and under his inspiration many beautiful hymns, called psalms, were composed and used in divine worship. But it was left to his son, Solomon, to build a splendid temple, and elaborate ceremonies for divine worship in it were devised.

God taught his people mainly through inspired preachers called *Prophets*. These men rose in every age, convinced that they spoke with God's authority and delivered his message. In some of the most sublime language ever spoken by man the prophets rebuked the people for practicing the vices of the pagan nations, called upon them to worship the one true God and told of his loving kindness towards them. In the ringing tones of their noble language and the beauty of their thought the message of God is recognized to-day as it was by the people who first heard them.

Between the years 800 and 600 B.C., there was a series of these religious leaders, the greatest of whom were Isaiah and Jeremiah. The prophets had their own sermons written down. Also they collected the ancient traditions of the people and the chronicles of the early kings in books called *Deuteronomy, Judges, Samuel and Kings*.

Scribes

The powerful neighbouring kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon frequently raided the Israelites and carried off slaves. In 587 B.C., the Babylonians conquered them, destroyed their Temple and carried so many of them off into captivity that it was more or less the end of the State of **Israel**. But the exiles continued to practice their religion and God continued to raise up prophets to speak in his name, such as Ezekiel and Habakkuk.

When the Persians conquered Babylon, a party of zealous Israelites came home and began rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple under the inspiring lead of Ezra. He was a Scribe, a writer who studied and copied the ancient sacred writings, and he impressed upon the people that these were the words of God and must be preserved and honoured. A school of Scribes was established, which became a permanent institution. Gradually they put together the Old Testament as we have it to-day.

They wrote down the old "bible stories" which told of the beginnings of the human race and of the people of Israel. They collected the thoughts and meditations of wise men in the books of *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*; the events in the reigns of kings in the book of *Chronicles*; old moral stories in the books of *Ruth*, *Job* and *Esther*. A collection of hymns, ancient and modern was made, called the book of *Psalms*, some of which dated back to the days of King David. These beautiful songs to this day express the joys, hopes and sorrows of the human heart as it turns towards God.

The Canon of the Bible

The Greek king of Syria ruled the Israelites in the second century B.C. and tried to force them to adopt the religion of the Empire and its language, Greek. During the persecution under him, a pious Jew wrote the book of *Daniel*, a collection of six stories telling how the Israelites stood up to persecution in Babylon of old, and four visions promising a good time to come. It was written mainly in Hebrew, though parts of it were in Greek. A wise man called Ben Sira wrote *Sirach*, a collection of wise sayings written in Hebrew, which his grandson translated into Greek. The great deeds of a family of warriors called the "Machabees", who led Jewish revolts against the conquerors, were written in two books, one in Greek, one in Hebrew, later translated into Greek. Finally, a century or so B.C. , a Greek Jew wrote in Greek one of the most spiritual and lofty books of the Bible, the book of *Wisdom*.

There were three other books in Greek, based on Hebrew writings, namely the moral stories of *Tobias* and *Judith* and the prophecy of *Baruch*.

These writings in Greek were not regarded by some of the Jews as being equal to the Hebrew book of the Bible. The Protestant Churches have followed this tradition. They call them the "Apocrypha," and say they are good and useful for instruction but not equal in authority to the rest of the Bible. There was, however, another Jewish tradition which included these books in the Bible, and this the early Christians from the time of the Apostles adopted. The Catholic Church has always followed this tradition and has declared them to be truly part of the Bible. At several meetings of bishops in the fourth century, the *Canon* or list

of the books of the Bible was drawn up and these Greek books were included. The Church uses them constantly in her teaching and public worship, and indeed they contain some of the most beautiful and lofty passages in the Bible.

The New Testament

Jesus Christ and the first Christians cherished the Old Testament as the word of God. It was the Bible of the Apostles. But God continued to move and inspire men to write books which the Church accepted as having the same authority as the Old Testament. The first followers of Jesus Christ joyfully announced the good news of his life, death and resurrection, and almost certainly short collections both of the sayings and deeds of Jesus were put into writing shortly after his death and devoutly kept by the Christians. But the earliest Christian writings we have are the letters of Paul and other Apostles.

The Letters

About ten years after the death of Christ a Jewish teacher and writer named Saul, later called Paul, became a Christian. He was specially chosen by God and was commissioned by the Apostles to preach. He began traveling through the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire setting up Christian Churches. We have thirteen letters written by him in which he explains Christ's teaching and urges his readers to follow it.

The apostles Saints Peter, James, John and Jude wrote similar, though shorter, letters to distant Christian communities. A long treatise called the letter to the *Hebrews* was written to a community of Jews who seem to have been tempted to return to the beliefs and practices of their ancestors. During a violent persecution of the Christians by the Roman Emperor, St. John, or one of his disciples wrote a book called the *Apocalypse*, or Revelation, like the book of *Daniel*. It describes visions and symbolic pictures which represent Christ as Lord and Saviour triumphing over the evils of the pagan world and ensuring the ultimate happiness of his followers.

These writings were loved and venerated by the Christian communities, copied and handed around, read aloud in the churches as the word of God and treated as of equal authority with the books of the Old Testament.

The Gospels

It was thought necessary to have a fuller written account of Christ's life and teaching based on the evidence of the men who had heard him speak.

There are four of these called the Gospels according to Sts. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It is probable that St. Mark, companion of St. Paul on one of his missionary journeys and disciple of St. Peter, wrote the first. He probably used written material already available. St. Matthew, one of the apostles who had been with Jesus during his public preaching, used this book as the basis of his Gospel, written with Jewish readers particularly in mind. St. Luke, a Greek doctor who had been St. Paul's traveling companion, also used it, as well as other writings, and questioned eye-witnesses on the events, to write the third Gospel. He also wrote a book called *The Acts of the Apostles*, which is an account of the first years of the Church's life, with particular emphasis on the preaching of Sts. Peter and Paul.

St. John the Apostle, towards the end of his life, wrote the fourth Gospel. It is a more profound and spiritual account of some of Christ's deeds and sermons to show that he is God the Son and move the reader to believe in him.

These four Gospels tell the same good news, for the same purpose, but in slightly different ways. They proclaim the events of Christ's birth, death and resurrection in order to move the hearers to believe in him and have eternal life.

After the Gospel according to St. John, nothing was added to the written word of God. The Bible was complete. Now Christ himself, the full revelation of God to man, remains with his people, giving them life and teaching them truth in his Church.

God Wrote the Bible

God wrote the Bible, using men as his instruments. But he used them in accordance with their nature, namely as free agents, with memory, understanding, will and personality. Each collected his materials in his own way, made his own judgments, wrote in a style suited to his character, the nature of his message and the customs of his time. God moved the writers to write and guided them in their writing so that they wrote the truth which he had revealed to them and did so without error. He is the chief author, the human authors are his instruments.

The People Accepted it

The people of God recognized in the Bible the truth which he had taught them. It was read aloud in their assemblies and they pondered upon it, finding in it the expression of their deepest sentiments and feelings. The religious leaders of the people, under the inspiration of God, declared these writings to be word of God. There have been other writings of holy and learned men, before and after the

time of Christ, which have been venerated by the people of God, and yet they are not part of the Bible. What makes a book part of the Bible is the fact that God moved the author to write, guided him in his writing so that he wrote what God wanted and did so without error, and the Church leaders officially declared the book to be the Word of God.

History in the Bible

Most of the Bible is religious poetry, poetic sermons, moral stories and explanations of religious teaching. But much of it is history. Like all history, it is written for a purpose. The purpose of the Bible is a religious one. Events are selected and described to show how God saved his people in order that the readers might be moved to believe in him and serve him. This then is "salvation history". Moreover, it is history written two thousand years ago in Eastern lands by and for a people with a way of thinking and writing far different from those of modern times.

Sometimes the writers used colourful and dramatic stories of ancient times to teach religious truth. For example, the truth that God created the universe and the human race, and that man's sin brought evil and unhappiness is told in the dramatic account of Adam and Eve, the serpent and the forbidden fruit. The truth that man deserved to be wiped out for his sins, yet a chosen people were saved by a merciful God, is told in the story of the great flood and Noah who was saved with his family in the Ark.

The nearer the writers approach our own times the nearer their style of writing history is to ours. The writers of the Gospel make it clear that they are recording facts in a way very similar to that of the modern historian. They make it clear that they or their informants witnessed the events they record. St. John, for instance, says he writes about things "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands" (1 John 1, 1). St. Luke tells that he is recording things "delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (Luke 1, 2). The Gospel writers intend their facts, and among them the facts of the great miracles worked by Christ, to be regarded as real events. Christ really did walk on the water, did still the tempest, did cure the sick in hundreds and raised the dead to life. Above all, the fact of his resurrection from the dead is the central truth upon which the whole of Christian teaching depends.

Interpretation of the Bible

The Church under the guidance of God tells us which out of the many sacred books are the books of the Bible. Also under his guidance she interprets their

meaning in doctrines of faith and morals. God enlightens the mind of every man as he reads them, but he does not leave him free to make up his own religious beliefs merely from his own interpretation of the Bible. As a result of the theory of "private interpretation," which was taught in the 16th century, scores of Christian sects have arisen, all with different beliefs and practices, yet all claiming to base their religion on the Bible. It is not surprising therefore that the Catholic Church warns people about the dangers of private interpretation of the Bible in doctrinal matters. She has ever done so right from the beginning—in the third chapter of his second epistle St. Peter warns the early Christians of the dangers associated with interpreting the Scriptures without the proper guidance. Referring to the letters of St. Paul he writes:

"There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures" (2 Pet. 2, 16).

The Catholic Church has always taught the people the contents of the Bible. She orders that it must be read aloud in church and explained in sermons. In times when few could read she taught it by way of paintings, stained-glass windows and religious plays. Now that most people can read she urges her children to read it in the light of her teaching, and tells them that if they do so with faith and love they will not only learn the Word of God but also meet him through their reading and receive life from him.

II Vatican Council

When the catholic bishops of the world gathered with the Pope at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), they had this to say about interpretation of the Bible:

"Those who search out the intention of the sacred writers must, among other things, have regard for "literary forms." For truth is proposed and expressed in a variety of ways, depending on whether a text is history of one kind or another, or whether its form is that of prophecy, poetry, or some other type of speech. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances as he used contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of perceiving, speaking, and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the customs men normally followed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.

But, since holy Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the same Spirit by whom it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly brought to light. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith . . . The way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgement of the Church, which carried out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God”.

The Bible in English

Most of the Bible was originally written in Hebrew or Greek. We read it now in translations. Each translation must be judged on the quality of its English and, even more important, on its accuracy of translation from the original text. Many people are of the opinion that the best modern translation is the Jerusalem Bible. Its English is up-to-date, and it is translated by excellent scholars who are noted for their care. It is the translation used for public reading in most Catholic Churches in Australia. The recently published New English Bible, which was planned and directed by representatives of a number of Protestant Churches, is also an excellent translation.

We decided, however, to use the Revised Standard Version of the Bible in this course of lessons, because it is better known among non-Catholics. It is accurate, and the English used in it is good, although a little dated. All our quotations are from this translation.

For those who are not very familiar with the Bible, a few words about the references to our quotations may be helpful.

About the year 1230, a priest in Paris University divided the Bible into chapters. This made it much easier to find my particular quotation that was needed. In the year 1528, a Dominican priest divided each chapter into verses. This made it easier still to find any section, or even a sentence. These divisions are used in almost every Bible today.

You will notice in this course that, when we quote the Bible, we usually give you the reference after the quotation, so that you may refer to it if you wish. A simple example will explain this to you. After a quotation you may see in brackets (John 21, 15-17). This means that you will find the words quoted in the Gospel of St. John, Chapter 21, verses 15 to 17. If you have the time, it is good to look up these quotations in your Bible, and to read what goes before them and what comes after them. In that way you will see the quotation in its full context and be better able to appreciate its meaning.

Non-Catholic and Catholic Bibles differ very little from each other, especially in the New Testament. (See above 'The Canon of the Bible' regarding the main point of difference in the Old Testament). You should be able to find the quotations we give in any Bible you have in the house.

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The whole Bible tells of God's loving kindness to man. He created and set him over the universe. When man rebelled against God and became hopelessly bogged down in the mess his sins caused, God set about lifting him up and leading him to safety. He chose a people from the rest of the human race, saved them from many dangers and taught them through inspired leaders. At the right moment he sent his Son to teach all truth and give full life.

The Bible often compares God to a shepherd who guards and leads his sheep to places where they find sweet grass and fresh water. Jesus Christ called himself the "Good Shepherd" who would lay down his life to save his sheep (John 10, 14-15).

What God does for his people, he will do for each individual. He yearns over each person and longs to lift him up. Each man, if he is true to his instincts, longs to be lifted up and united to him.

The twenty-third psalm expresses these truths very beautifully. It utters feelings deep in the human heart and has comforted millions in many lands ever since it was written more than two thousand years ago. It is more than a beautiful poem to comfort and gladden the mind. It is a prayer to lift the heart up to God.

**The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want;
he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.**

**Even though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death,
I fear no evil;
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff,
they comfort me**

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
for ever.**

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HOW TO PRAY

Distraction and Dryness

Prayer is simple, prayer is talking to God. God always listens. Why then do we find it so hard to keep our mind on what we are doing? Why do we suffer from distractions?

We all do suffer from them. We start praying with the best will in the world. We turn our mind and heart to God. And then a few minutes later we realize with a shock that our attention has wandered far away. This is often worrying. People are inclined to think that their prayers are useless because they have suffered from distractions. This is not necessarily so. Obviously we should try to avoid distractions. But not all distractions are deliberate. Often they can't be helped.

In the first place don't be surprised that distractions come. We have a body as well as a soul. And our attention is most readily caught by what we can see, touch and feel. God is not visible to our physical eyes. **There is nothing to be surprised at then in the body's attention being distracted by one thing and another.** It is only to be expected that distractions will come. The important thing is to know how to deal with them when they come.

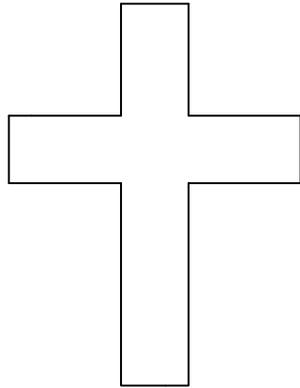
How to deal with Distractions

1. Be properly recollected at least at the beginning of your prayer. Say in your heart, "Here I am Lord and here, too, are You." You will know then at any rate that you have begun well.
2. If you find that your attention has wandered, patiently come back to your prayer and continue.
3. Never go over again the prayers that you have already said distractedly. If you start doing that you will grow so weary of praying there will be a danger that you will give it up entirely.
4. If the mind wanders again, once more patiently come back to prayer and continue.
5. Accept the distractions as a cross and offer them up with the cross Our Lord carried.

All this does not mean that we should take distractions for granted. We should continually be trying to make our prayers more attentive, more recollected. We should not be worried, however, when distractions come through no fault of our own. St. Teresa of Avila said that the "Prayer of distraction," as she called it, could be an even more perfect prayer than the prayer which goes, as it sometimes does, smoothly and comfortably. What she was saying was that **to persevere in prayer to God, even when everything is against it, is a real sign**

of love and shows even more devotion than prayer at the times when we experience full consolation.

The practice of regularly reading a few words of the Gospel or a portion of some other spiritual book will be found a great help to recollection in prayer.



COME HOLY SPIRIT

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Why should Christians read the Old Testament as well as the New Testament?**
- 2. Why do we say God spoke to man in a variety of ways and over a long period before the birth of Jesus?**
- 3. What connection do you see between the Jewish religion and Christianity?**
- 4. "The Bible is the Word of God". What does this statement mean to you?**
- 5. "Sometimes the writers used colourful and dramatic stories of ancient times to teach religious truth". Give examples of this from the Bible.**
- 6. What is the danger of "private interpretation of the Bible?" Did St. Peter say anything about this?**