

Toward a Catholic Understanding of Sacred Scripture: Perennial Guidelines for Biblical Interpretation

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The Holy Ghost inspires not each individual reader, but is ever active in the Church, the pillar and stronghold of truth. If, therefore, an individual desires rightly to understand and interpret Holy Scripture, he must find out the opinion of the Church, and be guided by it.

*Father Michael Seisenberger
Practical Handbook for the Study of the Bible*

Intro

The Church Militant engages in biblical interpretation during the most fundamental Catholic activities. Examples are plentiful: during spiritual reading, while catechizing children, or when praying the Mass. Hence, the Magisterium has issued many pronouncements (mentioned in previous articles in *The Latin Mass*) that offer guidance for the interpretation of the Bible. This present essay will discuss some of those ecclesiastical guidelines, with support from Scripture and Tradition.

Scripture in View of Tradition and the Church

The Bible is not to be read in isolation. Benedict XV's *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920) is trenchant: "Would that all Catholics would cling to St. Jerome's golden rule and obediently listen to their Mother's words, so as modestly to keep within the bounds marked out by the Fathers and ratified by the Church" (IV, 3). The pope declares that if an individual desires to comprehend Scripture, then he must understand its relation to Tradition and the Magisterium. The Church Fathers are the specific aspect of Tradition cited by Benedict; other aspects include doctrine, life, and worship. Let us now examine Tradition and the Church.

Sacred History testifies to the oral proclamation of God's revelation, functioning in an authoritative manner, prior to its inscripturation. The earliest books within the Old Testament provide an example. There is a large span of time, totaling thousands of years, between the actual occurrence of the historical events in the Pentateuch and their eventual recording by Moses (cf. Ex. 24:4; Josh. 1:7-8; 2 Chr. 34:14; Ezra 6:18; Dan. 9:11; Mal.

4:4). In other words, we see an oral teaching prior to the written teaching: a clear case of Tradition “in action” prior to a written Bible.

Still looking at the Old Testament, we notice a “pre-Christian” Magisterium. A dramatic example is discovered in Nehemiah 8:1-12. The context of this era is “The Return from Exile” (538-430 B.C.). The events involve the exiles returning to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple by Zerubbabel. Ezra returns from Babylon and begins his reform; Nehemiah also returns and rebuilds Jerusalem’s walls. This leads to the vivid episode of Ezra reading God’s law to the people during the renewal of the covenant. Nehemiah 8:8-9 reveals the Levites guiding the people for a correct interpretation of God’s law — a kind of teaching office for the disciples of the LORD. This is testimony that Scripture doesn’t function without a divinely appointed interpreter. Other examples in the Old Testament indicate such an office (cf. the book of Leviticus).

Proceeding to the New Testament, we see the same pattern: Tradition, Scripture, and an authoritative teaching office that collectively interpret God’s revealed truths. Tradition is vital to the spread of the Gospel per 1 Corinthians 11:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6; 2 John 12; and 3 John 13-14. St. Paul even categorizes Scripture as part of Tradition (cf. 2 Thess. 2:15). Moreover, there is an authoritative teaching office that interprets and safeguards God’s revelation (cf. Mt. 16:19; 18:17; 28:20; Lk. 10:16; Acts 15:1-35; Eph. 3:7-11; 1 Tim. 3:14-15).

Both Testaments are consistent: God’s written word is never secluded from Tradition, and the word is overseen by a divinely established office. The bottom line — to understand the Bible, one must also understand Tradition and the Magisterium.

The Expression of the Sacred Writer

Pope Pius XII’s *Divino Afflante Spiritu* 34 (1943) states the discovery and defining of what the sacred writer is trying to express is the supreme rule of biblical interpretation. Pius quotes St. Athanasius: “Here, as indeed is expedient in all other passages of Sacred Scripture, it should be noted on what occasion the Apostle spoke; we should carefully

and faithfully observe to whom and why he wrote, lest, being ignorant of these points or confounding one with another, we miss the real meaning of the author” (*Discourses Against the Arians* 1, 54). Such wisdom will spur us to consider who, what, when, where, and why. Who is writing the book? What is the topic or topics? When was the book written? Where is the origin of the book and its destination? Why was the book written? These questions make us cognizant of the Bible’s social, political, and religious climate. The answers help comprehend the perennial truths in Scripture.

A word of caution: moderns disparage the “hard sayings” of Scripture with the claim the writer’s expression is “uncertain,” or by insisting the author doesn’t have our “specialized knowledge of today.” Such an attitude fails to consider all Scripture, not just the pleasant sounding verses, is given by God via the special charism of divine inspiration (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Additionally, one must be aware of eisegesis: the commentator who brings into the biblical text his personal biases. This is especially important today, when Catholics are bombarded with books on the Bible that purport to offer a “fresh reading” or “new insights” or “recent discoveries.” A majority of such glamorous sounding works are recycled Modernism — with the aesthetically impressive footnotes and multi-page bibliography. Solomon’s advice in Ecclesiastes 1:9 is priceless: “there is nothing new under the sun.”

The Senses of Scripture

Catholic biblical interpretation identifies two main senses of Scripture: literal and spiritual. Typical is the outlook of Leo XIII’s *Providentissimus Deus* I, B, 2b (1893), which boasts that one of the stellar contributions from the Middle Ages was its exercise of the senses for biblical exposition. Both senses work together; St. Thomas Aquinas exclaims: “In Sacred Scripture, the truth is manifested in two ways. One way is according to what the words themselves signify; this is the literal sense. Another way is where things prefigure certain other things, and in this consists the spiritual sense” (*Quaestiones Quodlibetales* VII, 14). Let us look at each sense below.

The literal sense is obvious; the meaning conveyed by the actual words of Scripture. One example from each Testament will suffice: Joshua the son of Num died at age one hundred ten (Judg. 2:8), and the Savior went with His disciples across the Kidron valley to a garden (Jn. 18:1). In such a reading, we take the inspired words at face value. St. Thomas says the literal sense has a primacy: “All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal” (*Summa Theologiae* I, 1, 10, ad 1).

The spiritual sense is usually subdivided into three: allegorical, moral, and anagogical. First, the allegorical sense helps us gain a deeper understanding of biblical events by recognizing their significance in Jesus Christ. For example, the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 14:10-30 is a sign or type of the sacrament of baptism per 1 Corinthians 10:1-2. Second, the moral sense considers that biblical events ought to lead us to act justly. For instance, certain episodes of disobedience against God in the Old Covenant (e.g. Ex. 17:1-7; Num. 12:1-7; Ps. 95: 7-11) are recounted in Hebrews 3:1-15 as warnings for the Christian. Third, the anagogical sense points to the biblical events and their eternal significance. An illustration comes from the Apocalypse of St. John, who in Revelation 21:1-22:5 employs the Catholic Church on earth as a sign of the new and heavenly Jerusalem.

The senses of Scripture received great emphasis from the Church Fathers. St. Jerome’s *Commentary on Ezekiel* 4.16 offers testimony with reference to Jerusalem. Supplying our own scriptural references in parentheses, the “Father of Biblical Studies” notes that Jerusalem is a literal city (Mt. 2:1), a locale that allegorically points to the Catholic Church (Heb. 12:22), a place that morally echoes the soul’s earthly pilgrimage (Lk. 13:34), and a landmark that anagogically hopes to reach its final rest (Rev. 21:2). Similar Patristic endorsement of the senses is found in St. Augustine’s *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 1, 1 and St. John Cassian’s *Conferences* 14. The milieu of the Fathers produced two “schools” of biblical interpretation that devoted much attention to the senses. One school was noted for its emphasis upon the literal sense; the school at Antioch in Syria. The other school, at Alexandria in Egypt, highlighted the spiritual sense. The Patristic era also had an interest in “typology.” A biblical type is a true person, place, thing, or

event revealed in the Old Covenant that foreshadows an antitype in the New Covenant. The New Testament is filled with such typology in passages such as John 2:19; Romans 5:14; Galatians 4:24; Hebrews 10:1; and 1 Peter 3:21.

Literary Genres within the Holy Bible

A cursory reading of Scripture discloses a variety of literature within the sacred pages. The Pontifical Biblical Commission's *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* II, 2 (1964), labels this selection of literature as "literary genres." These genres are the styles of writing that were common to the particular setting of the biblical authors. The Commission's instruction, with a focus upon the New Testament, lists catechetical formulas, narrative reports, eyewitness accounts, hymns, doxologies, prayers, and similar genres in the current speech of that epoch. Genres are employed in both Covenants; additional Magisterial documents name other genres such as history, prophecy, and poetry.

The application of the precise genres to the specific books of the Bible requires effort; some books are easier to group than others. Interestingly, several inspired books contain more than one genre. Look at St. John's Apocalypse: its twenty-two chapters reveal nearly all the genres mentioned in *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*.

Despite the work needed to identify the genres, the effort is a great boon to biblical interpretation. It is evident that one ought not to read biblical poetry in the exact manner one reads biblical history. One ought to treat biblical prophecy different from biblical hymns. Making adjustments to the individual genre can help avoid interpretative errors. Nonetheless, one should avoid becoming preoccupied with identifying the genre, to the point where biblical reading becomes a mere exercise in literary analysis.

Content and Unity of the Whole of Scripture

The entire Bible is to be handled as a single entity if one desires to have a proper understanding of divine revelation. St. Pius X manifest this treatment in *Lamentabili Sane* 9, 10, 11, 12, and 61 (1907), with a defense of the inspired writings within both

Testaments. The saying of St. Augustine is fitting: “The New is hidden in the Old, the Old is made manifest in the New” (*Questions on the Heptateuch* 2, 73).

The content and unity of Scripture is seen in every facet of the Faith. One example of this unity is found in the branch of dogmatics called Christology; the study of the Lord Jesus Christ. This field is not restricted to the Gospels alone, but considers the prophecies and types revealed throughout the Old Covenant books. Texts with a Christological significance are found in all three divisions of the Old Testament: “History” (cf. Gen. 3:15), “Wisdom” (cf. Ps. 22:18), and “Prophets” (cf. Is. 7:14). This approach applies to all branches of dogmatics (e.g. Mariology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology). Further, one should be aware of the “analogy of faith.” This is the coherence of all the truths of the Catholic Faith; their relation to each other.

Final Comments

We have scratched the surface of biblical interpretation. The points discussed above frequently overlap and depend upon each other. A more exhaustive study can be accomplished by reading the applicable Magisterial pronouncements in their entirety. Additional information is found in classics such as Monsignor John Steinmueller’s *A Companion to Scripture Studies I*, and Monsignor Charles Grannan’s *A General Introduction to the Bible IV*.

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