

Scripture Study in this Faithless Generation: Resources for Reading the Supernatural in an Anti-Supernatural Age

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At times, when I am reading certain spiritual treatises in which perfection is shown through a thousand obstacles, surrounded by a crowd of illusions, my poor little mind quickly tires; I close the learned book that is breaking my head and drying up my heart, and I take up Holy Scripture. Then all seems luminous to me; a single word uncovers for my soul infinite horizons, perfection seems simple to me, I see it is sufficient to recognize one's nothingness and to abandon oneself as a child into God's arms.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux
Letters II: 1093-4

Intro

An authentic *sensus Catholicus* requires some knowledge of Sacred Scripture. The evidence for this fact is legion; three points will suffice for now. First, the Church Militant treasures the Sacred Scriptures as one source of revelation (beside Tradition). Second, many of the beautiful prayers of the Roman Missal of 1962 are taken directly from the Holy Bible. Third, the “Sacred History” revealed in the Old and New Testament is the only clear lens that allows us to view all history (cf. Heb. 1:1-2). Therefore, it is beneficial to engage in systematic Bible reading and study.

This raises two obvious questions. Where does the Catholic begin? What reliable sources assist the process? This article will help answer these questions. Our main thrust will focus upon resources that clarify the Holy Bible. It should be understood, however, that alluding to a recommended book is not an endorsement of its entire contents. Undoubtedly, any reading material should always be scrutinized in light of Catholic Tradition. Moreover, it is inevitable that some excellent texts will be omitted from this article. Space limitations prevent an exhaustive bibliography.

Nota bene: One should consult his confessor/spiritual director before beginning any type of prolonged theological research. Proper guidance from an orthodox Catholic priest will tailor the study to the individual's intellectual capacity and state in life. Regrettably, this kind of consultation is not always possible today.

Laying a Foundation: Magisterial Guidance to the Holy Bible

The best pillar of support for studying Holy Writ is the Magisterium of the Catholic Church — this should be the point of departure. Holy Mother Church has issued many pronouncements on Sacred Scripture, and related theological topics, that serve as trustworthy guides for Catholic orthodoxy. Let us survey some of these Magisterial works.

Texts that specifically address Sacred Scripture are Pope Leo XIII's *Providentissimus Deus* (On the Study of Holy Scripture, 1893); Pope Benedict XV's *Spiritus Paraclitus* (On the Fifteenth Centenary of the Death of St. Jerome, 1920); and Pope Pius XII's *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (On the Promotion of Biblical Studies, 1943). These Papal documents address essential Biblical study topics such as inspiration; inerrancy; authorship; interpretation; and the Patristic testimony to the Sacra Pagina.

Statements from the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) are valuable; beginning with the initial 1905 decrees and reading up through *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* (The Historicity of the Gospels, 1964). The PBC, when first established by Pope Leo XIII in 1902, was an organ of the Magisterium. However, Pope Paul VI in 1971 reconstituted the PBC, and since that time it functions under the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) as a kind of consultative body. Today, the commission is a “meeting place of dialogue” between Biblical exegetes and the Magisterium. Ironically, recent PBC texts (e.g. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1993) are granted by some an *ex cathedra* aura, while pre-1971 texts (e.g. *On the Historical Character of the First Three Chapters of Genesis*, 1909) are ridiculed or even ignored.

Magisterial pronouncements on theology are a boon to Biblical studies. These ecclesiastical statements safeguard the *depositum fidei* and foster a traditional Catholic understanding of Sacred Scripture. Noteworthy is Pope Pius IX's *Quanta Cura* (with attached *Syllabus of Errors*, 1864); Pope St. Pius X's *Lamentabili Sane* (Syllabus Condemning the Errors of the Modernists, 1907); *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (On the Doctrines of the Modernists, 1907); and Pope Pius XII's *Humani Generis* (On Some False Opinions Which Threaten to Undermine Catholic Doctrine, 1950).

Despite the occasional lack of theological precision because of its “pastoral” language, recent Magisterial pronouncements are offered for consideration: Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 1965), and nos. 101—141 from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997). Touching related themes, no. 11 from the CDF's *Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the 'Professio Fidei'* (1998) is helpful. Actually, none of these recent Magisterial texts supply anything essential to Biblical studies that went undetected in earlier Magisterial pronouncements.

Finishing our Magisterial survey, it should be noted that many accessible reference books contain excerpts or complete texts of these ecclesiastical documents. Books of this kind are very convenient, placing under one cover the pertinent pronouncements. Noteworthy compendia are Béchard's *The Scripture Documents*; Clarkson's *The Church Teaches*; Denzinger's *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*; Louis' *Rome and the Study of Scripture*; Megivern's *Official Catholic Teachings: Biblical Interpretation*; and Myers' *What Does the Church Really Say About the Bible?*

Choosing a Bible Translation

Previous articles have discussed the merits of the Douay-Rheims Bible — every Catholic should own a copy of this venerable translation. Some appreciate the Knox Edition

(1944, 1948, 1950); the opus completed by Monsignor Ronald Knox. Although his translation is not as literal as the Douay-Rheims, some prefer Knox's loose renderings because of the easier readability. If the Douay-Rheims may be classified as a "second-generation" formal equivalent text (i.e. a literal English rendering from Hebrew and Greek via Latin), then the Knox translation can fall under a "second generation" dynamic equivalent text (i.e. thought-for-thought English rendering from Hebrew and Greek via Latin). Both translations are best used in tandem.

Contemporary Bible translations are useful for the sake of comparison. The Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (1965, 1966) and Jerusalem Bible (1966), despite some defects in both translations, may be consulted with some benefits. Many choose these translations for their contemporary English. Someday, an ambitious publisher will put under one cover all the major Catholic Bible translations in the English tongue.

An advanced student will want to consult the Biblical language resources dedicated to the Hebrew and Greek tongues. In this regard, one should procure a copy of the Latin Vulgate. A vast selection of language tools are available from Christian Book Distributors (1-800-247-4784).

Background Information for Scripture Research

After selecting a Scripture translation, the student will want to consult a few resources that provide an overview of the Holy Bible and its related areas. One area of interest is the way the inspired text has been transmitted down through the ages. A compact but informative book is Graham's *Where We Got the Bible*. A more detailed account is found in Pope's *English Versions of the Bible*. Another scholarly treatment is discovered in *The Cambridge History of the Bible 1—3* (a set written by both Catholics and non-Catholics).

Once the transmission process is reviewed, the next area to cover is a general introduction to Sacred Scripture. Many older sets are accessible and remain superior to contemporary books: Grannan's *A General Introduction to the Bible I—IV*; Pope's *Catholic Student's "Aids" to the Study of the Bible I—V*; and Steinmueller's *A Companion to Scripture Studies I—III*. Briefer treatments are Baker's *Inside the Bible*; Breen's *A General Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture*; Fuentes' *A Guide to the Bible*; Lattey's *Back to the Bible*; Laux's *Introduction to the Bible*; and Steinmueller's *The Sword of the Spirit*.

It is beneficial to acquire knowledge of the historical milieu within the Holy Bible. A beginner's tome, useful for children or adults, is Schuster's *Bible History*. More scholarly works are Daniel-Rops' *Sacred History*; Ricciotti's *History of Israel*; and De Vaux's *Ancient Israel*.

A necessary addition for reading God's word is a Bible atlas. Without one, it becomes difficult to follow many Old Testament sequences (e.g. the Exodus). Further, an atlas makes it easier to follow the geographical locations mentioned within the four Gospels

and book of Acts. Numerous Bible atlases are available on the market; most are similar and sufficient for the task.

It is paramount that the Bible student read books that defend the inspired texts from the onslaught of Modernism. Father Brian W. Harrison, O.S., has provided a monumental service to the Catholic Church with his doctoral dissertation *The Teaching of Pope Paul VI on Sacred Scripture*. Related themes are discussed in Kelly's *The New Biblical Theorists*; *The Church's Problem with Bible Scholars*; Most's *Free from All Error*; and Hagerty's *The Authenticity of the Sacred Scriptures*. Brief but worthwhile is Taguchi's *The Study of Sacred Scripture*.

Commentaries for the Inspired Text

Once some background information for Holy Writ has been gleaned, the student of Sacred Scripture will want to consult Biblical commentaries. A commentary will usually cover areas such as authorship of the Biblical books; date of its composition; the historical milieu within the book's writing; the doctrinal significance of the inspired text regarding faith and morals; and the practical application of the revealed truths for the devotional life. Commentaries should never act as a substitute for the actual reading of the sacred pages. A commentary should clarify the Holy Bible and encourage further reading and study, not less.

In a previous article, *The Haydock Study Bible* was given some attention. This Douay-Rheims text, coupled with extensive traditional footnotes, yields an unsurpassed Scriptural resource. The accompanying dictionary is a bonus. After securing the Magisterial documents reviewed earlier, the next source to be purchased should be this Haydock tome.

The Church Fathers are invaluable for understanding the Holy Bible. Three popular multi-volume collections of the Patristic texts are *Ancient Christian Writers* (Newman Press); *The Ante-Nicene, Nicene, and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Hendrickson [non-Catholic]); and *The Fathers of the Church* (CUA Press). A fine set, appended with a useful Scriptural and doctrinal index, is Jurgens' *The Faith of the Early Fathers 1—3*. St. Thomas Aquinas' *Catena Aurea*, his collation of the great Patristic commentators upon the Gospels, is a classic. In addition, the Angelic Doctor's own Biblical commentaries are priceless.

A scholarly single-volume commentary on the entire Bible, with numerous entries on various points, is Orchard's *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*. A handy text is *A Commentary on the New Testament*, prepared in 1942 by the Catholic Biblical Association of America (when the association was still orthodox). Knecht's *A Practical Commentary on Holy Scripture* is true to its name.

Individual commentaries are usually restricted to single books or sections of Holy Writ. The scarce tomes of Cornelius a Lapide are outstanding. Dependable treatises can be

discovered in Prat's *Jesus Christ I-II* and *The Theology of St. Paul I-II*. Not to be discounted are the pertinent Scripture articles in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

A stellar resource that can function as a kind of Bible commentary and reading guide is easy to overlook — the hand Missal. The daily readings to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass provide excellent selections for pondering Sacred Scripture. The Propers (i.e. changeable Mass prayers) and Ordinary (i.e. fixed Mass prayers) supply a lifetime of reading material. Moreover, this method of study roots the Holy Bible to the Sacrifice of Calvary. The standard hand Missals (e.g. St. Andrew's; St. Joseph's; St. Mary's; Fr. Lasance's) will serve well in this capacity.

Continuing this line of study, an aid to Bible study based upon the Holy Mass is Guéranger's *The Liturgical Year 1—15*. This magnificent set not only contains selections from the Scripture readings for the Mass of the day, but also a wealth of theology, history, and practical advice that illuminates Divine Revelation.

Tools for Going Deeper into the Inspired Text

The student of God's word may want to interact with specific words or phrases; a Bible concordance is needed for this kind of investigation. Concordances come in two kinds: analytical and textual. The analytical or word concordance usually lists all chapter and verse locations of key Biblical terms (e.g. apostle; wrath). Textual or topical concordances usually contain excerpts from the specific verses, arranged by subject (e.g. "God's Mercy in the Old Testament;" "Works and Salvation"). Two analytical concordances are Thompson's *Concordance to the Bible* and Whitaker's *The Eerdmans Analytical Concordance to the Revised Standard Version of the Bible* (non-Catholic). Three textual concordances are Maertens' *Bible Themes I-II*; Vaughan's *The Divine Armory of Holy Scripture*; and Williams' *A Textual Concordance of the Holy Scriptures*.

Working alongside the concordance, a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia traces the Scriptural terms back to their Hebrew and Greek roots, and provides a rich definition. Useful texts are Hartman's *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible*; Léon-Dufour's *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*; McKenzie's *Dictionary of the Bible*; and Steinmueller's *Catholic Biblical Encyclopedia*.

It is fascinating to study how each of the Four Evangelists often recorded the same events, but from different perspectives and emphases. For this type of examination, a synopsis or harmony of the Gospels is an ideal tool. This kind of aid will place side-by-side, for comparison, all the events recorded by the Apostolic writers. Good sources are Aland's *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (non-Catholic) and Hartdegen's *A Chronological Harmony of the Gospels*. As an aside, the variations revealed for the same Gospel episodes actually strengthen their trustworthiness (a classic apologetic argument that is worthy of an entire article!).

An important detail: Bible study resources are sometimes written to match a specific Bible version. Still, these books can be employed even without the “proper” version on hand.

Final Comments

We have reviewed some helpful resources that shed light upon Holy Writ. Many of the recommendations can be purchased at reasonable prices “on-line” (www.bookfinder.com). A single book purchase from each category will establish a dependable home library — a necessity for the serious Catholic.

A future article will build upon our recommended resources. We will examine a way to read the Sacred Scriptures chronologically: emphasis will be placed upon the main events of “Sacred History.” As we prepare for this endeavor, let us ponder the Fifth Century utterance of St. Jerome: “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ” (*Commentaries on Isaiah* prologue).

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