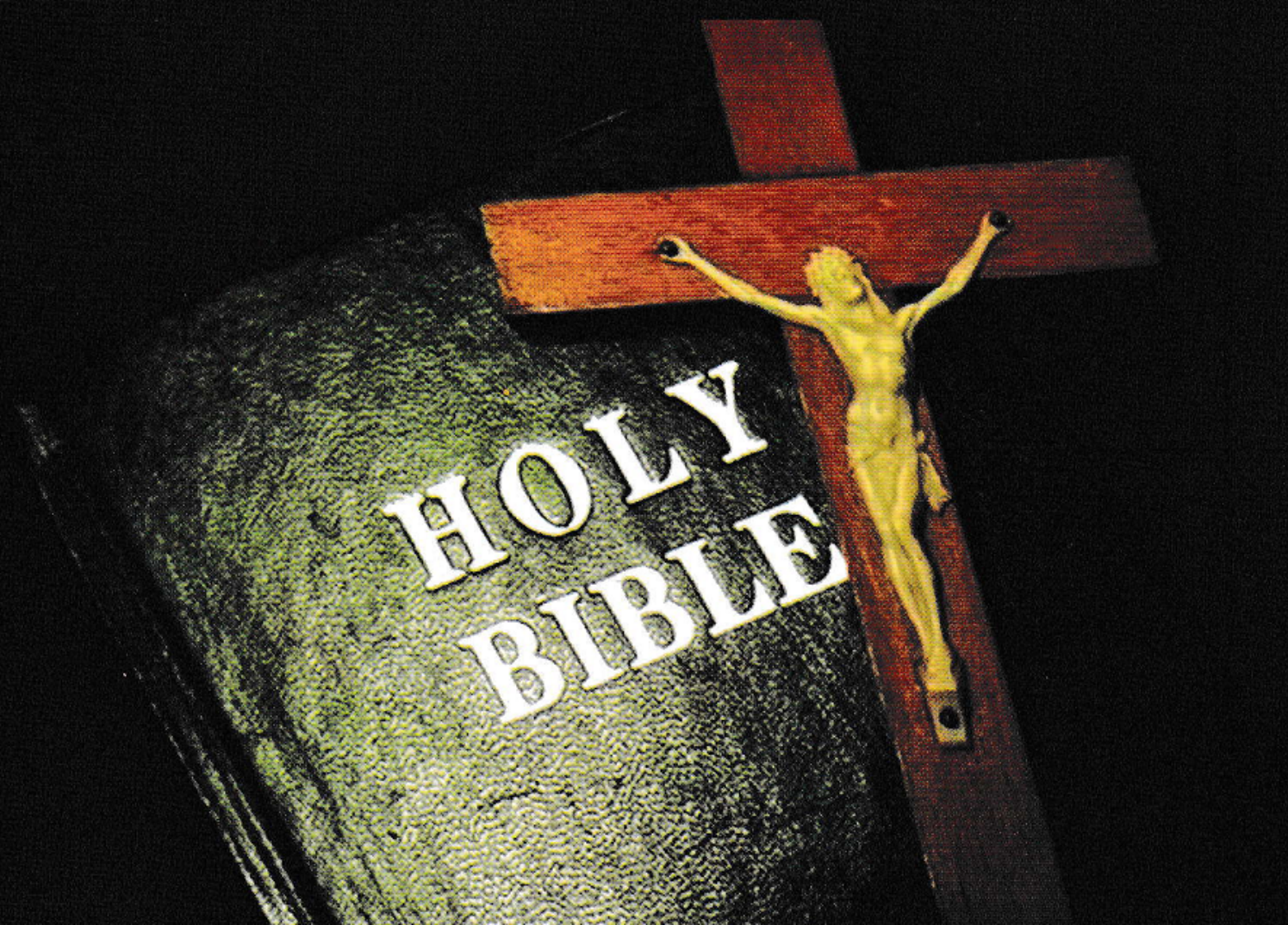


A PILGRIMAGE THROUGH THE BIBLE - 1

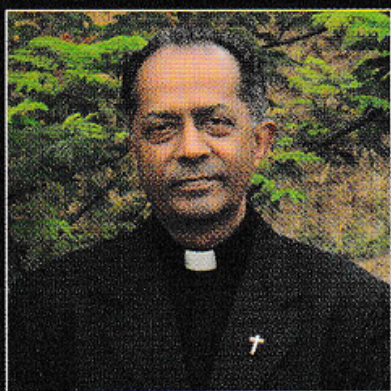
A Guide to  
**BIBLE STUDY**

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Dr. Michael Karimattam

A photograph of a wooden cross with a crucifix on top, resting on a dark, textured book cover. The words 'HOLY BIBLE' are embossed on the book cover in a light, serif font. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the textures of the wood and the book cover.

HOLY  
BIBLE



# A GUIDE TO BIBLE STUDY

Dr. Michael Karimattam

*“It pleased God, in His goodness and wisdom, to reveal Himself and to make the mystery of His will”* (Vat. II, DV 2). Bible is the written Word of God that reveals to us God, His plan and will for us and teaches how to live as children of God. The Bible is a book that was written more than 2000 years ago in languages and situations totally different from ours. Without taking this fact into account, people interpret bible passages according to one’s own interests and imagination. The same passage, verses and incidents are often given contradicting interpretations, creating much confusion and opening the way to misunderstanding. Many of such interpretations stand against the official teachings of the Catholic Church.

In this Context there is a great need for a serious study of the Bible that would help people without special training in biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, to grasp the meaning God intends to communicate to us through the written Word. The Series: **“A Pilgrimage through the Bible”**, is an attempt to respond to this need. This book is the first one of that series. It deals with the basic facts such as Inspiration, Canon, and introduces various methods of bible reading, study, interpretation, praying with the Bible and sharing the Word of God. The text of the Vat II document on Revelation **“Dei Verbum”** is given as the last chapter.

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Bible Studies

**A GUIDE TO  
BIBLE STUDY**



**A GUIDE TO  
BIBLE STUDY**

**Dr. Michael Karimattam**



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English

*A Guide to Bible Study*

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## INTRODUCTION

*“In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation” (DV 2.)*

The Document of Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, published on 18 November 1965, created great interest and love for the Bible among Catholics. As the Church in Kerala published the Bible in

Malayalam on 31 December 1981, an official translation of the Bible in the vernacular was made available for the people of Kerala. This created a renewed interest in the Word of God for the Catholics in Kerala. The Charismatic movement, that had received momentum at the time, fired up the interest in the Word of God among the faithful of Kerala. Great importance was given to the Bible in the area of Faith formation on parish and diocesan levels.

Thus, in various ways the people of God became attracted to the Word of God. People began to read the Bible. Almost all the families tried to have at least one copy of the Bible and started to read it as part of the daily family prayer. The faithful became deeply interested in reading and studying the Bible. However, this new interest in the Bible gave rise to a few serious problems as well.

The Bible is a collection of 73 books written more than 2000 years ago in languages and situations totally different from ours. Without giving much consideration to this fact, people began to interpret Bible passages and incidents in the way each one felt suitable to the need. The same passages and verses were often given contradicting interpretations by prayer group leaders and preachers, creating much confusion and misunderstandings among the People. Some of the interpretations were against the official teachings of the Catholic Church.

Thus, the Word of God that is to function as the source of unity tended to a cause of conflict and division among the Catholics. New sects began to spring up. Retreat centres emerged throughout Kerala and some of them give emphasis to certain themes while neglecting the fundamental principles of faith. This created further confusion and misunderstanding among the faithful. Themes like ancestral curse, healing the roots of the family

tree, casting out the spirit of the dead turned into evil spirits, preaching the Gospel the souls of the dead in order to convert them are examples of the erroneous interpretations of the Word of God which caused many to go astray from the main stream of the Church.

Under these situations it became necessary to make available an authentic study of the Bible in the light of the official teaching of the Catholic Church for those who have no special training. In consideration of this need, the diocese of Tellicherry, under the Department of Bible Apostolate, started a new series of Bible interpretation, under the title, “*A Pilgrimage through the Bible*”.

Surprising was response received from the readers. Many Religious congregations of sisters, organization of the youth such as Jesus Youth, teachers of Faith formation etc. began to use these books as study material. Within six months, 20,000 copies of the first book, **Primeval History (Gen 1-11)**, were sold. Reprints were made again and again. By 1997, the publication of 14 books, interpretation of Bible from Genesis to 2 Chronicles, was completed and we had started with the Prophets, publishing a commentary of the Book of Amos. Then, in a totally unexpected way God intervened in my life and in the project of **Bible Pilgrimage**, and I was forced to stop writing and publication. Now after 22 years, we are restarting that series, with slight alterations and modification.

This book is the preface to that series. It deals with introductory questions such as, what is the Bible, why is it called the Word of God, who wrote it, when it was written, etc. Following the basic information, the need and benefits of reading the Bible, how to read it etc. are presented. After presenting the

method “*Devotional reading of the Bible*” (*lectio divina*) a rather developed form of the same method, called “Gospel Sharing - Seven Step Method” is discussed in detail

Next we deal with various methods of bible study. Some of the important factors to be kept in mind while interpreting bible passages are also pointed out in this section. The basic theme of the Bible is the relationship between God and humanity, and the Bible is often described as history of salvation. Hence this book of introduction concludes with a brief survey of salvation history. The official teaching of the Second Vatican Council on Revelation, *Dei Verbum* is added as an appendix.

*“The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body. She has always maintained them, and continues to do so, together with sacred tradition, as the supreme rule of faith, since, as inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the Word of God Himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles. Therefore, like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: “For the Word of God is living and active” (Heb. 4:12) and “it has power to*

*build you up and give you your heritage among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32; see 1 Thess. 2:13)” (DV 21).*

*“For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”(5) Therefore, they should gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose and other aids which, in our time, with approval and active support of the shepherds of the Church, are commendably spread everywhere. And let them remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for “we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine saying” (DV 25).*



## Chapter I

# BIBLE, THE WORD OF GOD

The Bible can be said to be the sum total of the revelation God has made over time or the summary of the letters God sent to humanity.

### **An all-time Best Seller**

Without any shadow of a doubt we can say that the Bible is the most popular book in the world. No other book in the history of publication has been translated into so many languages. No other book has been printed and distributed in so many copies. Over two billion Christians consider the Bible as the Holy Book, containing the written Word of God. Over a billion Muslims consider the bible with great respect. The first part of the book which the Christians call the Old Testament is the Holy Book of the Jews. Even people of other religions and those who belong to no religion consider the Bible as the most important written book. The Bible is divided into two parts, namely Old Testament and New Testament. The Old Testament is the sacred scripture of the Jews. While the Christians call it “Bible”, the Jews call it, The Book (Sefer), Holy Book (Sefer ha Kodesh) or Tanak. The word Tanak (or TNK) is the abbreviation of three words, presenting a threefold division of The Book, namely Torah -T (The Law), Nebiim - N (Prophets) and Ketubim -K (Writings).

Originally the Old Testament was written in Hebrew while the New Testament was written in Greek. Later they were translated into various languages. According to a recent estimation there are 6909 languages in the world and the Bible has been fully or partially translated into 2932 languages. The entire books of the New Testament have been translated into 1333 languages. Johannes Guttenberg (1400-1468), a German blacksmith, goldsmith, inventor and publisher is the one who invented the printing machine and the first book he printed was the Bible.

## **The Name Bible**

I was blessed to be one of the three chief editors of the P.O.C. Malayalam Bible that was published on 31 December 1981. One of the main questions we discussed was the name of the book. Various names such as Sacred Scripture, Word of God, Testament, Book of Revelation were suggested but at the end all agreed on the term “Bible”. It is not a Malayalam word. What does it mean? How did this name originate?

The word Bible is the adaptation of the Greek word *Biblion*. A very simple translation of this word is “book”. The word “*Biblion*” is the singular form. Its plural is and “*Biblia*”. There is a history behind this term. On the Eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, about 40 Kilometres North West of Beirut, the archaeologists have discovered the remains of a big city that city was called Gebel but was known as Byblos when it was under the rule of the Greeks.

Byblos was a famous harbour city from which papyrus sheets were exported to all over the world. The word paper comes from the word, papyrus. The papyrus sheets were cut into suitable size and used as a writing material. The most important book written on them was the Sacred Scripture. Thus the Holy book was connected with Byblos and began to be called *Biblion*, “Bible”. The word simply means “book”.



## **Bible - a Collection of Books**

The Bible is a book and at the same time it is a collection of 73 books. Some of them are long but some are very short. The longest book in the Bible is Psalms with 150 chapters. The second letter of St. John, with 13 verses is the smallest book. The Bible is divided into two parts, Old Testament and New Testament. The word Testament, however, does not fully express the meaning or the content of the book. The word covenant would be more apt because the covenant God made with the people is the central theme of the book.

The Old Testament has 46 books which could be divided into three groups such as: 1. Historical Books (Genesis to 2 Maccabees 21 books); 2. Wisdom Books (Job to Ecclesiasticus or Sirach - 7 books) and 3. Prophets (Isaiah to Malachi - 18 books).

There are 27 books in the New Testament which can be divided into four groups, namely Gospels (4); Acts of the Apostles (1); Epistles (21) and Revelation (1). The Epistles are divided into the “Letters of St. Paul” (13), “Letter to the Hebrews” (1), and “Catholic Epistles” (7). There are some who divide the New Testament books imitating the division made in the Old Testament. They consider the first five books as historical books, the Epistles as books of Wisdom and the book of Revelation as a prophetic book.

The first part of Salvation History, Genesis to the advent of the Son of God, is presented in the Old Testament. The fulfilment of the promises God made, that is the fulfilment of Salvation History, started with the birth of Jesus, the incarnation of the Word of God as man. His life, activities, teachings, death, resurrection, and glorification are the content of the first part of the New Testament. The second part deals with the way the Apostles and other disciples worked to bring the Good News to the ends of

the earth. God will renew the world and a New Heaven and a New Earth will come into being. That is what the last book of the Bible promises. The Bible concludes depicting the beautiful vision of God dwelling in the midst of human beings. In short, the Bible presents salvation history from creation to the coming of the New Heaven and New Earth, from Paradise to Parousia.

## **Formation of the Bible**

There is a long history behind the formation of the Bible, as we have it today. Before the modern scientific study started, there was a very simple explanation regarding the formation of the Bible. The Pentateuch was written by Moses. The historical books were written by Joshua, Samuel, and Elijah. Ezra wrote the history after the Babylonian Exile. David composed the Psalms and the books of Wisdom were written by Solomon. The books of Prophets were written by the prophets in whose name the books are known. But this simplistic understanding changed by the 16<sup>th</sup> century when more scientific research began on the Bible. Now the bible scholars have come to a general agreement that many of the books, especially the letters in the New Testament, were written by the Apostles or dictated by them and written down by their disciples or secretaries. The Gospels and even more the Old Testament books have a more complicated history of formation. This formation history could be divided into five parts: 1. Historical Event 2. Explanation 3. Oral tradition 4. Written tradition and 5. Final Publication.

### **1. Event**

Bible is the written word of God. “Word” means revelation or the means used for revealing the message. Hence, Bible is the book that presents the revelation of God. Much of this revelation took place, mainly through some events such as creation of the universe, call of the Patriarchs, Exodus etc. Of these the most important, as far as the history of salvation is concerned, is the

Exodus Event through which God revealed His name and true nature.

In Egypt, under the rule of Pharaoh, the people of Israel were brutally oppressed and they cried out to the Lord. The Lord heard their cry and liberated them with mighty hand, performing many miracles. He divided the sea for them to walk on dry ground and get away from the land of slavery, guided them through the desert, giving them shade of the cloud during the day and light during the night. They were fed with Manna from heaven and water from the rock. God protected them from the attack of enemies and accepted them as His own people through a covenant He made with them at Mount Sinai. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, they entered and settled in the Promised Land, the land of Canaan. This long process is the central theme of the Exodus event.

A similar picture can be seen about the New Testament also. The Christ event is the centre of the New Testament and it depicts the incidents from the birth of Jesus to His resurrection and glorification. There is a parallelism between the Exodus event and the Christ event. If Exodus depicted the passing from the land of slavery to the Promised Land, the Christ event depicts the passing of humanity from the slavery of sin and death to the Kingdom of God, to the status of the children of God. Both are historical events; but many who witnessed and experienced them did not recognize the true meaning of the events. Hence they needed to be explained.

## **2. Explanation**

God reveals Himself through incidents that are visible to all. But, all those who see them might not comprehend the meaning of what they see and hear. Those who walked through the parted sea did not understand its inner meaning. They considered it as low tide. When they found “Manna” being showered from heaven,

they asked what it was. Moses explained to them that it was the blessing from God who felt compassion for them. Only then, did they realize the meaning of the event as the sign of God's love and compassion.

The same happened in the case of Jesus also. Some people even misunderstood him. When Jesus cast out evil spirits with the Spirit of God, they interpreted it as the work of the prince of demons namely Satan or Beelzebub. Those who ate the miraculously multiplied bread only searched for more bread as they did not understand the inner meaning of event. Even the Apostles could not understand all that Jesus did and said. Only when the Risen Jesus explained to them, for example on the way to Emmaus, did they realize that the Christ event, what they saw and experienced, was the fulfilment of the redemptive mission entrusted to Jesus by the Father. It was the manifestation of God's plan for the salvation of humanity.

### **3. Proclamation - Oral Tradition**

Those who came to know God through various events described their experience and proclaimed it in public. What they heard and understood through Moses was passed on from generation to generation. This sharing continued in homes and other gatherings for prayer. Many of the things they heard became part of their prayers. For example, the songs of Moses and Miriam (Ex 15, 1-21), the song of Deborah (Judges 5, 1-31), Song of Hanna (1 Sam 2, 1-10), Lamentation of David (2 Sam 1, 17-27), and above all the Psalms became the prayer of Israel. At the same time the feasts they celebrated, such as Passover, Pentecost, the feast of the Tabernacles etc., became occasions to remember and recount the redemptive works of God. When the Passover was celebrated at home, the parents explained to the children the story of the Passover lamb and unleavened bread and the way God liberated Israel from slavery in Egypt. The priests explained

the same thing in the prayer gatherings and gradually the explanations took on a definite form. Thus, the oral traditions were formed.

The same thing happened in the case of the New Testament as well, especially in the formation of the Gospels. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Apostles shared the revelations they received from Jesus Christ. True to the command of the Master, “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all of Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Lk 24,47; Acts 1,8), the Apostles proclaimed the Word of God all over the world. Their pattern of preaching the Gospel first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles could be seen in the Acts of the Apostles and letters of St. Paul.

This proclamation took place mainly in two situations. Firstly to those who were hearing about Jesus for the first time, as a missionary activity of introducing Jesus, his life and his teachings. Secondly the Word was preached to those who gathered for prayer, celebrating the memory of the Last Supper of Jesus. Over a period of time, these Narratives took a definite form. Of these the most perfect, authoritative and complete oral tradition was the one that formed around the Last Passover Jesus celebrated with His disciple, to which was added the passion narrative. The fact that all the four Gospels narrate the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus almost in the same way supports this conclusion.

#### **4. Written Tradition**

As the eye-witnesses were dying out and new generations coming up the possibility of forgetting many things and adding unauthentic materials became a cause of concern. Hence, it was important that what they heard over the generations should be kept in written form. Of all the material of the OT most research has been conducted on the first five books, namely the Pentateuch, also called the Book of Moses, and various theories have been

proposed. The research still continues and ever new theories are being proposed. Of all the theories, the one about the four sources behind the Pentateuch seems to be still valid, though with ever new nuances. There is a consensus among the Scripture Scholars that these four traditions were formed between the time of David (1000 B.C.) and the time of Ezra-Nehemiah (450 B.C). Such research has been done over the other books also and they have come to similar conclusions. Scripture Scholars have a similar view regarding the Gospels. St. Luke has explicitly stated that he had done his study before writing the gospel (Lk 1, 1- 4). Similar investigations are being done regarding the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles.

## **5. Final Editing and Publication**

There are differences of opinion especially regarding the Old Testament, about the time, when a book of the Bible took the final shape as we have it today. Most of the bible research scholars agree that the books from Genesis to 2 Chronicles attained the final form by the time of Ezra, namely the middle of the fifth century B.C. There is no consensus regarding the other five historical books from Tobit to 2 Maccabees. The books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs took the final form by the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Psalms and proverbs were written from the time of David and Solomon to the fourth century B.C. The general conclusion is that the Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) was formed in the second century and the book of Wisdom took the final form in the first century B.C.

Bible Scholars have a better understanding regarding the formation of New Testament. Most of them agree that of the 27 books of the New Testament, the first books written are the two letters of Paul to the Thessalonians, around 50 A.D. Of the Gospels, the Gospel of Mark was written first (65-70 A.D.) and the Gospel of John was the last to be written (90-95 A.D.). The

Acts of the Apostles is the second part of the Gospel of Luke and that was written together with the Gospel by Luke, between the years 70 to 80 A.D. The Letter to the Hebrews was written before the destruction of Jerusalem between the years 67 and 70 A.D. and the gospel of Matthew after the destruction of Jerusalem. There is no consensus regarding the Catholic Epistles. Most probably they all were written before the end of the first century. Most of the Bible Scholars agree that the last book, the book of Revelation was written right before the death of the Roman Emperor, Domitian (96 A.D.), who had unleashed the most severe religious persecution. Thus, all the books of the New Testament were written between the years of 50 and 100 A.D.

The 73 books of the Bible were written over a period of 1000 years. This was not the creation of one or two authors; it was formed as result of the joint effort of numerous persons and communities. If it is so, then how can we say that the Bible is the Word of God? This question will be dealt with in the following chapters.

## Chapter 2

# THE AUTHOR OF THE BIBLE

The Bible is a collection of 73 books; at the same time it is a single book. In this Book many themes are presented in various literary forms. However all through it, there is one theme to all the books, theme of “Eternal Salvation”. The Bible describes the unfolding of the history of salvation that God gives to humanity. All that is written in the Bible is related to this single theme. A great number of persons appear in the Bible but there is one person who is the most important and central character - Jesus Christ, the Son of God Incarnate. All the others are related to this single person.

Bible was written by many authors but there is one single author above all other authors, God the Holy Spirit. Here we need to take into consideration two things: 1. What does it mean when we say that the Holy Spirit is the main author of the Bible? 2. How should we consider the great many people involved in the formation of the Bible?

### **1. Holy Spirit - The Author of the Bible**

The Document of Vatican II, **Dei Verbum** teaches, that *“Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother*



*Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-20, 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety,... written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself” (DV 11).*

## **Inspired by God**

This statement points to the teaching of the Catholic Church about Inspiration of the Scriptures. The word inspiration is the translation of the Latin word *Inspiratio*. The literal meaning of the word is “breath” or “breathed on”. The original Greek word used, “*Theopneustos*” also means the same thing. When St. Paul wrote, “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3, 16), the Apostle used the same word. Many take this literally and claim that it means that the entire Bible was breathed into the writer or dictated by God.

This idea about inspiration was prevalent among primitive Christians as can be seen for ancient pictures portraying God’s inspiration. Artists have drawn pictures of the sacred writers, especially the evangelists, sitting with pen and paper and thinking while the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove sits on the shoulder and speaks into the ear of the author. The idea the picture expresses is evident: The Holy Spirit dictates and the author writes down what he hears. The part of the author is only that of a pen or writing instrument. In this case the part of the Holy Spirit is not inspiring but instructing and dictating. It is true if we take the Greek and Latin words used in this operation in the literal sense.

If this theory is accepted, we have to believe that all the 73 books of the Bible were dictated by the Holy Spirit at various times. But, this would raise a number of questions for which it will be difficult to answers. Why do we have four different

presentations for the same Christ event? Though there are many things similar in all four Gospels, the literary style, order of presentation, and points of emphasis are different. Thus there are many questions in the Old Testament and New Testament for which we can find no answer. Besides, it is difficult to understand that the Sacred Authors acted like mere machines.

In this context what St. Luke says about his writing deserves special attention: “Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed” (Lk 1, 1-4). This is a clear example of the human participation in the writing of the Gospel. Hence we have to listen to the official teaching of the Catholic Church regarding the operation of the Holy Spirit in writing the Sacred Scripture.

*“In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted. Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation” (DV 11).* In short, God and man worked together in composing the Bible. Or rather we can say that the Bible is the Word of God written in human words. The Vatican Document compares Bible to the incarnation of God as man. *“For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human*

*discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men” DV 13).*

What we saw regarding the various stages of the formation of the Bible need to be taken into consideration here. One might ask, when or at what stage of the long process of the Word of God being written down and made available in the present form of the book did the Holy Spirit operate? Some think that it happened in the persons who gave the final form. But, the Church teaches that the Holy Spirit was involved all the way through the formation of the Bible, as we have it today. Therefore, inspiration worked not only in one person but all through Salvation History. Here all those who have experienced and communicated God’s revelation through spoken words or written words, were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

## **Inspiration**

Now the question is raised: What is Inspiration? There is much misunderstanding among people about inspiration. Hence it must be clearly pointed out Inspiration is not.

**1. It is not dictation** The Holy Spirit does not dictate what is to be written. Each author writes using his/her ability and with a specific intention.

**2. It is not only inerrancy:** The Holy Spirit would protect the sacred authors from communicating matters that are against faith or morality. But Inspiration cannot be preventive just to such negative action

**3 It is not just subsequent approbation** We cannot limit inspiration to the approval by the Holy Spirit for the matters written according to the personal interest and views. It is not like a “*nihil obstat*” given by the Church authorities to the effect that there is nothing against the official teaching of the Church. Inspiration protects the author from making mistakes but that is not all.

All through the formation of the Bible, the Holy Spirit inspired the authors by giving them light, enthusiasm, protection, guidance and strength.

## **The fruits of Inspiration**

Because the Bible was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it has certain characteristic features. Four of them are listed below:

### **1. Bible is the Word of God**

Word is a means used to communicate something. It could be the spoken word or some deed. Because it is inspired, the entire Bible contains matters that God communicates to humanity or are revealed by God. The revelation of God contains two things. God revealed Himself and His plan of salvation. *“Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men. That is to say, He chose to share with them those divine treasures” (DV 6)*. Not only what is written with the introduction “God said” but the whole Bible contains Gods revelation. God reveals through words and action and so the entire Bible is the Word of God.

**2. Infallibility** Since it is inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Bible contains no wrong information or false instruction. Infallibility is applied only for matters that deal with faith and morals. There will be no error when Bible teaches what to believe and how to live. But there could be mistakes while dealing with history or geography because teaching such scientific matters is not the goal of the Bible. The authors presented such matters basing on the knowledge and information available at the time of writing those books. There is disparity between the scientific information and Biblical presentation of the structure of the universe, age of the earth etc. Here a famous dictum of Galileo is significant. “Bible does not teach how the heavens go but how to go to heaven”.

**3. Unity - non contradiction** Though there are many books in the Bible, it is a single book as it is inspired by the Holy Spirit and deals with a single theme, Salvation. Hence there will be unity between the various parts of the Bible. Though some words or teachings might appear to contradict each other, upon close examination we will see that there is no contradiction but they are complimentary. For example, consider some of the words Jesus said about peace. In the farewell discourse Jesus tells the disciples: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (Jn 14, 17). But on another occasion he had told them: “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division” (Lk 12, 51). Though there is a difference between these two statements, it emphasises that ultimately the Peace Jesus gives is different from the kind of peace we find in the world.

**4. Bible is the Criterion of Life** The Bible teaches what to believe and how to live. However, it is the NT that is the ultimate criterion and guide of faith and conduct, not the Old Testament. Jesus did not abolish the OT but fulfilled it. We must see the OT in the light of the New Testament. The OT emphatically states that God is one but the NT teaches that this one God is the communion of three persons. Regarding the law of life also we can see such a fulfilment: “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them.”<sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished (Mt 5,17-18). Six times Jesus pointed out this law of fulfilment with the preface, “You have heard that it was said to the men of old...but I say to you” (Mt 5, 21-48). All these propose a higher standard of morality and so what was revealed through Jesus should be the norm used in fashioning one’s life.

## **2. Human Authors**

In writing the Bible, the main author is the Holy Spirit but it was written by numerous people God chose to do the writing.

Who were they? It might be helpful to understand certain views that existed in ancient days regarding the authors. Some of them still exist. Just because a book is known in the name of a person, it would not mean that he wrote the book with his own hand. There were five different views regarding the authorship.

**1. *The one who directly wrote*** If a person has written a book, he will be its author. This is acceptable and relevant at all times. Even if someone copied the text, the author would be the one who originally wrote it. The most obvious example is the Gospel of St. Luke. But, there are not many books for which we can find such a definite author like this.

**2. *Dictation*** One would tell another one, clearly what is to be written. The one who writes might be called “secretary”. Here the author is not the one who write but the one who dictates the text. Most of the letters of St. Paul were written in this manner.

**3. *The one gives ideas*** One person tells another person the ideas that are to be written down. The one who heard it writes everything without omitting any idea that was communicated. Here the author will be the one who provided the ideas. For example, note the statement of Peter, “Through Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God” (1 Peter 5, 12). Many of the pastoral letters of Bishops, Apostolic letters and Encyclicals of the Pope are written in this fashion.

**4. *The master, the source of Ideas*** Sometimes, after the death of a master, the disciples collect his ideas and teachings and publish it as a book. Many of the books in the Bible were written in this fashion. Most of the books of the Prophets were written by their disciples. An example is the book of Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet who lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The book known in his name has 66 chapters of which 1-39 were written before the Babylonian exile; 40–55 during the exile and 56-66

after the exile. But all of them are known in the name of the Prophet Isaiah.

### ***5. In the Literary tradition of a well know person***

Different from all these, another kind of authorship existed in the early days. Some famous people were considered as the author of certain literary patterns. Books written over a period of time might be collected and published in the name of that famous author. The first five books of the Bible (Pentateuch) are known as the books of Moses. One time it was believed that Moses wrote all these books known as Torah (Laws). But, now it is accepted as an undisputed fact that the Pentateuch was formed over Eight centuries, from the time of Moses to the time of Ezra-Nehemiah.

David was considered as a gifted musician. It is reported in the book of Samuel that the music David played used to give life and enthusiasm to Saul who was subjected to depression. We see many songs in the Bible attributed to King David. Not only that, the whole book of Psalm is known in the name of King David. Solomon was a man of great wisdom and so all the books of Wisdom are known in his name. It is generally agreed now that the Book of Wisdom was written during the first century B.C. Still that book is known as The Wisdom of Solomon. So also we have The Song of Solomon.

Besides all these there is what we call the pseudonymous literature, namely publishing books in the name of well know persons of the past. In the Bible, the book of Daniel is an example for this. The book that was written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., during the time of religious persecution under Antiochus IV, is attributed to a person called Daniel who is supposed to have lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C, during the time of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. Hence, just because a book is known in a name would not mean that it was necessarily written by that person. No one considers it wrong to publish a book in the name of a famous person.

## Chapter 3

# CANONICAL BOOKS

The Bible is a collection of 73 books written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But which are the books included in this collection? What is the proof that a book was inspired by the Holy Spirit? Who decides that a book is inspired or not, and under what criteria? There is a difference of opinion even among the Christians. The Bible published by the Catholics have 73 books while the Bible published by the Protestants have only 66 books, 7 books less, in the Old Testament. There are many other books, both in the O.T. and the N.T. that were once considered as part of the Bible, among the Jews and Christians. Hence, the above question is relevant.

The Bible was formed in the community of the faithful. The OT was written centuries after the formation of Israel as a people. The first five books were completed, the way we have them today, only in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Israel, the people of God, was there before the Bible came into existence. The same is true with the New Testament also. The first Gospel was written between 65 and 70 A.D., about 35 years after the death of Jesus. The Gospel of John was written towards the end of the first century. The first letter of St. Paul, the first letter to the Thessalonians, was written in 50 A.D. In short, 20 years had passed, after the Christ event, before the first book of the N.T. was written.



Another factor that has to be kept in mind is that the Bible was written in and for the community of the Faithful. It is the teaching authority of the Church that decides which books are to be included in the Bible. The word canon can mean several things. First it denotes a measuring rod. Then it can point to a set of laws, such as the canon Laws and each law of the collection is considered a canon. Canon is also particular title given in the Catholic Church to some ecclesiastical dignitaries. But when we use this word for the Bible it denotes the “list” of books accepted by the Catholic Church as the Word of God “Canon” and the “books” in the list are called “Canonical Books”.

By the end of second century A.D. a list of Canonical books in the NT had come into existence. Though there were some differences of opinion regarding some books, by the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, 27 books of the N.T. were accepted as Canonical books.

In a pastoral letter written in connection with the feast of Passover Athanasius (296-373), Patriarch of Alexandria, officially taught the faithful that the New Testament contains 27 books, giving the names of all the books. Thereafter many regional and ecumenical councils repeated this teaching. In 1546, the Council of Trent, in the document called “**De Canonicis Scripturis**”, published the list of books to be included in the Bible, both O.T. and N.T., 45 in the OT and 27 in the NT, altogether 72. The difference in the number of books is due to the fact that the Book of lamentation was considered as part of the Book of Jeremiah and the two together were counted as one book

**Norms of Canons:** The Catholic Church has prescribed four conditions for accepting a book as canonical, in the New Testament. 1. Apostolic origin. It must have been written during the time of the Apostles, before the end of the first century and should be somehow related to one of the 12 Apostles. 2. It

should be approved by the universal Church. 3. It must be in total agreement with the faith tradition of the Church. 4. The Church Fathers must have quoted from it.

A different set of laws were used to determine the canonicity of the O.T. Books. The O.T. of the Christians is the Holy Book of the Jews and so the Protestants claim that only the books the Jews consider as Bible should be accepted by the Christians. Accordingly in the O.T., 39 books are accepted as Canonical books. They omit the following seven books, namely Tobit, Judith, 1-2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) and Baruch which the Catholic Church accepts as canonical. Besides these seven books, the Protestants reject also six chapters from Esther (11-16), the “song of the three youth” the 68 verses found in between Dan 3, 23-24, and the last two chapters of the Book of Daniel (Dan 13-14)

These books and parts of books are rejected on the ground that these are not found in the Hebrew Bible. However, there is proof that most of them were originally written in Hebrew. For example the author of the Book of Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) has acknowledged in the prologue that he was translating from the Hebrew original. Part of the book of Judith has been found in Hebrew among the scrolls of Qumran. Hence the argument for omitting those books from the canon is not fully valid. It should also be kept in mind that the Church was using not the Hebrew bible but the Greek translation called the Septuagint (LXX). The Catholic Church is using as criterion for the canonicity of OT books not the Hebrew origin, but some other norms.

The official Jewish canon came into existence only at the end of the first or towards the beginning of the 2nd century A.D. They felt the need to do so because the Christians were trying to establish that Jesus is the Messiah and the expected Saviour by using the Greek Bible. The Jews prescribed four norms to decide

a book as part of the Bible. 1. There must be complete harmony with the teaching of Torah (Pentateuch). 2. It must have been written during or before the time of Ezra. 3. It must have been originally written in Hebrew. 4. The place of writing must be Palestine. According to these norms a number of books in the Bible were omitted from their list.

Regarding the canonicity of the Old Testament, the Catholic Church used mainly two norms. 1. If Jesus or the Apostles quoted from any book, that book would be considered as part of the Bible. 2. If there was a reference in the New Testament to any of part the book, it would be considered as part of the Bible. Though the Catholic Church used the LXX as the norm for canonicity, not all the books of LXX were approved as Canonical books.

**Apocrypha:** The books that were not written originally in Hebrew and the Catholic Church officially approve as canonical are called “Apocrypha” by the Protestant Churches. The Catholic Church calls them “Deutero Canonical books”. The title Deuterocanonical is now being questioned, and many Catholic bible scholars prefer to avoid that description altogether and see all the 46+27 books of the bible as canonical.

However, a number of books, not considered as part of the bible by the Catholic Church or by the Protestant Churches, were accepted in the past as part of the Bible by some people. The Catholics call them “Apocrypha” or unofficial books whereas the Protestants call them “Pseudepigrapha” or unofficial books under false name

In the category of OT Apocrypha there are many books such as The Book of Enoch, The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, The Book of Jubilees, Life of Adam and Eve, Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah etc. In relation to the New Testament also there are many apocryphal books. For example,

gospels attributed to various persons, such as all the apostles, Mary Magdalene. There are various infancy narratives, acts of several apostles etc. Many of them were considered as part of the Bible at least in certain areas.

These books contain many details that interest the readers, though they are not approved canonically. Such information is often presented as visions and revelations. For example the Maggi who came from the East were three in number, they kings called Melchior, Casper, and Balthazar. The visions from the book of Enoch are widely used by many Christian sects even today. It has to be kept in mind that we receive the message of salvation from the books that are officially approved by the Catholic Church, not from the books listed in the Apocrypha. By the very term unauthentic, we have to conclude that they might not go along with the teaching of the Catholic Church. Though they are helpful to understand the line of thought of the time, they cannot be used as norms for faith and morals.

## Chapter 4

# WHY READ THE BIBLE

The Bible contains the message of Salvation that God made available to humanity. Hence the question why one should read the Bible could seem irrelevant. However, one should have a clear understanding about the purpose of reading the Bible. There are some who read the Bible to gain knowledge or to enjoy the descriptions. Some others read the Bible just like any other ancient literature, for research purposes. But, none of these is the main purpose for which the Bible was written and why one should read the Bible

Here I would like to share a personal experience of mine. During the years 1998 to 2000, I was staying at the Divine Retreat Centre and managing the Bible College. Usually the retreat ends on Saturday morning with the Holy Mass and the final message by Rev. Fr. George Panackal, the founder-director of the centre. During this program that lasts for about 3 hours, I noticed one thing he usually told the participants. “My dear friends, when you get home after the retreat, every day you must take an ounce of tonic”. I wondered what type of Tonic was going to be distributed at the retreat centre. Father Panackal continued, “The Tonic is nothing other than Psalm 119. You must consume, every day, one verse from this Psalm that has 176 verses. Psalm 119 depicts the importance of the Word of God, its operations, the

blessing one receives through the Word of God. Each verse of Psalm 119 should be used for meditation and prayer. If we do so, the Holy Spirit would do wonders in our lives. Father George explained all that to the people who were preparing to leave after the retreat.

There is another important point about reading the Bible. St. Augustine (354-430), the bishop of the diocese of Hippo, is one of the most important Theologians in the Catholic Church. He had a wayward life until the age of 32 when he went through a total conversion. Though he was a great philosopher, he made mistakes in the area of moral life. One night while sleeping, Augustine woke up hearing a voice.

He realized that the sound came not from outside but from inside. He clearly heard two Latin words “Tolle et lege” which meant, “Take and read”. What was he to read? Then he noticed the Bible on his table and he opened it and found Rom 13,13: *“Let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify desires”*. These words made a deep impression in his heart and they turned his life upside down. It transformed Augustine to a great saint - St. Augustine, Doctor of the Church. We can see here an answer to the question why one must read the Bible. But more than this, there are so many passages in the Bible itself that tell us why one should the Bible.

***1. To listen to the Word of God:*** It is God who speaks to us through the Bible. He speaks to us in order to reveal Himself and to give us eternal life with Him. The most perfect, final and personal revelation is in Jesus Christ the Word of God made flesh. “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son,

whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb 1, 1-2). “*For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church*” (DV 21). “*Prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture... for we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine saying*” (DV 25). Hence one should read the Bible in order to understand what God is telling us.

**2. To Know the Truth:** One of the main reasons for reading the Bible is to know the Truth. “*Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*” (Jn 8, 31-32). How would I know the truth about me and the world in which I live? Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? How did I reach here? What is my ultimate goal? All these questions are part of the quest for Truth. The answers I find would influence my life. But, most of the time the answer we get would be only partial truth and at times fully false.

The ultimate truth about me is related to my origin and goal. This search would end in God who is the beginning and the end of my being - the Alpha and Omega of my existence. There is only one Truth and that is God. This truth is revealed through the Word of God. Hence, reading the Word of God would lead us to the Truth. Knowledge of Truth would lead us to true freedom.

**3. To Attain Eternal Life:** God created man to be with Him. Man was formed out of the dust of the earth and he was given life by God's breath and then God placed him in the Paradise. Paradise is the state of being with God. But, man lost the paradise through sin. In order to bring man back to God, He made the

plan of Salvation. The Bible also has the same goal. Hence the goal of reading the Bible should be attaining eternal life.

The conversation Jesus made with the people who came searching for Him, the following day after being satisfied by eating the bread He multiplied miraculously, ended up in a conflict. Upon hearing Jesus telling them that his body is the true bread, the people were confused and became angry and left Him saying they were not cannibals. There was confusion even among the disciples and many of them abandoned Jesus. Then he asked the twelve if they also wished to go. The response Peter made is significant: *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”* (Jn 6, 68). The Bible is the Word of eternal life. Jesus has taught: *“It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and life”* (Jn 6, 63). Jesus had once reminded his audience that the Jews believed that the Word of God is the source of life. *“You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me”* (Jn 5, 39).

**4. Food for the Soul:** Just as the body, so also the soul needs food. The Word of God is the spiritual food to nurture and strengthen the soul. The people of Israel had experienced this while they were wandering in the wilderness, on their journey to the Promised Land. God led them through the wilderness, allowed them to experience hunger and then fed them with Manna from heaven. *“He humbled you by letting you hunger; then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD”* (Deu 8, 3). Jesus encountered Satan the tempter, quoting these words from the Book of Deuteronomy (Mt 4,4). The Book of Wisdom has this to say about the importance of the Word of God: *“Your children, whom you loved, O Lord, might learn that it is not the*



*production of crops that feeds humankind but that your word sustains those who trust in you” (Wis 16, 26). Body needs food and Jesus multiplied bread to feed the people who came to hear him and were hungry. But He taught them that they must not become slaves to material food. Soul is more important than body and the food for the soul is the Word of God. One should read the Bible with this truth in mind and searching for the spiritual nourishment.*

**5. *Light on the Path:*** We are on a pilgrimage to heaven or rather into the heart of the Father. To reach the final destination we would have to walk through the narrow and difficult path. On the way we will be tempted to take a path that is wide and easy. How can we find the path to eternal life? When there is darkness all around, when we are groping in the dark to find the path, who would help us to find the right way? Here, the Word of God is the guide for us to show us the right path. *“When you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it” (Is 30,21).*

Almost all the verses of Psalm 119 present the Word of God as the light on our path. *“How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; do not let me stray from your commandments” (Ps 119, 9-10).”Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119,105). “The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple” (Ps 119, 130). All these are necessary directions for life. In a way, we can say that the whole Bible gives guidance for our lives. Hence we are picking up the lamp of the Word of God when we read Bible.*

St. Paul reminds us of this truth when he writes to his dear disciple, Timothy. *“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in*

*righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3, 16).* Teaching is helping one to know what to believe. Reproof is teaching one what to do and how to live. Correction is the guidance given to one who has gone astray to get on the right path. Living according to the Word of God is a life practicing justice. Thus, man lives according to the Word of God by following the instructions in the Bible.

**6. *Helps to Make the Right Decision:*** God created us in His own image, emphasizing the fact that we are free. God does not want the obedience of the slaves under compulsion, but the love of the children who are free and submit themselves to His will knowing that it is the only way to be really free and be happy. This freedom is the essence of human beings, the specific feature of man who was created in the image and likeness of God. However, this freedom could be misused and so God helps us to discern the truth, to sort out good and evil, truth and lie. The Word of God is the tool God has given us to make this discernment.

*“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live ...I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (Deu 30, 15-20).* Man has the freedom to choose. But, he must be aware of the consequences of that choice and must be aware of the ultimate

end of that selection. The one, who lives according to the Word of God, will be like the wise man who built his house on the rock. Those who do not do that would be like the foolish man who built his house in the sand.

It is up to us to decide whether we want to go to hell or to heaven. *“I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me”* (Rev 3, 19-20). God will not break open the door locked from inside. God will come in only if we open the door of our hearts. That is what happens when we read the Bible. It would show us what is right and we are free to accept or reject it. But, we must be aware that when we reject it, we are choosing eternal damnation.

**7. To Receive Total Healing:** God wishes us to be healthy and happy. But, we become affected by various illness and our minds are disturbed by various problems. In the final analysis sin is the root cause of illness and death. When we are totally free from sin then we will have no illness or death. The book of wisdom teaches: *“For neither herb nor poultice cured them, but it was your word, O Lord, that heals all people”* (Wis 16,12).

Most of the miracles Jesus performed were related to healing. It was His word that healed the sick. The Centurion who came seeking healing for his servant, confessed this truth. *“Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed”* (Lk 7, 6-7). Jesus, reminded this during his farewell discourse to his disciples: *“You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you”* (Jn 15,3).

Just as sin makes one physically ill, healing of the spirit would help healing of the body,. Hence healing is needed for both body

and soul. The Paralytic was healed spiritually before he was healed physically (Mk 2, 5.12). When the Apostles were sent out to preach the Good News, they were given the power of healing and the healing was a sign of the authority they had (Mt 10,7-8; Mk 16, 15-17). As in the time of Jesus, today also we see many people getting healed through the Word of God.

In the eyes of Jesus or in the view of Bible, it is not correct to say that one become sick because of his or his parents sin. Today many use this excuse to explain man illness and suggest various ways to healing the roots of the family tree. We must not ignore the fact that the warning: *“I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me”* (Ex 20,5), was reinterpreted and corrected by the Prophets and finally rejected by Jesus.

*“In those days they shall no longer say: 42The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge . . . But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge”* (Jer 31,29-30). Ezekiel presented this truth with greater force and clarity: *“What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge? As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.... I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live”* (Ez 18, 1- 32).

When the disciples asked Jesus about the blind man who was sitting at the Temple gate and the reply He gave is the final word in this problem. *“Neither this man nor his parents*

*sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him*" (Jn 9,3). Sickness and healing could be opportunities to express the glory of God. Hence reading the Bible could bring healing to the body as well as mind.

**8. To attain Consolation, Peace and Hope:** It is the will of God that provides us with life, healing, strength and hope. Even if one did not get physical healing, one might receive inner peace and happiness by listening to the Word of God. Jesus has said: *"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest"* (Mt 11, 28). This promise of Jesus is being fulfilled by listening to the Word of God. It can give us the peace and joy that no one else can give (Jn 14,27; 15, 11).

The Bible testifies through many people's experience that God can give us deep peace and joy through His Word even in the midst of severe persecution and suffering. Even today there are millions of people accepting persecution joyfully, in the name of Jesus. In the second letter to the Church in Corinth, St. Paul narrates all the suffering he had to undergo in the name of Jesus but he was happy about it as they brought him closer to Jesus (2 Cor 1,3-5; 4,7-15; 5, 1-10; 8,2).

The Church in Philippi had suffered much for Christ. In his letter to that church Paul expresses his great joy and peace for their perseverance. *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"* (Phil 4, 4-7). The basis of their joy is that the Lord is near and that should give them great joy and peace. This assurance was gained through the Word of God. When we read the Bible with an open heart we would experience

great peace and joy. We would feel detached from the material things. We see so many examples of people touched by the Word of good, like that of Zacchaeus. Without any doubt, the heart that receives the Word of God will be filled with deep joy and peace. Despair would disappear and hope will fill their hearts.

**9. To come to a real conversion and change one's own life:** The Word of God is so powerful that it created the universe and protects it. It is the Word of God that created humanity and safeguards the human beings over the ages. Unfortunately, we often do not realize the power of the Word or share it with others.

Just a small example. It was a time when the Irish Republican Army was strong and creating much trouble. Two Religious Sisters from Ireland reached the London Airport. The customs officer asked if they had anything to declare and one of the sisters said they have. The surprised officer asked: what? The sister said: explosive! All of those who heard the words of the sister were shocked. The officer immediately called bomb squad thinking they had some explosive material with them. They opened the box that was set aside and there were 4 copies of the Bible. The officers were surprised and relieved but they laughed at the sisters and asked if that was the explosive they carried. The sister was not amused. In dead seriousness she told him: Take and eat of it; then you will see how explosive it is.

This may sound like a joke but when we examine closely and listen to the testimony of people who have experienced the power of the Word, we would understand the explosive power of the Word of God. *“Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?”* (Jer 23, 29). Prophet Jeremiah uttered these words in the midst of a violent conflict with the false prophets. The Lord had said against the false prophets who mocked the Word of God: *“Because they have spoken this word, I am now making my words in*

*your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall devour them” (Jer 5,14).*

Jeremiah was called to cleanse the society of false beliefs and evil practices. God said to Jeremiah: *“Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer 1, 9-10).*

The New Testament also presents the power of the Word of God in strong language and powerful images. *“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4,12).* The Word of God is usually compared to two edged sword (Eph 6,17; Rev 1,16; 19,15).

The Word of God is powerful enough to transform not only individual s livefe, but also the entire society; it can destroy the existing unjust systems and structures and rebuild a new society, built upon the values of the Kingdom of God, such as, justice, equality, brotherhood, freedom and compassion. However, very often when it comes through scientific analysis and ideological interpretations, the Word of God seems to lose its transforming power. The pietistic interpretation of the Word also often blunts the edge of the Sword that is the Word and is no more effecting any radical change in the persons who use and also in those who hear it preached. Unfortunately some use the Word of God as a source of material wealth. The number of individuals and institutions that become rich through the proclamation of the Word seems to be increasing.

St. Paul had set aside his life for Evangelization. Some of his affirmations and claims deserve special attention at this juncture. *“We are not peddlers of God’s word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God*

*and standing in his presence” (2 Cor 2,17). Those who preach the Word of God for accumulating wealth would interpret the word in a way that would suit their purposes and please those who listen to them but fail to communicate Word that would call the society for a total conversion. St. Paul warns that one has to remain open to the Word of God, or else one will never understand the Word and attain salvation. “If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4, 3-4).*

Even though St. Paul had every right to make a living by the proclamation of the Gospel, he refused to make the preaching of the word a means of profit making; instead he worked hard with his own hands to make a living. He placed his life before the people as a model not to accept anything in return for preaching the Word. *“We did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (2 Thes 3, 8-10). He felt ashamed to live by the fruit of others’ hard work. “Indeed, I would rather die than that— no one will deprive me of my ground for boasting!” (1 Cor 9, 15). “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains” (1 Tim 6,10). By saying this St. Paul was cutting the root of the desire to become rich by preaching the Gospel.*

The Word of God, when preached without diluting it, would lead to the conversion of heart and create lasting peace and joy. The change in the personal life will be reflected in the family and



society. The lives of Mathew and Zacchaeus who were tax collectors are clear and convincing examples. The life of the early Christian community, presented in the Acts of the Apostles is a great testimony of this attitude (Acts 2, 44-47; 4, 32-37). At the same time the lives of Ananias and Sapphira stand as a warning (Acts 5, 1-11) Those who refuse to share their wealth, while hearing the Word of God, would have the experience of the rich young man in the Gospel of Mark (Mk 10, 17-25).

**10. Keep the Word in the Heart and Live by it.** The Blessed Mother is the most exemplary character of keeping the Word in the heart and living it. She did not understand the Word immediately but she kept it in her heart and pondered over it. (Lk 2, 19-51). *“Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home....”* (Deu 6, 6-10). When we keep the Word in our hearts and meditate on them, it will create significant change in our lives. Our thoughts, words and actions, and our very outlook on life will be fashioned according to the Will of God.

We must not be satisfied just by reading the Bible. *“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers ... being not hearers who forget but doers who act— they will be blessed in their doing”* (Ja 1, 22-25). Jesus advised many times that we must listen carefully to the Word (Mt 15, 10; Mk 7, 14). Samuel is an example of listening carefully. *“Speak Lord, for your servant is listening”* (1 Sam 3, 10). What Samuel heard was a call from God that changed him into a new person. Next to Moses, he was the greatest leader for the people of Israel.

We would see radical change in the lives of individuals when they listen to the Word of God, with the resolution to change according to the revealed will of God. It would do wonders in our

lives. We still hear the testimony of many people whose life was changed by listening to the Word.

St. John asserts that the goal of writing the Gospel was to make a change of life through carefully listening to the Word and attain eternal life by living according to it. His words could be considered as a conclusion of these reflections. *“These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name”* (Jn 20,31).

## Chapter 5

# HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

The Bible is the Word of God, written in human words, and it gives eternal life. God reveals Himself and His plan of Salvation for humanity through the Bible. Hence we read the Bible to know God and His plan of Salvation and to find the narrow path that would lead us to the heavenly Father. Then how should we read this Bible? Various types of reading are possible. It is good to look at the way one must read the Bible and the kind of attitude one must have while reading.

**1. *Read with Respect and attention:*** When we pray, we speak to God and when we read the Bible, God speaks to us. While listening to God, we must have great respect and devotion and we must listen not only with our ears but also with our hearts. We must have a disposition that is similar to the one Samuel had when he said, “*Speak Lord, for your servant is listening*” (1 Sam 3, 10). The message of God would touch us deeply and so we must listen carefully.

After Solomon offered sacrifices in Gibeon, at night God appeared to him in a dream and told him to ask for anything he wished and the response Solomon gave was significant. “*Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can*

*govern this your great people?"* (1 Kgs 3, 9). "*Understanding mind*" is a translation of the original Hebrew "*listening heart*". Only when we listen with our hearts, we will be able to hear the voice of God resounding behind the words. Read the Bible with an attitude of openness, with a deep desire and resolution to believe the message of God and to fashion our lives according to it.

**2. *Read Daily:*** If we believe that it is God who speaks to us through the Bible, we would consider it a blessing to set aside some time to read it every day. It will be good to set a fixed time and keep to that schedule as much as possible. It is the food for our soul and light on our path. Just as our body, our soul also hungers and thirsts for spiritual food.

**3. *Various Ways of Reading:*** People do Bible reading in various ways. Some just open the Bible and read the part they see. That is called "*random reading*". Some would read the same book continuously from its beginning to the end. That is called "*continuous reading*". Some would read the Bible from the first book, Genesis to the last, Revelation. There are a lot of people who read the entire Bible once a year. Many Churches conduct chain reading of the Bible and finish reading from Genesis to Revelation in a week. Some people read it alone and that is called personal Bible reading. Some do it in a group, one person reads and others listen and that is called group reading. All of these are good and helpful.

**4. *Liturgical Bible Reading:*** The Church of Christ is a Liturgical Community. God commanded the Pharaoh of Egypt through Moses: "*Let my son go that he may serve me; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your first-born son.*" (Ex 4, 23). In this command, there is a hint about the purpose of God choosing a people for Himself. Worship is the goal and center of the life of the People of God. In this worship, reading of the Bible is an essential part. The Liturgy of the Holy Mass is

divided into two parts. In the first part we share the Word of God and in the second part we share the Bread that becomes the Body of Christ.

Here the Church is following the example given by Jesus to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. After setting their hearts on fire with the Word of God, the bread was broken and shared (Lk 24, 13-35). In all the Liturgical functions of the Church, reading the Bible is an essential part. The readings are arranged in a way that suits the theme of the season and meditation for the day. They are also read during the prayer of the Church and family prayer. It is important that one listens to it carefully.

**5. *Searching for Inspiration to solve Problems:*** There is a way of using the Bible to find out the will of God in concrete situations, in lives of individuals as well as that of the community. Close your eyes and pray for a while and then open the Bible and read the first sentence that comes into the focus of your eye. Then accept that message as the solution offered by God for the problem the person or the community is facing at the time. In certain situations such a way of discerning the will of God might be helpful but it might not be an acceptable method all the time.

The Bible is not a magic book that suggests how to solve problems. Not all the verses would be applicable at all times to deal with problems. Not all the suggestions will be practical and applicable. A verse taken out of context could mislead a person. Hence this method should be used with extreme caution and prudence; if not, one might end up receiving false messages. Though the Bible contains the Word of God from beginning to end, not all the verses would give the proper suggestion to deal with problems.

**6. *Devotional Reading (Lectio divina):*** This type of reading is encouraged in all the denominations of Christian Churches. The Popes have encouraged this type of reading that

could be used by individuals as well as in groups. This method has become very popular among the youth and in Charismatic groups. Hence, it might be helpful to look into it more closely.

All the religions practice reading from their Holy Book. During the fasting season the Muslims read Quran and during the month of July, the Hindus read the Geetha and the Ramayana. The Sikhs also have such a reading practice. They do it individually and in groups at home or in some public places. A similar way of reading is done by Christians also. This is called **Devotional Reading** (*Lectio divina* in Latin). In this method, the Bible is read slowly, carefully with devotion and deep awareness that the Bible is the Word of God and when we read the Bible God speaks to us. This reading gives an opportunity to listen to the voice of God. In the course of time this type of reading took a certain definite form and structure.

This method of Bible reading came into practice among the Religious communities of the Oriental Churches. The great Bible Scholar, Origen Adamantius (185-254 A.D) spoke about the need and importance of reading the Bible with devotion and patience. Profound truths are hidden in the Bible and they might not be obvious when we read the first time. To understand them we need concentration, meditation and ardent desire

It was St. Benedict of Norica (480-547) who popularized this reading method in the Western Church. He was the founder of the Benedictine Religious Order and he introduced this method of reading through the Constitution of the congregation. He exhorted that *“If the master is speaking and teaching, the disciple must listen in silence. In reading the Bible, God is the master and the one reading is the disciple”*. This was the 6<sup>th</sup> paragraph in the constitution.

After saying that ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ, the Fathers of Vatican Council II taught in the Vatican

Document, *Dei Verbum*, “Therefore, they should gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose” (DV 25).

On 6 November 2005, in the middle of his Sunday noon Angelus and prayer service, Pope Benedict XVI said, “I would like to invite your attention to an ancient but fast spreading practice of Devotional Reading of the Bible. Read a part of the Bible, meditate deeply on the message, read the part again and again, as the Church Fathers say, chew the Word, draw out the essence of the message and thus enrich your meditation, nurture your life as if from a source of living water. This is the meaning of this exercise”.

**The Structure of Devotional Reading:** Devotional reading means read the Bible carefully and meditate on it. Over the years a structure was formed for this reading. As a rule it has 3, 4 or 5 steps. The simplest method involves reading, meditation and prayer. In ancient times itself, one more step, contemplation was added to this. Besides these, some add one more step, “Action”. Hence we put it as a five step bible reading method, namely *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio et operatio*. Given below is a brief explanation of each step:

**1. *lectio (Reading)*:** Read carefully the chosen part of the Bible. A paragraph from any book of the Bible is read. If one is reading alone, read in silence. If it is in a group, read loudly, clearly, giving emphasis to each word, so that all may hear it and meditate on it.

**2. *Meditatio (Meditation)*:** Meditate or reflect on the words that were read. Repeat again and again the word that struck you. Reflect on what God is trying to tell you, what is expected of you, what is being promised to you, etc. Try to

listen to the gentle voice of God, deep in your heart. Do this meditation with the conviction (1 Cor 2, 14-15) that the Holy Spirit will reveal the divine mystery to you.

**3 *Oratio (Prayer)*:** In the light of the Word of God that was read, and the reflections on the passage, form a spontaneous prayer and offer it to the Lord. Prayer should be inspired by the Holy Spirit. When we read the Bible and reflected on it, we are listening to the voice of God. Now, present to God the feelings and thoughts that are coming into the mind. It could be done by praise, expressing gratitude, asking forgiveness, presenting requests, or in the form of intercessory prayer. Or it could be a combination of all these.

**4. *Contemplatio (Contemplation)*:** Calm the mind. Stop all the reflections, thoughts and go into a deep silence. Let the words of the Psalmist be a guide, “*Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations. I am exalted in the earth*” (Ps 46, 10). This is a very important step in the Devotional Reading. With no thoughts or feeling, listen to the voice of God resounding deep in the heart. In this silence, only God and I should be present. Experience His presence, His love, and His care. The seed that falls in the soil sprouts in silence. Be in a disposition of receiving. Allow God to work in me and through me. It is in this situation that God raises a soul to mystical experiences.

**5. *Operatio (Action)*:** The words of St. James, “*Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves*” (Jas 1,22), is the inspiration behind this step. It is not enough that we hear the Word of God but must act according to the message we received. Then only will the Word become fruitful in our personal lives and in society. Listening and reflection must lead to action. The Holy Spirit would inspire and inform us what to do. The decision for action should be simple, useful and limited to one's ability. Preference should be given to the corrections



and changes in one's own personal life. The Devotional Reading of the Bible should bring about some change in our pattern of thinking and living. The community in which I live must witness some change in my personal life.

***Certain Precautions:*** Devotional reading of the Bible is helpful and inspirational for persons and communities. At the same time, certain precautions are necessary for those who follow this method of reading the Bible.

1. One must not forget that this is only one of the many methods used to read and study Bible, not the only method.

2. Reflection and meditation are two essential steps of the devotional reading of the Bible. The Holy Spirit guides the soul to the inner meaning of the Word. At the same time there is a possibility of personal likes and dislikes that enter into these reflections and sharing. We must discern and distinguish the inspiration of the Holy Spirit from the imagination of the individual mind. When we fail to do that, there will be many misunderstandings and misinterpretations and cause division instead of unity in the community and Church.

Not only past history but also the numerous denominations that exist today are the proofs of the result of such divisions. *“Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else’s scrutiny”* (1 Cor 2,14-15). When each one interprets this teaching of St. Paul the way it suits him, it could cause divisions in the community and lead people astray.

The message we get through devotional reading and spiritual reflections should be examined in the light of the official teachings of the Catholic Church. No inspiration that is against the true

meaning of the Bible or the official teaching of the Church would come from the Holy Spirit. The inspiration we get from prayer and reflection would provide spiritual energy and deep awakening of self but when they are presented as part of the Evangelization, one must make sure that they are not against the official teaching of the Bible or Church. Unfortunately some Retreat preachers and Councilors do not give due importance to this aspect of bible reading and interpretation and the damage caused by such practice should not be taken lightly.

3. The message we get through reflection and meditation should not be against the overall teaching of the Bible. When we pick up words and verses for meditation or preaching, we must remember that it is part of the Bible. There will be no contradiction in the Bible. Hence one must make sure that the interpretation one gives to the individual words and passages are in conformity with the general teaching of the Bible and not against it. Through meditation I can find out what the Word of God is telling me. At the same time we must always take special care to make sure that our inspirations and messages are not against the official teaching of the Church. Remain alert to discern personal imagination from inspiration coming from the Holy Spirit.

4. Reading alone is not sufficient: Devotional reading does not exclude the need of studying the Bible. Together with the reading we need also a serious study of the Bible. The guidance for the same is given through the official teachings of the Church. This will be pointed out in detail in the chapter that deals with the interpretation of the Bible.

5. The insights we get through devotional reading of the Bible must not be against the logical conclusions, and detailed study of the Bible. Spiritual awakening, detailed study, devotion, reason, and feeling do not have to be contradictory. They must be complimentary to attain the goal envisioned by the devotional reading of the Bible.

## Chapter 6

# GOSPEL SHARING SEVEN STEP METHOD

We have seen various ways of reading the Bible. The devotional reading of the Bible was discussed in detail and we saw that it is a method that could be used individually and in groups. Now we come to a method called Gospel Sharing, Seven Step Method that is designed to help groups, especially prayer groups, to read and reflect on the bible passage. This is a further development of the *Lectio Divina* method we have discussed in the previous chapter, expanding the structure and making it more suitable for today.

This method of reading Bible was used effectively in the prayer groups of Basic Christian Communities of South America and South Africa. People found it a very useful method of prayer. Today this method is being used in small prayer gatherings all over the world. Knowing the details of this method would help to understand the Bible better.

First of all we must be aware that Gospel sharing is not a group study of the Bible. This is method to be used in prayer groups where the Bible is read and used for prayer. Here, no one is teaching, preaching or correcting. This is a small group get-together, in order to listen to the Word of God, reflect on the

reading in silence, and share the message in the group according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thus one person's insights become helpful to another.

The promise of Jesus, "*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*" (Mt 18, 20) is the foundation of this prayer method. Jesus is present among the faithful who gather to listen to the Word and pray. The Holy Spirit would guide them into the inner sanctum of Truth. With this conviction, they gather to pray. God speaks to us through the written Word of God. To receive the message we must wait in prayer, read with an open mind and listen with the heart. The seven step method of Gospel sharing would be a help in the process. The main goals of this prayer method are given below

1. Experience the presence of the Risen Lord in the group.
2. Help each one to be touched by the Word of God.
3. Help each other to deepen in faith through personal sharing.
4. Build community spirit among the members of the group by helping each other to grow in faith.
5. Create an atmosphere that is conducive to work for the betterment of society.
6. Form family groups that would be an image of the Kingdom of God and that would become the source of strength for the parish.
7. Deepen the awareness that all are members of the Church that is the mystical body of Christ and so obliged to help each other to bear witness to the Kingdom of God.

To achieve this end, certain things need to be done from the beginning. The Word of God should be the guide and centre of life. Hence, one must participate in the prayer meeting with a deep desire to understand the inner meaning of the Word and to practice it in life. The same verse might give different insights to different people. Therefore listen to each one carefully. Not only through the part that was read but also through the members of the group, the Holy Spirit would speak to us.

Sharing the inspiration one received from the Holy Spirit should not be in the form of advice, criticism or suggestion. The attitude while sharing must be, “I feel God is telling me this . . .”. Everybody in the group must actively participate in all the parts of the sharing. The inspiration each one gets should be shared loudly and clearly so that all can hear what is being said. The beauty of the language should not be a concern. Take care not to miss what the others are saying while being anxious about what one is going to share and how to express it.

All the participants must have a copy of the Bible, at least the New Testament. The leader must decide which part is to be used for the prayer session and when the leader announces the part that is going to be read, all must find it in the Bible. When one is reading aloud, others read it silently from their Bible. Any part of the Bible could be used for the prayer but for this particular type of sharing, a part from the Gospel will be most appropriate. Choosing the passage at random would not help this method of Bible reading.

The number of people in the group could be decided at the participants’ convenience. The ideal number would be between 10 and 15. This mode of prayer could be used as part of the family gatherings and then all the family members participate in the prayer. In the family gatherings in the parish, the participants could be divided according to different age groups such as children, youth and adults to make the prayer meeting more effective.

### **Seven Step Method of Gospel Sharing: The Steps**

- 1. Invite the Lord*
- 2. Read the Text*
- 3. Share the Word*
- 4. Listen in silence*
- 5. Share the message- choose the word of life*

## 6. *Take up a task*

## 7. *Spontaneous Prayer.*

### **Explanation of the 7 Steps:**

Sit in a circle so that all can see each other. Nobody has any special place in this circle as all are brothers and sisters and so are equal. The Church is a community of the brethren. By sitting in circle, they can express this sense of community and equality. All must have the Bible in hand and begin the session at the decided time.

**1. *Invite the Lord:*** Jesus is the chief guest and the head of the group. Though He is with us at all times, often we are not aware of it. We invite Jesus into the group to experience His presence in a powerful way. Usually we start all meetings with a welcome speech. Here we welcome Jesus into our midst. We can invite Him remembering one of His promises or actions.

***For example:*** “Lord Jesus, you went into the house of Zacchaeus who wished to see you, and brought salvation to that family. You have promised to be with us till the end of the world. We praise and thank you for your promise. As we are gathered here to share your Word, be with us and help us to experience your presence in our midst. Speak to us Lord. Open our ears to listen to your Word and open our hearts to receive your message”. Amen.

Thus, remembering any of the incidents of or promises about Jesus presence in the midst of people, we can invite Him into our midst. We also can use episodes where Jesus accepted the invitation and went into a house (Cana, Capernaum, Bethany, Emmaus etc.). Jesus had walked into places where someone was ill and cured that person and we could use one of those incidents. The Risen Lord is in our midst. What is important is

that we come to the awareness of His presence in us and in this group. It might be good to sing a song, possibly invoking the Holy Spirit, before inviting Jesus.

**2. Read the Bible:** The leader announces the part of the Bible to be read in the group. For example, The Gospel of St. Mark Chapter Ten, (when all have found the chapter, announce the verses) 46 to 52. Then invite a person to read the Gospel and that person reads it slowly and clearly, articulating each word. After a minute, another person is invited to read the same passage. While one is reading, others read it silently from their book. The part is read twice in order to make a deep impression in our hearts.

**3. Share the Word:** All will be touched by a word, a phrase or a verse from the passage that was read. Allow each one to repeat it three times. Be aware of the fact that Jesus is speaking to each one and to the group and with that conviction listen to each other. Sometimes more than one person might pick up the same verse. Be sincere in your sharing and that is the most important thing.

Example:

1.       The Blind beggar was sitting by the roadside  
          The Blind beggar was sitting by the roadside  
          The Blind beggar was sitting by the roadside
2.       Jesus, have mercy on me  
          Jesus, have mercy on me  
          Jesus, have mercy on me
3.       Jesus is calling you  
          Jesus is calling you  
          Jesus is calling you

4. Lord, let me see again  
Lord, let me see again  
Lord, let me see again
5. He followed Jesus  
He followed Jesus  
He followed Jesus

The verses are repeated not to learn them by heart. There might be certain things one missed in the first reading. When they are repeated meditatively, it would become an experience for each one and enable to be touched and transformed by it. When the crowd was listening to Jesus and following Him, the blind man was sitting at the wayside. I also might be sitting on the wayside of my life, nurturing my personal miseries. Or some might get the experience of being called by Jesus as Bartimaeus was called. Or Jesus might be asking me what I want? Share what has touched you.

**4. Listen in Silence:** When all have finished sharing, the leader announces the fourth step.

Leader: Let us listen with our hearts to what the Lord is telling each one of us, in silence.

We can go into the depth of the Word only when we listen with our hearts. Listen to the voice of Jesus, repeating the word or verse that touched our hearts. What is the Lord telling me through this word? Be in solitude. Do not waste time formulating the message to be shared in the group. Only those who listen with the heart will be able to understand the Word and share it with others. In the light of experience, the group can decide how long the silence should last. Suggested time is 3 to 5 minutes.

**5. Share the Message:** When the time of silence is over, the Leader asks each one to share what one heard in the heart.



Then each one shares the message that was received. Here are some examples:

1. The fact that the blind man was sitting at the wayside touched me. I too have been sitting at the wayside of life. I was blind to the point of not hearing or seeing Jesus. But now I realize that Jesus who can give me sight, give meaning and aim for my life, is passing in front of me. Just as the blind man, I too must cry out to the Lord.

2. I was touched by the words: “he cried out louder”. I pray but not with faith and conviction. When I do not get what I ask for immediately, I get disappointed. As others asked the blind man to be silent, many discourage me. There were moments I felt that there is no point in praying. But, the Lord is asking me to pray with greater confidence and conviction rather than being discouraged and give up.

3. “He sprang up and came to Jesus”. I was touched by this verse. As soon as the blind man heard that Jesus was calling him, he forgot everything and ran to Jesus. Rather than get lost in my loneliness, problems and sorrows, I must listen to His calling and run to him. I must have more enthusiasm in matters that deal with the Lord. I have to stop putting off to do it. Jesus is asking me to throw away all that is blocking me from it as the blind man threw off his cloak.

Thus, each one shares the message received. While sharing, one should be careful about certain things:

1. Sharing is not to give advice or to teach others.
2. Listen attentively to each one's message. No one is to question it. It is not a discussion.
3. Sharing the message should not turn out to be a public confession. There is no need to confess one's mistakes and sins. We have other possibilities and places for it. As the people

become closer, the sharing would become deeper and more personal.

4. Sharing should not degrade into a situation of trying to get the admiration of others. Practice prudence and sincerity in this sharing.

**Word of Eternal Life:** At the end of the sharing, a verse can be selected as the Word of Life. This verse is to be remembered and pondered over until the next meeting. It may operate as a power centre in everyday life. The verse must be acceptable to all in the group. During the next meeting, the members could share how it was helpful and keep the same verse or choose another verse as the Word of Life for the next week. For example, a group might have chosen the verse, “But, he cried out louder” as the Word of life. It might have helped them to pray without losing heart in the face of obstacles, to go on praying with hope and to remain strong in the face of problems.

**6. Take up a task:** After sharing the messages and choosing the Word of life, the group enters the next stage.

**Leader:** Let us now consider what is the task the Lord is asking us to take up.

Before choosing a new task, evaluate how the decision of the last meeting was carried out. Did all do what was entrusted to them? Was it successful? If not, what went wrong? If needed, add more people to the task force or entrust the task to someone else. Discuss all these things and make a practical decision.

Certain things should be taken into consideration while taking up a task. 1. Take up only the tasks that are needed and helpful and everybody agree with. 2. It should be something that could be done without much difficulty and in a limited period of time. 3. There should be a consensus about who will do what and when. Decisions should not be imposed on a person or a part of the

group. 4. Decision does not necessarily have to be one that derived from the subject of prayer. Think of a project that would go along with the call of Jesus.

In taking up a task, the following suggestions might be helpful.

1. Various people present the tasks that they think is important and needed. 2. From the various suggestions, choose the one that is most needed, possible to finish in a limited period of time, acceptable to all and possible to bring to a successful end. 3. Invite suggestions for carrying out the task. 4. Choose the method that is most suitable for completing the task. This could be demonstrated through an example:

Different Opinions and suggestions:

- a. Build a house for a poor person who has no home
- b. Give financial help to a person who is sick.
- c. Visit an aged person who is seriously sick.
- d. Make the prayer groups in the parish more active.
- e. Try to reconcile two families, living in conflict.
- f. Try to promote active participation in the Sunday Liturgy.

All felt that **b** and **c** as most needed at the time. Next they discuss how to go about it. Two people are put in charge of visiting the aged patient. They visit the person within a week and give the love and greetings of the group and offer prayers. Regarding the expenses of the treatment, various suggestions were made.

- a. See the Pastor and secure the support of the parish.
- b. Take the patient to a good hospital as soon as possible.
- c. Collect the money for the treatment from the prayer group. Each one pledges an amount.

- d. Try to get as much help as possible from the diocesan fund.
- e. Talk with the family, understand the situation and decide what is needed and look into various possibilities.

Since all the suggestions are good and needed, choose what is agreeable to all. Then one or two persons are given the responsibility of carrying out the task. During the next session each one must share how they carried out the mission.

**7. *Spontaneous Prayer:*** This is the last step of the Gospel sharing. The leader invites each one to pray in their own words, as the prayer comes into their hearts. Each one prays in one's own words on the basis of the Word of God that was read, the reflections and messages shared, decisions made and task taken up. It could be in the form of thanksgiving, praise, supplication, etc. Prayer should be short and clear. All should get a chance to pray. When each one finishes, the group makes an appropriate response such as, Lord, we thank you; Lord we praise you or Lord, hear our prayer.

When all have finished, the leader initiates and all join in to pray - 1 Our Father, 1 Hail Mary and 1 Glory be.

***Evaluation:*** After the concluding prayer, everyone expresses their opinion about the way the group process went. Evaluate each step and see what went well, where they experienced problems and how they could improve it the next time.

The following questions might be helpful for it:

1. Did they succeed to maintain an atmosphere of prayer during the whole time? Was there anything that hindered the spirit of prayer? Were they able to experience the active presence of Jesus all through the prayer?

2. Did everyone have a Bible? Were they able to find the part that was going to be read? Was the reading clear and slow enough to understand?

3. Did all understand the sharing of the chosen part of the Bible? Was there enough time for silence during the sharing? Or were they rushing to finish?

4. The time they took to listen with the heart was too short, too long or just right?

5. Was the sharing personal and touching one's heart? Did anyone use that time for criticism or for preaching?

6. Was the discussion regarding the task guided by the Holy Spirit? Was the decision according to the will of God? Did anyone try to impose his/her opinion on the group?

7. Did all pray freely? Did everyone get enough time?

8. Did the leader perform his/her duty well?

9. Any suggestion to make the next meeting more fruitful?

Through sincere evaluation each prayer meeting can be made better than the previous one. Pointing out the shortcomings should not be done in the mode of accusation. When something is pointed out, one should accept it rather than try to justify oneself. The main intention of this Gospel Sharing is that the group grows to be a community in a way that is pleasing to the Lord.

## Chapter 7

# BIBLE STUDY

The Bible is the Word that God has given to us for the salvation of humanity. It should be available to all and all must be able to understand the message it conveys. But, the Bible was written by people who lived more than 2000 years ago and written in a literary form that was familiar and popular at that time. To understand that today we need help from Bible scholars who have studied the language of the time, various literary forms used, their world vision, customs, practices, beliefs etc. Without a study of this background, it will be difficult to understand the message the Sacred Author wanted to communicate. Wrong interpretation of the Bible could lead to communicating erroneous message. This is the reason for the confusion and contradictions prevalent among many people who follow the same Bible. Hence it is evident that a serious study is needed in order to understand the message that God conveys through the written Word that is the Bible.

The study of the Bible could be conducted in many ways, depending mainly on the persons who study and the subject studied. In this chapter a brief description of a few possible ways of conducting a Bible study are presented, mainly under two headings namely, the persons who study and the material studied.

## **I. Persons who study:**

### **Here we have three categories:**

**1. *Teacher-Student:*** One person teaches and the students listen and study. This is what happens in ordinary class rooms. There are also correspondence courses, contact classes, using media such as TV, internet etc., in which the instructor does not appear in person.

**2. *Group Study:*** People with similar interests get together and study the Bible. The group meets at an appointed time and day and all would have read and studied the subject before coming to the group. One of them would make the presentation. Through questions and discussions, they go deeper into the subject. While studying the Bible they might bring up questions concerning the teaching of the Bible about contemporary issues, how to evaluate present day problems in its light, how they should see them and respond to etc. Such response and discussions would bring out the power of the Word that is sharper than a two edged sword. It might lead to activities that would change unjust institutions and active participation in building a just society.

**3. *Personal Study:*** Using the available tools one studies the Bible. Not only when other possibilities are not available but also while using them, one could and should spend time for personal study of the Bible. It is through personal study and reflection that the Word of God becomes an experience and works as the light in the path. One should be careful not to go astray. Here, the official teaching the Church should be taken as guide line.

## **II. The Material Studied**

The Bible is a collection of 73 books and for the study purpose it could be approached in various ways such as word study, thematic study, character study, paragraph study or book study. These various approaches are described briefly here below

**1. Word Study:** One of the possibilities is studying the words that appear in the Bible. One can choose words in any order and study them. Here one tries to answer the question: in what all places does a word appear? In what context does it appear? Is the word used with the same meaning in all these instances or does it have different shades of meaning? Is the word used with the same meaning in the Old Testament and New Testament? Any development achieved in the change of meaning? Such questions will be taken into consideration while studying Bible using this method. This study is helpful for preparing the Bible Concordance, Bible Dictionary and Bible Lexicon.

**2. Thematic Study:** Rather than studying the significance of a word, here the attempt is made to have a deep study of a theme. The same theme might be presented with more than one word. Not only that, when a word is translated from the original language, it might not express the entire meaning of the word. Hence, various words might be used to translate a word written in the original language.

For example the Hebrew word “Hezed” is often translated as “love”. But, the word love does not express all the different shades of meaning of the Hebrew word Hezed. The original word signifies the love that God expressed through the Covenant, a love that would never become less or will be withdrawn. It is guaranteed by the covenant God has made with the people. Hence it could be translated as steadfast love, unchanging love, and fidelity.

Thus a detailed study of words that present various meaning is envisioned by Thematic study. The Greek origin of the word “Love” also could be studied in this fashion. What does Jesus mean when he says (Mt 5, 44) that we must love our enemies? Jesus asked Peter three times: “Do you love me?” and all three times Peter said that “I love you”. But, in Greek, two different words are used by Jesus and Peter.



In fact there are four different words in Greek that can be translated as love. The first one “Eros- eros” which expresses is a type of love that is shared by two people who wish to get married. The word erotic comes from this root. The second word is “Storgein- storge” used to designate the love parents feel towards the children, which could mean affection.. These two words are not found in the Bible. “Philein - Philia” is the third word that is used to depict the love between friends. It could be translated as like. The fourth word “Agapan - agape” is used to express the love of God. Thus, the same word love could have any of these four nuances.

When Jesus asked Peter, the first two times, the evangelist used the word “Agapan” but Peter’s response with the word “Philein”. Simon, do you love me and Peter responded “Yes my Lord, I like you”. This might be easier to understand the meaning. The third time when Jesus also used the word “Philein” Peter broke down. This is only an example to show the need for such a study.

Thus, there are many themes that could be studied such as salvation, truth, freedom, sin, repentance, conversion, Good News, life etc. By studying such themes, one can have a deeper understanding of the salvific message presented in the Bible.

**3. Character Study:** Salvation History unfolds through the lives of many people. The inspiration or call they get and the response they give, the consequences, conflicts, the person’s experiences etc. are areas that reflect the revelation of God. By making a comprehensive study of each individual, one could receive deep insights. In one sense, the Whole Bible contains stories, stories of individuals that reveal the Salvation History.

There are certain important questions to be asked when studying each individual character. 1. In the Bible where does the person appear? Sometimes the character may appear in

various places, in the Old Testament as well as New Testament. Abraham, Moses and David are some of the examples. 2. What does the Bible tell about the person? Biographical details, important events in the person's life etc. 3. What was the God experience of that person? Encounter with God, call, the mission, and the relationship with God etc. 4. How did the person respond to the Call? Fidelity, obedience, protest, disloyalty. 5. How did the person die? How did that life conclude? 6. The place of the person in the History of Salvation 7. Message : what is the message the sacred author trying to convey through that character?

**4. Paragraph Study:** We see the presentation of numerous incidents and teachings in the Bible. One can analyse each incident or teaching and thus conduct a serious study of it. The Bible consists of 73 books and each book is divided into chapters and chapters into verses. In the beginning such a division did not exist. It was Archbishop Stephen Langton of Canterbury (1150-1226), who divided the books into chapters in 1214. Santi Pagini, an Italian Dominican and bible scholar (14670-1541) divided the OT into verses in 1528 divided the OT. This division was not generally accepted, the verses were much longer than we them today. The final division of the bible both OT and NT into verses as we have them now is done by Robert Stephen, a French Scholar (1503-1559) and owner of a press in 1551. There is no universally accepted method that has been used to divide the books into paragraphs. Hence we find different divisions of chapters into paragraphs in different editions of the bible. Each paragraph is supposed to deal with one subject. It will have a beginning and an end. First we have to decide where the subject begins and where it ends. Start the study using the order of division in the Bible, one is using. When the detailed study is completed, one might feel the need to change the structure and delimitations of the paragraph.

Following is a method that would be helpful for paragraph study. 1. Decide the part one is planning to study y the paragraph, find out its beginning and end. This is usually called delimitation of the text. 2. Where does the narration begin and what was the condition when the action began and when it ended? Is there any difference between the beginning and end and if so, what is the difference? How did this change come about? 3. Who are the characters that appear in this episode? What is the function of each character? Support? Encouragement? Opposition? Who are the ones opposing? Why? How did the character overcome the opposition? 4. Main themes y is any subject given special importance, emphasis? If so, which are they? Is this subject discussed in any other part of the book? If so where? What was presented there? 5. Main Message y what special message can be gleaned from this paragraph?

The Miracles performed, Parables told, and Exhortations of Jesus are usually studied using the method of paragraph study. Studying other parts of the Bible also, in this way, could be useful.

**5. Book Study:** Those who wish to study the Bible in detail should study each book from beginning to end. The above methods would help only to study certain parts of the Bible. A comprehensive study is not easy but it would be good that one tries to study each book as much as possible. When one tries to study books, it might be better that one studies the Gospels first. Gospels would function as a light on our path of life.

Jesus is the Centre and fullness of God's revelation. He brought to completion the vision of faith and morality found in the Old Testament. Hence, the norm of life should be the teaching of Jesus Christ. There is method, generally known as 4R Method, each R standing for a stage of the study, namely **Retire, Read, Reflect and Respond**. The following is a brief description of each stage.

## 4R Method

**I. *Retire.*** It means to set aside a time for Bible study, on a regular basis, daily or weekly. One decides how much time one wants to spend for studying the Bible, and keep the time regularly. Consider it as an appointment with God, to listen to His Word. Approach the study with devotion and a prayerful attitude.

**II. *Read:*** The following should be noted while starting to study the book

**a. *Book Background:*** Before starting to study a book, one should have some basic knowledge about its background. Who wrote it, where, when, for whom etc. need to be studied in order to understand the message conveyed through the book. In most of editions of the Bible a brief introduction concerning these questions will be found. Read them and if possible read a book on introduction to the Bible that would provide a good background study. Most of the Bible commentaries have such an explanation of the background of each book.

**b. *Read the book at one stretch:*** First of all read the entire book in one sitting. Almost all the books in the Bible could be finished reading in less than two hours. Some of them would need a little longer, but many books could be read in less than an hour. When you read, if there is something you do not understand or have any doubts, write it down in a notebook. No need to search for the answer at this stage

**c. *Summary:*** After having finished reading, write down a brief summary of the content of the book, in just one page.

**d. *Table of contents:*** Next prepare a detailed list of the content of the book. Write down the number of chapters and the main topic presented in each chapter. For this, the headings and subheading found in the Bible could be used. Then one can get a general understanding of the book and the development of the theme at a glance.

*e. Analysis:* Next each paragraph is analysed in detail. After deciding where each paragraph begins and ends, look into the literary form used in this passage. It might be as a travelogue, miracle, parable, teaching, correction, encouragement, prayer or something similar. Find out who is the main character in the passage, when, where did it occur, why, how and for what purpose? By asking these questions, one can find out the full message contained in the paragraph.

At this stage observe closely and pay attention to each word. Who are the persons appearing there? Who is the main character? Where did the incident take place? It could be in the Temple, synagogue, on the road, at the sea coast, in a house. Finding out the exact place would help to understand the nature and goal of the account. The time when it happened also is important. Was it at night, during the day, morning, day of Sabbath or any other specific time and day? Such indication of time would have a decisive role to play in the incident. What happened? What changes took place from the beginning to the end? What all steps were passed to reach the concluding stage? In the process who helped? Who opposed? Such questions are important to get a detailed understanding of the message conveyed.

Finally one must consider the question, for what? This question should be dealt with on three levels. 1. Why did Jesus do it? Why did He say this story? This is a historical question. 2. Why did the Evangelist record this? What kind of message was he communicating to the people of the time? This question touches the aim of the author. 3. Through this description what message is the Holy Spirit giving me and my community? This goes into the contemporary application and analysis of the Word of God. This third point will be discussed in more detail in the next step.

The answers found by the detailed study and analysis of the paragraph should be written down in the notebook. One may

not find answers for all the questions immediately. One might need further research about the matter. However, these questions are suggested in order to make sure that one does not leave any part or word unnoticed. With the insights received from the careful observation and analysis, move into the next step.

**III. Reflect:** Until now we were trying to analyse the Word of God and find out the various shades of meaning in it. The study done on scientific and objective levels would become a guide and light on my path, for me and my community, only when it is related to my everyday life. Hence an attempt should be made to find out what God is telling me through this episode.

The words of St. Paul could be a guide here. “*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness*” (2 Tim 3,16). What does this part of the Bible tell me? According to it what should I believe? What kind of changes should be brought about in my life? What are the promises it makes? What hope does it give me? Such questions would be helpful for this reflection. Four points from Paul's advice need special attention, namely, teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness.

**a. Teaching:** It deals with faith, what one should believe. How does this part of the Bible affect my faith? What does it teach me? In each incident and paragraph, there will be something about our faith

**b. Reproof:** It deals with the rule of life. What does this passage tell me about how I should live, what are the demands it makes, commands it give? How should I form my life? What should I do? What should I avoid doing? We get such directions for life from the Word of God. Besides the direct orders, there may also be suggestions given through parables and incidents. One must pay special attention to such suggestions.

**c. Correction:** The Word of God is like a mirror and measuring stick. It would show me my mistakes, shortcomings, faults, failures, negligence. It will tell me what I have to correct, where I have to improve and to what I must pay special attention to.

**d. Training in Righteousness:** When I lead my life according to the Word of God, believing the revelations I received, obeying the rules and regulations, my life will be pleasing to God, it will become fruitful by practicing justice in life.

The main points for this stage of reflecting on the Word of God in relation to personal life the following six points put as an acronym **CHRIST** would be helpful. Christ is the way and guide, life and Light. Hence CHRIST is a guide to life. Each letter in the word indicates some points for our reflection.

**C. Convict- Conviction:** Convict means the fault has been confirmed. The part of the Bible I read might invite my attention to an area of my sin. Upon hearing about the crime of the rich man who killed the ewe lamb of the poor neighbor to prepare the dinner for the guest, King David became furious and condemned the cruel action. Then Prophet Nathan pointed his finger towards the king telling, “**You are the man!**” (1 Sam 12, 1-13). This Word convicted King David of his sin. In the same way, the Word might lead us to the realization of our sinfulness and repentance.

Conviction means also deep awareness. The Word could give me a deep awareness of my state of sin, responsibility, love of God or any such matter. The Word would give us convictions that would change our attitude and way of doing things. Then the Word will become a lamp on my path.

**H. Heal:** This means make a person well. The Word of God is like a sharp two edged sword, but that sword could be used not only to make a wound but also to heal. Sword causing

healing might sound contradictory but the knife in the hands of a surgeon would cut off the infected part and cause healing. Hence the Word of God could heal me. Does the passage under consideration operate this way? It is the forgiving Love of God that gives me healing.

**R. *Reveal:*** The word is used to make known something. The Word of God could bring us various revelations. The Word under study might reveal to us the mystery of Redemption. It also could reveal certain things about my life. Reminding me of some forgotten incident of the past also could come in this area. God's Plan of Salvation is the main theme of the Bible, revealed throughout, in many ways. Hence find out what God is revealing to me through this part of the Bible.

**I. *Instruct:*** The Word of God will be imparting to me the knowledge about what I should believe and how I should live. What is envisioned here is the teaching regarding Faith and Morals.

**S. *Strengthen:*** The Word of God will give energy or force and make the person strong. The Word is food that gives energy to our soul. Jesus has told us that bread alone is not enough for us to live, rather we need the Word (Mt 4,4) as food for our soul. Daily reading and study of the Bible, and prayer would strengthen us along the way. The Word of God is like the bread Elijah received when he was in despair and wanted to die in the wilderness. The Angel told him, "*Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you*" (1 Kgs 19, 7). The Word strengthens the weak, as Prophet Isaiah says, "*sustain the weary with a word*" (Is 50,4).

**T. *Transform:*** It means Cause change in the person. Constant contact with the Word of God would make radical changes in our lives. It could be sudden or slow. Usually it will be a slow process. When I read and meditate on the Word every day, it would cause certain changes in me without my being



aware of it. It would purify my memories, clarify my thoughts, change my convictions and turn my desires to God. One would lose interest in accumulating material wealth, receiving praises and recognition, getting into high position, having name and fame etc. All that the person would want will be to be a child pleasing to God and that will be the source of joy. This conversion in the heart would become visible in one's life, in relationships and life style. Thus, the Word of God would make one slowly, a New Person (Gal 6, 15) who would grow into the fullness of Christ (Eph 4, 13-15).

**IV. Respond:** Response to the Word studied is the fourth step of the personal study of the Bible. Deciding how I should respond to the message received through reading and reflection is the last step in this process. The words of St. James are relevant here, "*Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves*" (Ja 1, 22). The decisions made after reading, analyzing and reflecting is the subject here. Insights received during the reflection should inspire one to make the decision.

One need not make decisions every day that would change one's life all over. The decision should be simple and practical as Jesus says, "*Today's trouble is enough for today*" (Mt 6, 34). It will be better that the decisions are in the area of faith and practical life. It might be to put more trust in the mercy and forgiving love of the Lord or asking forgiveness for some wrong done. Another possibility is to put more order in life. Being sensitive to the needs of others is another possibility of building better relationship with relatives with whom one has frequent contact or friends and those in need. It is possible that one decides to show more care and concern to the people with whom one works or the people who are neglected. Whatever it is, it is a decision made according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Write down the decision in the notebook.

End the session with a spontaneous prayer, thanking God for the insights received, asking forgiveness for the mistakes, and requesting strength to put into practice the decision made. Thus, studying a paragraph a day, one would experience the renewing power of the Word of God. The person will be filled with fruits of the Holy Spirit such as, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5, 22-23).

## Chapter 8

# INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

The Vatican II suggested new ways and guidelines for the renewal of the Church. Of the 16 documents it issued, one of the most important was *Dei Verbum*, published on 18 November 1965. This official document about the Revelation of God, "**Dei Verbum**" was unanimously approved by the Council Fathers and published by Pope Paul VI. It created a popular attraction to the Bible and promoted a life based on the Word of God. In order to call attention to the various parts of the Bible, the Synod of Bishops, assembled in the Vatican from October 5 - 16, 2008, took up the theme "**The Word of God in the life and mission of the Church**" for further discussion. The decisions and suggestions of the Synod were codified and published by Pope Benedict XVI in the document **Verbum Domini**. This official document has provided very valuable guidelines for interpreting the Bible. Following the example of the Synod of Rome, the Catholic Church in Kerala, observed the year 2008 as the year of the Bible.

During the last 50 years, after Vatican II, the Catholic Church in Kerala really experienced the power of the Word. Among all the people of the Church, especially among the lay people, there emerged a great devotion and respect for the Word of God and an enthusiasm to study the Bible. The priests, Religious and lay

Apostles began to pray with the Bible and proclaim it in various situations. In this little State, Kerala, there are more than 100 retreat centers and Hundreds of preachers, proclaiming the Word and leading the faithful in prayer. Miraculous healings and other miracles attract people to the Word of God. As in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit has descended on the Church in Kerala, to create a mighty storm of Renewal.

At the same time there are some preachers who interpret the Bible as they like, paying little attention to the guidelines and official teachings of the Church, and cause conflict and division in the Church. They claim that the Holy Spirit has given them special revelations and they are guided by the Spirit. Hence, no one should give them any direction and they would not submit to any official teaching or suggestion. With such claims, they teach many things against the official teaching and practice of the Catholic Church. The simple ordinary people are often confused, not knowing what to believe and how to interpret the word of God in their lives. Under these circumstances, it is important that all come to know what is the Bible, how it should be studied, understood, and interpreted. The following are some guidelines for the interpretation of the Bible.

## **1. Bible is the Word of God**

The official teaching of Vatican II clearly states that the *“Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church”* (DV 21). God reveals Himself and His plan of Salvation through the Bible. *“Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself”*

(DV2). Since God is speaking to us through the Bible, we should read it with strong faith and deep respect.

## **2. Word of God through Word and Deed**

Not only are the words written with the preface, “God Said” but the entire Bible contains the Word of God. The Word means the means used to reveal. God used words and deeds to make the revelation. Bible starts with the words, “*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth*” (Gen 1, 1) and ends with the prayer, “*Come, Lord Jesus*”. All the words and deeds of God, from creation to the renewal of the universe or establishment of the Kingdom of God presented in the Bible reveal God and His plan and so should be taken as the Word of God.

## **3. Bible - A Book Inspired By God**

God chose certain people to record all that He wanted to communicate and pass them down from generation to generation, without mistake and they were given the needed ability and inspiration to perform the task. The incentive and help God gave is called “inspiration”. Though the Bible was written by many people, the real author is God, the Holy spirit, as St. Paul says, “*All scripture is inspired*” (2 Tim 3,16). When St. Peter also repeat the same idea, “*No prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God*” (2 Pet 1,21), we have to believe that it is the truth.

## **4. Canonical Books**

The Bible is a collection of 73 Books. The Catholic Church teaches that there are 46 books in the O.T. and 27 in the N.T. as Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Protestant Churches accept only 39 books in the O.T. but of the NT they accept all the 27 books. Seven books accepted by the Catholics in the O.T. are not included the Protestant canon on the ground that they are not available in Hebrew and so they are not inspired

by the Holy Spirit. However, the canonicity of the 73 books has been approved by the Catholic Church since the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and this has been stated through many official documents of the Church. The books that are included in the official list are called Canonical books.

Vatican II has again repeated this teaching: “*Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit*” (D V 11). The seven books are Tobit, Judith, 1-2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, and Baruch. The Protestants have rejected also the 68 Verses presenting the song of the youth in the furnace, in the Book of Daniel in chapter three between verses 23 and 24, the last two chapters namely 13-14 of Daniel and six chapters from the Book of Esther (Est 11-16). Hence, when using the Bible, one must check and see who published it and which books are in it.

## **5. Pay Attention to Literary Genre**

Bible is the Good News of salvation, God granted to sinful humanity. But not all 73 books were written neither the same time nor in the same literary form. The Bible was written over a Thousand years by numerous authors. It was written at a time that was totally different from ours. Since they were formed in an entirely different cultural set up, to understand what God is telling us through these words, we have to consider the historical situation, literary forms used and the cultural back ground. To present the revelation of the will and plan of God, from Creation to the New Creation, the authors have used different literary forms. Some of the literary forms are described here below.

**a. History:** 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles are history books in the true sense of term, written with the help of historical records. The Acts of the Apostles also is a historical book. But, not all the other books of the Bible are based on

historical records. There may be historical facts behind the narratives, but they cannot be considered history in the present day sense because they are not based on written and verifiable records.. For example there is history in the Pentateuch but, not everything in it can be considered as history in the normal sense; there is more interpretation of facts in the light of faith. The Gospels also report historical events, but many other literary forms are also used to present the teachings.

**b. Law Codes:** Another literary style we see in the Bible is “Code of law”. The Ten Commandments (Ex 20, 1-17; Dt 5,1-27) is the best example. Besides these, there are other law codes in the Pentateuch such as The Code of the Covenant (Ex 21-23); The Code of Holiness (Lev 17-26) and The Deuteronomic Code (Dt 12-26).

**c. Sermons:** There are speeches made to help the people to grow in faith and to renew their lives and that belongs to another literary form, namely Sermons. The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5, 1-12) is the most well know example. The book of Deuteronomy was written as four speeches of Moses. Besides these, we can see a number of talks by the prophets in the books of Prophets and historical books.

**d. Prophecy:** Proclaiming the Word of God with authority is called prophecy. Very often prophecy is confused with prediction or foretelling of an event. But that is only one form of prophecy, and perhaps not the most important one. Prophecy is proclaiming the Word of God, speaking in God’s name, with authority. Promise of Salvation, call to repentance, warnings of punishment etc., all belong to this literary form of prophecy. Such prophecies can be seen all through the Bible. The eschatological discourse (Mk 13; Mt 24-25) and major part of the Book of Revelation are examples of this literary form in the New Testament.

**e. Songs - Poems:** We can see different types of songs in the Bible. The whole book of Psalms and the Song of Songs are poems. Besides these there are many other songs in the Bible. Songs of Moses and Miriam (Ex 15,1-21), the song of Deborah (Judg 5,1-31), the canticle of Hanna (1Sam 2,1-10), the lament of David (2Sam 1,17-27), the Magnificat, the canticle of Mary (Lk 1,46-55) are only a few examples. The language used in poetry will be different from that of the prose. They might use more symbols and images.

**f. Parables:** Parable is a literary form in which physical realities and common situations are used to explain spiritual realities. They are usually stories told to explain certain point or to challenge people to make a decision or for any other similar purpose. To make the parables attractive to the listeners, the story teller would add many details. However, a parable usually will have only one main point to convey. Therefore while interpreting a parable one should not get lost in the details, but ask what the central message of the story is. Usually the main intention of the story teller will be to help the person or persons understand the seriousness of the situation and make proper decisions. Prophet Nathan told the parable of the ewe lamb (2 Sam 12, 1-14), in order to make King David aware of the seriousness of the crime he had committed. Without knowing the intention of the prophet, David pronounced the judgment and then was shocked to hear the verdict: “**You are the man**”. All the parables told by Jesus have a similar purpose, namely explain the situation, nature of the Kingdom, the need of making a decision etc.

**g. Proverbs:** Proverb is pithy saying, a phrase or a sentence that gives advice or says something that is generally true. The whole Book of Proverbs as well as the Book of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) are proverbs. Great truths will be contained in a few words and they are often like capsule size parables. Here one should not try to understand the sayings literally, but search



what is the inner meaning of the saying. For Example, the sayings of Jesus, such as: “*Let the dead bury their own dead*” (Lk 9, 60); “*Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather*” (Lk 17, 37); “The one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one” (Lk 22, 36) are not to be interpreted literally.

***h. Drama:*** Drama is a literary form which powerfully expresses ideas, convictions and truths through conflicts and dialogues. In many books in the Bible, we can see this literary form. The entire Book of Job is a powerful drama, discussing the mystery of the suffering of the just.

Besides these, the Bible has also used many other literary forms such as epics, myths, satire etc. In a single book, the Sacred Author might have used more than one literary form. Therefore, it is important to recognize the literary form used in the passage one is studying. Taking everything literarily without any consideration of the type of literature used, would lead to misunderstanding of God's revelation and the meaning intended by the Author.

**6. *Bible presents the Salvation History Fulfilled in Jesus Christ:*** “*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds*” (Heb 1, 1-2). Though there are numerous characters in the Bible, the main character is Jesus Christ. The entire Old Testament is a preparation for the coming of Jesus and the New Testament presents the fulfillment of that preparation. Hence one must read and understand the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament.

Even the matters that deal with faith and morals have gained clarity over the years. In the O.T. the emphasis is given to the fact that God is one. But the New Testament reveals that this one

God is a community of three persons, namely Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Though there is some reservation about it, polygamy was generally approved in the O.T. But the N.T. is very clear about monogamy. It teaches that marriage is a Sacrament in which a man and a woman become one for life. Jesus has clearly stated that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the Law. In this fulfillment he surpasses the OT interpretation, going to the very root of the intention and purpose of that law given by God. It is clear from the way he address the issue in the Sermon on the Mountain, repeating six times the same formula: “*You have heard it said... but I tell you...*” .

We are to obey the new laws Jesus set in front of us rather than the out-dated laws of the Old Testament. For example all the sacrifices prescribed and described in the book of Leviticus were preparation for the one sacrifice of Jesus. Hence with the fulfillment of the goal of those sacrifices in Jesus, all of them have become obsolete and irrelevant. We have to reinterpret many of the precepts of the OT in the light of Jesus, teaching. For example, curses on the enemies (Ps 69, 22-28); “*Punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation*” (Ex 20, 5); and call for revenge (Ex 21, 12-24) and many such teachings have been corrected by Jesus. In short, it is not the O.T. but the New Testament that is normative for our lives in the area of faith and morality.

**7. Bible and Science:** The aim of the Bible is to reveal the ultimate truths about the universe and humanity and enable humans to participate in the divine life. The Bible, teaches as Galileo puts it, “*how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go*”, or how and when the universe came into existence. Science discovers matters through experiments and observation and corrects the old hypotheses in the light of new discoveries. That is not the way Bible operates. However, there is no contradiction between the Bible and Science; they are complimentary. Both originated

from God. The Bible, through the Divine revelation, helps the human intelligence, weakened by sin, not to go astray. Scientific study helps man not to get lost in superstitions.

Interpreting the Bible without realizing its ultimate goal and literary characteristics was the main reason of opposing scientific investigations and findings. Science will go astray when it does not realize and acknowledge the limitation of human intelligence and denies universal truths. Therefore, Truth will shine forth where the Bible and Science, faith and reason, work together, as St. John Paul II, in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* teaches.

**8. *End of the World:*** The Bible speaks about the creation and end of the universe but it does not say how and when the end would come. The descriptions given in the apocalyptic literature, especially in the Book of Revelation, are not to be taken literally. The Bible does not give any secret formula to predict the end of the world. God has not revealed the time or season when the world would come to an end, as it is clear from Jesus' own words: “*But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*” (Mk 13, 32). Hence we should be careful about those who claim to know and predict the end of the world through private revelation they claim to have received or predict the day and time, using certain mathematical formula. All the same, we should be alert and watchful at every moment following the exhortation of Jesus, “*Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.....*” (Mk 13, 33-37; Lk 21, 34-36).

**9. *Not only the Bible but also the Tradition:*** “*It is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence*” (DV 9). Hence, accepting only Bible as the foundation for faith

would be against the teaching of the Catholic Church, faith and reason.

Jesus founded the Church and chose the Apostles to proclaim, the revelation of God for the salvation of humanity to the ends of the world. The Apostles preached the Gospel through their words and deeds. They gave faith formation through the practice of certain traditions, celebrations and actions such as Baptism, breaking of the bread and celebrations of the feasts. The written word came much later. The Apostles wrote the epistles to help the people to deal with certain faith crisis they experienced and to give clarity about matters that deal with faith and morals. As the generation of the eye-witnesses were dying out, the disciples felt the need to preserve the teachings and activities of Jesus in written form. The Church existed before the Bible was written and the Bible took shape in the Church. It is the Church that decided which all books belong to the bible, how to interpret them and also propagated the Bible.

The Evangelists themselves have testified that all that Jesus did and taught were not written down (Jn 20, 30; 21, 25). St. Paul who instructed, *“So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter”* (2 Thes 2,15), is telling us not to neglect the sacred traditions of the Church. Therefore, in order to understand the truth God revealed, one must accept the Bible and the authentic traditions of the Church.

By authentic tradition mainly the following four points are intended: 1. The liturgical texts of the first centuries A.D.; 2. The teachings of the Fathers of the Church; 3. The dogmatic definitions of the ecumenical Councils. 4. The Ex-Cathedra proclamations the Popes. It was through these channels that the faith transmitted by the Apostles continued to grow and gain clarity through centuries. Hence it is not proper to deny what the Church

teaches just because it is not found, in the same way, in the Bible. Teaching about the seven Sacraments, the dogmas about Immaculate Conception and Assumption of the Blessed Mother, are some of the examples.

**10. Development of Faith:** It was slowly and with the help and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit that the Church came to the depths of truths presented in the Bible. Jesus himself had told the apostles about it: *“I still have 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; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come”* (Jn 16, 12-13). The knowledge and faith about the Holy Trinity, that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are three persons in one God, developed slowly. This faith gained clarity through the teachings of the Church Fathers and the proclamations of the Councils. It took years to gain clarity for the faith that the mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God, that Jesus Christ is truly man and truly God. Erroneous interpretations and heresies forced the Church to redefine and clarify the teachings. This pilgrimage into the depth of Truth is continuing even today with the help of the Holy Spirit.

It does not mean that Church teaches anything that is not in the Bible or contrary to the teaching of the Bible. All it does is clarify and teach the Truth presented in the Bible. Hence the Bible and tradition of the Church are complimentary to each other and not contradictory.

**11. The authority for the final Interpretation belongs to the Church:** The Bible presents all that is needed for salvation in a simple language so that all could comprehend it. The Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the teaching about the last judgment are clear examples.. But not everything in the

Bible is so simple or clear. When there is a doubt about the interpretation of a passage one should consider the official teaching of the Church. *“For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God”* (DV 12).

Jesus has entrusted to the Apostles, the mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Mt 28, 16-20; Mk 16, 14-20). Protection from the power of evil that would lead to erroneous teaching (***Infallibility***) was promised to Peter and to the Community of the Apostles. Jesus said, *“I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it”* (Mt 16, 18). This promise points to the protection and guidance guaranteed to the teaching authority invested in the Church that is led by the successors of Peter. Opposing what the Church officially teaches regarding faith and morals would be opposing and denying the truth.

**12. Consider the context:** *“Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which 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 worked out”* (DV 12). Bible should not be seen as single words or verses but as one unit. Words are parts of a verse and a verse part of a paragraph, paragraphs are parts of the chapter and chapters are parts of the book. Not only that; all the 73 books of the Bible unfold the truth about Salvation History. Hence, when a verse is interpreted, we have to see how it fits into the ideas of the paragraph and book. Since God is the final author of the entire Bible, there will be no contradiction between parts and statements in the Bible.

Some of the statements in the Bible might appear to be contradictory. Let us look at some of the statements of Jesus.

*“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword”* (Mt 10, 34). *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives”* (Jn 14, 27). These statements may appear to be contradictory but when we go into the depth of those words we can see that they are complimentary. When people are forced to make a decision about one's faith in Jesus, there will be division and opposition between those who accept and those who reject His teaching and that will cause lack of peace. But, by accepting the truth and acting according to it, one would gain deep peace. It is this peace Jesus offered and it prevails in the midst of persecution and suffering.

Words and verses taken out of context could provide a meaning different from what was intended by the Author. For example Jesus said, *“The one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one”* (Lk 22, 36). Jesus was using a symbol to make the disciples aware of the seriousness of the situation in which they would find themselves after His death and urging them to gain strength by prayer and faith to withstand the temptations that will be paused by the Passion and death of Christ. Interpreting this as an invitation to take up arms would be totally against Jesus' teaching; this interpretation is the consequence of not taking into account the context in which it was said. St. Paul's command to the women in Corinth that they should not speak in public and should cover their heads has to be understood against the particular cultural background of the church in Corinth. It will be wrong to take this as a universally valid law of the Church.

**13. Go into the Depth:** The written Word might contain deeper meaning than it appears. One must first attend to the literal meaning but that may not be sufficient concerning all passages of the Bible. Besides the literal meaning, that is the most obvious, there could be some other message hiding beneath the visible outer layer.

**a. Deeper Meaning (*Sensus Plenior*):** Most of the prophecies in the Old Testament have two levels of meaning. The first level is mostly the literal meaning that was easily understood by the contemporary audience, and it was immediately relevant and applicable to their situation in life. However, many of the prophecies had also a message that was to be fulfilled after a long time and that could be understood only in the light of fulfillment. The prophecies about the “*Virgin birth*” (Is 7, 14; Mt 1, 22), “*Call from Egypt*” (Hos 11, 1; Mt 2, 15), “*Suffering Servant*” (Is 53, 7-8; Acts 8, 22-23) are some of the examples. Only when Jesus explained it and opened their hearts to understand it, did the disciples comprehend the meaning of those prophecies (Lk 24, 27. 45).

**b. Typological Interpretation:** Many of the persons, things and incidents in the OT had a symbolic meaning that was to be fulfilled in the New Testament. For example, when Paul presents Jesus as the New Adam then the Adam in the OT is taken as a *symbol or prototype* (Rom 5, 12-21). Isaac climbing the mountain carrying the wood for sacrifice was a symbol of Jesus carrying the Cross and walking to Golgotha. The High priest in the Old Testament was the symbol of Jesus, the High Priest of the New Testament (Heb 8-9). The Ark of the Covenant that contained the Ten Commandments written on the stone tablets is often considered as a symbol of Mary who carried Jesus, Word of God incarnate, in her womb. All the sacrifices in the O.T. point to the one Sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

**c. Spiritual Interpretation:** Much of what is written in the Bible, both events and teachings could be understood both in the material as well as in the spiritual sense. For example the manna which God sent from heaven to feed people of Israel in the desert was a true material food and at the same time it pointed to the bread of eternal life. When Jesus taught: “*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats my body and*



*drinks my blood will have eternal life*”, Jesus was showing the meaning on both levels. Those who crossed the Red sea were liberated from the authority of Pharaoh. It was also a journey to the freedom of the children of God. When Jesus gave sight to the blind and hearing to the dumb, He was giving physical as well as spiritual sight and hearing to them. When Jesus taught us to ask for bread, He was teaching to ask for the food for the soul and body. Therefore, there is no materialism that avoids the spiritualism and no spiritual side that avoids the material side. When we limit our interpretation to one area, we cut the meaning of the Bible into half.

**d. Allegoric Interpretation:** This is a method in which one finds a meaning for each individual details of the description of events, parables etc. This will be quite different from the literal and obvious meaning. The influence of such an interpretation can be seen in passages of the gospels. The parable of the sower (Mt 13, 1-9) and its explanation (Mt 13, 18-23) is a clear example of such an interpretation. In the normal sense a parable is told to explain a divine or supernatural reality in the light of a physical or natural reality. There will be usually only one central point as the teaching of a parable. The aim of the parable of the sower was to teach the people that that the Kingdom of God will become a reality, overcoming numerous obstacles. In the allegoric interpretation, on the contrary, each part of the parable is given special attention and the focus is shifted from the fate of the Word to the mode of its reception. Here the Sower is the Son of God; the seed is the Word of God; the field is the hearts of people who hear the Word and so on.

This was a method prevalent among Jewish Rabbis. St. Paul who studied under them often used this method of interpretation. In teaching about the role of Abraham, Hagar, Sarah, Abrahams two sons, Sinai, Jerusalem in the history of Salvation, we can see the influence of this type of interpretation (Gal 4, 21-31). Ancient Church Fathers especially of Alexandria gave importance to the

allegoric interpretation while those of Antioch gave importance to the literal meaning, and concentrated on scientific interpretation. Allegorical interpretation is a method that gives free reins to the imagination of the interpreter and there will no guarantee for the authenticity of what they teach using this method. Hence, great caution should be taken while using this method of interpretation.

**e. *Midrashic Interpretation:*** Midrash is a type of interpretation that was popular among the Jewish Rabbis. The word Midrash is derived from the root *darash* which means to search. The original meaning was the search to know the will of God. *Midrashic* method was used in two ways in interpreting the Bible. It is called *halaka* when this method is used to interpret and apply the laws in the Bible to daily life and concrete life situations. The word *halaka* derives from the root *halak* which means to walk. This could be explained as the necessary laws to live according to the will of God. The second use of Midrashic method was known as *Haggadha* which came from the word root *nagad*“ that means explain, proclaim, prove. The aim of Haggadic interpretation was to take inspiration from lives of persons and from various incidents in the Bible. These two types of interpretations are not to be understood as scientific study of the Bible, but they could be used as good advices to lead a good life.

In the Old Testament we can see many examples of such interpretations. 1 and 2 Chronicles are Midrashic interpretations of the books of Samuel, and Kings. The same kind of interpretation could be found in the books of Jonah, Tobit, Judith, Esther and Judith. Following the Old Testament, many books formed among the Jewish people but not approved as part of the Bible, were written in the form of Midrash. For example there were books written using Adam, Enoch, Joseph, Moses, and Isaiah as characters and written in Haggadic method.

In the New Testament also Midrashic interpretations are visible. The response Jesus gave to the question about divorce was an answer in the form of Halakka (Mt 5, 31-32; 19, 7-12). While rereading the Exodus event, St. Paul gives Haggadic interpretations (1 Cor 10, 1-13). When speaking about the magicians of Egypt who opposed Moses, Paul (2 Tim 3, 8-9) and when pointing to Satan who argued with St. Michael the Archangel about the body of Moses, St. Jude (Jude 1, 9) also used this type of haggadic interpretation.

This method is useful to interpret the Word of in the light of contemporary events and circumstances and to encourage people to lead a life in the light of Word of God. It is very commonly used in retreat preaching and convention talks. Some preachers are very fond of this method and they find all sorts of meaning and symbolism in objects like the donkey on which Jesus mounted, the cock crow that led Peter to conversion, the mantle that the blind beggar Bartimaeus threw away etc. It is amazing how from these apparently insignificant objects and events preachers draw very important lessons for practical life.

This, however, cannot be understood as bible interpretation, but could be seen as a rereading or preaching based on certain biblical characters and episodes. This type of interpretation and preaching can easily lead the speaker away from the central message of the Bible and also lead his hearers astray. This method could be useful for preaching, but one should be careful not to go against the official teachings of the Church.

**14. Scandalous and offensive narratives:** The Bible is the holy book that presents the matters that are needed for the salvation of humanity as the revelation of God. However, there are some descriptions that are far from being holy and salvific but outright scandalous and offensive. All kinds of sin, adultery, murder, incest are presented in the Bible. The drunken state and nudity

of Noah, degrading action of the daughters of Lot, adultery of David, are examples of such narratives. There are people who raise questions about certain descriptions in the Song of Songs, some explanations in the books of Prophets, the command of God to exterminate a population in order to make room for the Israelites- all these are found very offensive and conveying a message that is quite contrary to what one would expect from a holy book that is meant to teach us the way to eternal life. Why did the Sacred Authors include such descriptions and commands in the Bible?

The Bible is not a biography of saints that provides spiritual awakening and zeal for holiness. It is history of Salvation God gives to the sinful humanity. Hence it is essential to describe the sinful situations that made God's intervention necessary to save humanity. Not only that, many of these descriptions show how badly one could fall if one did not obey the commandments. If Samson who was called before his birth and equipped with the / Spirit of God, King David who was loved and chosen by God, and Solomon who was given the greatest wisdom could fall so miserably, then it is evident how careful we must be and how much we should depend on God, we who are not so holy and have only limited wisdom.

Descriptions that might appear as scandalous are of two types, namely related to sex and violence. Song of Songs is a poem of love. It is presented as a conversation between two people who are in love and wish to get married. At the same time one should also keep in mind that this picture of love between persons in fact depicts the love of God for the people of Israel, for the humanity and also for the individual soul. It was the prophet Hosea who compared the Sinai covenant to marital covenant, presenting God as the husband and the people as the wife. Ever since, this picture was taken up by several biblical authors to describe the deep and intimate love God has for the people. The

NT also uses such imagery, especially in describing the relation between Jesus and the Church as the bridegroom and bride. The prophets presented idol worship as adultery. Chosen people entering into idol worship is like a wife who is being unfaithful to her husband. To make the people aware of the seriousness of their sin, the prophets compared their sin to the most detested of all sins namely prostitution.

Many of the laws in the Old Testament might appear to be promoting violence. It is difficult for us to accept the image of a God who destroys other people to protect His own people, the Israelites. These narratives present a vision of God that was prevalent at that time, but has been abandoned and superseded by further revelations about the true character of God. There was a time when each people believed to have their own gods. To prove that the God of Israel was the strongest and Almighty, they presented the destruction of other people and exalted the protection God gave them. Only slowly the people of Israel came to the realization that there is only one God and that He is the God of all the people. He loves and protects all, as His own children. It was during the Exile that they came to realize that they were called to be a witness to the Almighty God among the people of the world. It is the fulfillment of this revelation we have received through Jesus Christ. Hence one should consider the offensive narratives and commands as stages which the people of God passed through to arrive at the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ.

## Chapter 9

# SALVATION HISTORY

The Bible tells the story of Salvation God is giving to humanity. God created man in His own image and likeness and placed him in the paradise to be happy and to be with Him forever. In order to remain with God one has to live according to God's Will. Being obedient and subject to God and His expressed Will is not slavery but the guarantee for the freedom of the children of God. It is not the creature but the Creator who decides the goal of the creation and how to achieve it.

Forgetting the fact that he is a creature, man considered obedience as something degrading and tried to become equal to God. The one who broke the commandment and tried to be like God, lost everything. He was cast out of the presence of God and the paradise that symbolized the happiness man experienced at the presence of God was closed and sealed behind him. Life became difficult. Hard work and illness drained his energy. Nature became hostile to the one who rebelled against the Creator. The one who was fashioned out of soil had become alive with the breath of God. Now losing that breath life, he returned to the soil. Death established dominion over man.

However God did not abandon humanity. He made a plan to raise man from the fallen state to the position of “*children of God*”, to be with Him again. The unfolding of this plan is what we

call the history of salvation. This history can be divided into three parts: I. **Preparation**, II. **Fulfillment**, and III. **Proclamation**. The time of Preparation goes from creation to the coming of Jesus, the Savior. All the prophecies and hopes were fulfilled in Jesus Christ and so “The Christ Event” is called fulfillment. Proclaiming all over the world, the salvation made available to humanity through Jesus Christ, is called the time of Proclamation. Speaking in general, the first stage designates the time of the people of Israel and the last stage the time of the Church of Christ. In between the two comes the Christ event that marked the center of history. The New Testament begins with the Christ event. Next, we shall take a close look at the three stages.

## I. The Time of Preparation

The time from the creation of the universe to the time of the coming of Christ the Savior is the time of preparation. This long period is presented in the Old Testament. To make it convenient to study, we can divide this period into seven stages. **1. Primeval history (history before history) 2. Patriarchal history 3. The Exodus event 4. Fight for and conquest of the Promised Land 5. Monarchy 6. Babylonian exile 7. Post exilic period.** The Old Testament presents the history with its focus on the people of Israel. At the same time, Israel's relationship with the other peoples and nations are also reported. God's plan of salvation for the world is revealed and it moves toward completion through the history of the people of Israel. Now we shall, see each of the seven stages briefly, also pointing out which book of the OT describes this stage and which was written at which time.

### 1. Primeval History - Genesis 1-11( -B. C. 1850)

The time from creation to the time of the Call of Abraham is called the primeval history. We cannot call it history in the normal sense because there is no written document or any other concrete

evidence for all that happened during this time. Hence this period is called history beyond history. It might be more meaningful to say that this is the theology of history rather than pure history.

The origin of all things is presented here. The beginning of everything, namely the universe, peoples, animals, birds and everything that has a beginning, is explained through the eyes of faith in this part of the Bible. The beginning of suffering, the cause of suffering man experiences and the hope of being liberated from it also appears in this stage. Since all humanity came from one pair of first parents called Adam and Eve, all belong to the same human family and therefore are brothers and sisters. But the first man and woman broke the commandment of God, lost the divine life in them, and so they and their children, forgot their brotherhood and began to fight with each other. They become enemies to the point of one killing the other. As generations passed, people distanced more and more from God and from each other. Finally God entered into history and put an end to this culture of violence by destroying everything, except a family, by flood.

Humanity was washed and purified in the flood waters. By showing that all the people in the world came from the three sons of Noah, Shem, Ham and Japheth, the universal brotherhood is emphasized again. At the same time, through Noah who was found to be the only just man on the earth before the flood, evil entered again and dominated the world. The primeval history ends with the picture of the tower Babel, the ultimate expression of human pride and rebellion against God. Pride scatters and turns people against each other is the lesson taught by the description of man's attempt to build a tower reaching up to heaven and God coming down to disperse the people by confusing their language so that they could not understand each other. However, a ray of hope is shed into this gloomy picture by pointing to Abraham, son of Terah, through whom God will continue to work for the salvation of humanity.



## **2. Patriarchal History- Gen 12-50 (1850-1700)**

From the scattered people, God called one man, Abram and guided him through a new path. With the call of Abram, salvation history entered into the next stage. The plan and action of God are beyond the possibilities and hopes of human beings. Salvation history continued through a progeny born of an old man in a barren woman. The promises God gave to Abram were impossible from the human point of view. He was promised descendants like sands on the sea shore and stars in the sky, a land of his own and blessing to all people through his descendant. Abram believed and walked through the path God showed him and he was given a new name, Abraham. He was entrusted with the mission of becoming the Father of the people of God and of the Savior of humanity. He walked through the path of uncertainty and bitter suffering. The test of faith reached the climax when he was asked to sacrifice his only son, the source of all his hopes and expectations. But, he did not waver. His faith in God was absolute and his obedience unconditional. Thus he became the father of faith, the father of all believers.

Salvation history started as a family history with Abraham, but when it passed through Isaac and reached Jacob, it became the history of a people. Jacob was always running away from problems. God put an end to this running by wrestling with him and making him strong and courageous. The Patriarchal history ends, away from the Promised Land, in Egypt with the scene of the coffin that contains the embalmed body of Joseph. But this was not the end but the prelude to a new beginning.

## **3. The Exodus Event - Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (1700-1250).**

The third stage of Salvation history began in Egypt. The people of Israel who came to Egypt as royal guests eventually were eventually reduced to slavery. From 1700 to 1550, Egypt

was ruled by a foreign power called Hyksos. In 1550 the Egyptians defeated the Hyksos and occupied the throne and foreigners were forced to leave the land. Those who remained were made slaves. Thus, the descendants of Jacob became slaves in Egypt. After many years, God liberated them through a leader called Moses. God revealed to the people of Israel, through many miraculous events, that the Lord of the universe is not Pharaoh but the Almighty God, Yahweh who guided them through various ways in the wilderness.

The people liberated from Egypt miraculously crossed the Red Sea, travelled through the desert and finally encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai. God made a covenant with them by which they became the people of God. Moses explained the nature, goal and conditions of the Covenant. Then they started the journey toward the Promised Land. The cowardice, disobedience and infidelity brought down God's punishment on them and they were forced to wander for forty years in the desert, delaying the entry into the Promised Land. On the way while they were in the plains of Moab Moses died.

The Exodus event consists of the history of Israel from the slavery in Egypt to the death of Moses. The various events and experiences of the time were passed from generation to generation through oral tradition first in the families and then during the prayer meetings. It is possible that at least certain things that deal with the Covenant was written by Moses and handed down to the coming generations. However, they were written down the way we have today, only many years after the events took place.

#### **4. Conquest of the Promised Land - Joshua, Ruth, Judges (1250-1130)**

After the death of Moses, the people of Israel continued the journey under the leadership of Joshua. Just as in the Exodus event, God performed miracles on the way. The River Jordan

that was in flood was miraculously parted, forming a path in the middle for the people to cross the river safely. The next obstacle was the fort of Jericho. The walls of Jericho crumbled at the approach of Joshua and the people, opening the door to the Promised Land. From then on it was a march of victories, a triumphal march defeating those who opposed and accepting as friends and allies those who were ready for a treaty. The Land of Canaan was divided among the 12 tribes of Israel. By renewing the Covenant at Shechem, the people renewed their vow of obedience and fidelity to God.

After the death of Joshua there were conflicts and troubles. Under the Canaanite influence the people of Israel started worshiping idols. There was no proper leadership for the people. They were often defeated in battles, and sometimes reduce to slavery. The fourth stage of the history of salvation ends presenting the people in a severe crisis. The story of Ruth is presented as an interlude to this history of conflict and crisis. Ruth is a gentile widow, who accepted the God of Israel as her God. She is presented as a model of fidelity to God and to her aged mother-in-law. By stating that she was the great grandmother of King David, the sacred author is showing that no one is outside the salvation God offers to humanity and in a way points to the fact that sometimes the gentiles are more faithful than the chosen people Israel.

### **5. Monarchy: 1-2 Samuel; 1-2 Kings; 1-2 Chronicles (1130 - 587).**

This stage covers about six centuries, from the birth of Samuel, the last Judge, to the time of deportation to and exile into Babylon. The people who felt that the Judges were not enough to give them protection from the enemies, who were becoming ever stronger and aggressive, wanted to have a king to lead them in war. Samuel who was of the conviction that Yahweh is the King

of Israel and to ask for another king would mean lack of trust in God and was equivalent to apostasy, initially opposed the popular request, but was asked by God to anoint a king for them. The first king, Saul, won victory in a number of wars in the beginning but for many reasons his life ended up being a total failure. The people of Israel faced severe crisis when Saul, defeated in the battle against the Philistines ended his life falling on his own sword.

The next king, David, succeeded in making Israel a mighty nation. New hopes and dreams took wings in Israel. The religious practice of worship took on a definite form. The writing of the Bible started. His son, Solomon, brought Israel to the zenith of its glory. But even before the death of Solomon (930) the empire started to crumble. Idol-worship gained strength. The people were oppressed while the royal household lived in luxury. There was corruption all over. The poor were denied justice. Solomon had to work hard to suppress rebellion and unrest.

Three kings, Saul, David and Solomon, ruled for about 100 years (1030-930). After the death of Solomon, the kingdom was divided. Ten tribes of the North rebelled and formed a new Kingdom which called itself Israel. The remaining two tribes in the south, Judah and Benjamin were called the Kingdom of Judah. The capital of Judah was Jerusalem while Israel built their capital in Samaria. There were frequent wars between these two kingdoms. Only during the time of very few kings there was peace and unity between them.

After two centuries (930-721), the Northern Kingdom, Israel was conquered by Assyria. Following their general policy, the Assyrians brought people from other conquered nations into Israel and settled them in various parts of the country while most of the Israelites were deported and sent to various parts of the great Assyrian empire. Thus ten out of the twelve tribes of Israel vanished from history. The Israelites, who were not deported, gradually

entered into marriage with gentiles and thus a mixed population was formed in Israel. They are known as Samaritans after the name of their capital, Samaria.

Judah had a nominal existence for another one and a half centuries. In 598 Babylon captured Jerusalem and thousands of people were taken as captives and deported to various parts of the empire. The invading army withdrew after reducing the country into the state of a vassal and imposing heavy tribute. After a few years Judah rebelled, stopped paying tribute and hoped to defend themselves with the help of Egypt, in vain. Babylon came a second time, to conquer, but to destroy. In 587 at the end of siege that lasted for more than a year the army of Babylon made a breach in the walls of Jerusalem. The city was taken, and destroyed. The temple was reduced to ashes. Thousands including the king were taken to Babylon as slaves and led to captivity in Babylon. The curtain fell on the rule of kings, the fifth stage of Salvation History.

During the time of the Kings, Israel became a powerful nation. It was the golden age of the Prophets who proclaimed the Word of God with authority. Prophets were of two kinds, namely writing and non-writing prophets. Many great and powerful prophets such as Elijah, Elisha, Micaiah have no book in their name and so they are called non-writing prophets. Those who have a book in their name are called writing prophets. It does not mean that they themselves wrote the book; it could be one of their disciples did the writing and the book was attributed to the well know prophet. There could be also pseudonymous writings such as Jonah. The writing prophets are divided into two categories, namely major and minor. This division is made not on account of the importance of the content, but because of the length of the book. There are four major and twelve Minor Prophets.

Most of the great prophets came on stage during the time of Kings. They were constantly calling the people and their leaders to conversion, to get back to the original faith in Yahweh and to

obey His commandments. The great prophets were not only critics. They were sent by God to purify the faith of the people, to strengthen them with the hope in the coming of the Messiah, the Redeemer King whom God will send to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. The Word of God that had been handed down in the form of oral tradition and written tradition began to be organized into books during this time. More clarity was gained about God and His plan of salvation. Worship began to be more organized and centered on the Temple in Jerusalem. There were three groups in the leadership role, Kings, Priests and the people.

There were three kings in the undivided kingdom, Saul, David and Solomon. Then the Northern Kingdom, Israel had 19 kings including Jeroboam II who ruled for 40 years and Simri who ruled only for 7 days. In Judah, there were 19 Kings and a Queen named Athaliah. Thus all together, there were 41 Kings and a Queen who ruled over the people of Israel covering period of approximately five centuries. With the Babylonian exile, Monarchy in Israel came to an end.

## **6. Exile (587-538)**

In B.C. 598 Babylonian army captured Jerusalem. Above Ten Thousand people including King Jehoiakim, the royal household and the ruling officials were deported to Babylon as prisoners (2 Kings 24, 8-17). Judah was to pay a large amount yearly as tribute to Babylon. After a few years, Zedekiah, whom the king of Babylon put on the throne of Judah, rebelled, making a treaty with Egypt. The Babylonian army came back in 587 and destroyed Jerusalem and again took thousands as slaves to Babylon. Thus the 6<sup>th</sup> stage of Salvations History, The Exile began.

Apparently the Babylon Exile was a great loss and disaster for the people of Israel, but in reality it turned out to be a time of great revelations and new discernment. When there was no king, no Temple, no priests and sacrifices, no pilgrimages and no

celebrations, in short, no outward expression of religion, people were forced to turn to God with their whole heart. They became aware of the presence of God beyond place and time, and realized that obedience out of love is more important than cultic sacrifices. They came to the deep conviction that God has chosen them out of all the peoples on the earth, not because of any merit of theirs but purely out of compassion and love. This invited them to rethink the aim of being called as the people of God. They became aware of the universal love of God and that the aim of their call was to be the light of the world. Thus, they received many revelations about the nature of God and their duty and mission as the People of God.

During the Exile the Prophets, Deutero Isaiah (Is 40-55) and Ezekiel gave hope and guidance to the people. Priests who drew inspiration from Prophets Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the disciples of the prophets worked together to guide the people. History of Israel was written by a group called Deuteronomistic Historians who were influenced by the teachings of the prophets. It is commonly believed that the books from Joshua to 2 Kings were written during this time. Many of the prophetic books took their final and present shape during this period.

During the same period a group of priests began to study and reflect on the importance of the Law, fidelity to the Covenant, the relevance of worship, relationship with the gentiles and similar topics in the light of the exile experience. They too played a significant role in writing the Bible. During the post exilic life, they had great influence over the people.

## **7. Post Exilic Period (B.C. 538 - A.D. 135)**

Cyrus, the King of Persia, defeated Babylon in B.C. 538. He gave freedom to the foreign captives to return to their native lands. With that began the 7<sup>th</sup> and last stage of preparation for

the coming of the Savior. This period can be divided into three: **Persian Rule** (538-332); **Greek Rule** (332-63); and **Roman Rule** (B.C. 63 - A.D. 135). Throughout this long period of almost seven centuries, the people of Israel were under the rule of some foreign power.

**Persian Rule:** The Persians, while keeping the political power, allowed Israel to have religious freedom, and helped them to rebuild the Temple. As far as the writing of the Bible was concerned, they had all the help and freedom they needed. The rebuilding of Israel took place under the leadership of Ezra who had come back from exile in 458 B.C.. The final editing and publishing of most of the OT books took place during this period, under the influence of the Priestly School whose head was Ezra. Pentateuch was written, in the form we have today, at that time. The Prophetic books and historical books were edited and organized. All the Wisdom Books except “Wisdom” and “Ecclesiasticus” were written during this time.

The priests occupied a very important position in the society. Though it was a foreign political power ruling, they had total freedom in the area of religion. The awareness that the exile was caused by infidelity to Yahweh through idolatry, forced the religious leaders to impose strict rules in the field of religion and worship. The conviction that the contact with the gentiles was the cause of infidelity to Yahweh and idol worship led them to order the people to terminate all contacts with the gentiles. Marriages with gentile women were annulled. The people were compelled to follow the letter of the law. There emerged a strong feeling that only the people of Israel were holy and this led to a superiority complex. The awareness they had during the exile about universal mission was either ignored or rejected. A ghetto mentality developed among the Jewish people.



However, not all the people were convinced of the arguments of the priestly leadership. Now and then some dissenting voices were heard against the general teaching of the priests and wise men. They questioned the teaching that literal observance of the Law is the norm for holiness and that the holy people, only the holy ones, will be blessed by God. Blessing of God, according to their teaching, came in the form of wealth, health, many children and long life. The Books of Job and Ecclesiastes were written in strong opposition to the ghetto mentality of the religious leaders. Absence of Prophets was another characteristic of this time. The age of the Prophets came to an end by middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Malachi was considered to be the last prophet. The book of Jonah, written at this time under false name, is a satire that mocks the narrow mentality of the Priests and emphasizes the responsibility of Israel as people of God to be the light of the world.

***Greek Rule:*** In 336 B.C., following the death of King Philip of Macedonia, his 19 year old son, Alexander took over his father's throne. Within a short time Alexander became the King of Greece. Then, he defeated Persia in a number of battles. In 332 B.C. Palestine came under Alexander. The Persian period came to an end giving way to the Greek rule. In 323, at the age of 32, Alexander died and the vast empire was divided among the four Commanders of his Army. Ptolemy became the ruler of Egypt and Seleucus took over Syria. Israel was placed under Egypt until Antiochus III of Syria defeated Egypt in 200 B.C. and then Israel came under Syria.

The conquest and success of Alexander created great appreciation and admiration for the Greek culture. Studying in Greek Universities, taking part in their sport completions, and enjoying their tragedy dramas influenced the thought pattern and life style of the people of Israel. Without any pressure, a large

number of Israelites accepted the Greek culture. Even though Israel had come under the Syrian in 200 B.C. they were allowed to continue their religious practice, because initially Syria was following the Persian policy of cultural and religious tolerance. But, in 175 B.C. Antiochus IV called Epiphanes, the Syrian king, decided to impose the Greek culture on its subjects by force.

The people of Israel were forbidden to continue their religious practices. Circumcision and observance of Sabbath were no more allowed. People were forced to eat pork. A statue of the Greek god, Zeus, was enthroned in the Jerusalem Temple. All were ordered to offer sacrifices to the idols. Those who opposed were severely tortured and brutally murdered. The period between 167 and 164 was a time of religious persecution for the Jews. For the first time in their long history the people of Israel had to suffer just for their religious belief and practices.

There was a mixed reaction among the people of Israel to this new law. Many who had already accepted the Greek or Hellenistic culture welcomed this move and readily supported the new policy. A group of devout Israelites decided to obey the Law at any cost and vowed to be faithful to the faith and traditions of their fathers. They called themselves “chasideim”, the holy ones, but the people called them “Perushim” the separated ones, because they had a special dress that distinguished themselves from others. The word Pharisee is an adaptation the word Perushim. Yet another group, under the leadership of a priest called Mattathias and his five sons decided to oppose the new move with armed revolt. The books, 1-2 Maccabees tell the story of this revolt and its success. The books like Daniel and Ruth encouraged people to resist. In 164 B.C. Antiochus IV was killed and the religious persecution ended. However, the practice of Greek culture continued voluntarily. The books “Wisdom” and “Ecclesiasticus” were written during this time.

**Roman Rule:** In B.C. 63, Pompey, the Roman Consul defeated the Syrians and took over Palestine. This marked the last sage of the preparation of salvation history. With the approval of the Roman Senate, Herod became king of Palestine in 40 B.C. Within three years he eliminated all the enemies and began his rule in 37 B.C. Right before his death in B.C. 4, the world witnessed the birth of the Savior that divided the History of the World into B.C. and A.D. (B.C. = Before Christ; A.D = Anno Domini, the Year of the Lord). Following a revolt of the Jews in 64 AD that turned out into an all-out war, which came to be known as the Jewish War, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD and thousands of Jews were made captives and sold as slaves. After about 60 years, there was another rebellion against Rome under a leader called Simon bar Kochba in 135 A.D. which was brutally crushed by the Roman army. With that, the Jews were forbidden to enter Jerusalem. The Romans changed the name of Jerusalem into Aelia Capitolina (Eastern Capital). In the place where the Jerusalem Temple stood, they built a temple for Jupiter. With this, the period of Preparation ended and also the relevance of Jewish people in the Salvation history. They were supposed to prepare for the coming of the Messiah but they failed in the mission.

## **II. Fulfillment**

The Christ event is the center of Salvation History. Jesus of Nazareth is the Word of God who became flesh and lived in our midst. Historians and Bible Scholars claim that Jesus was born between B.C. 6 and 4 and his death is considered to be in A.D. 30. The four Gospels of the New Testament present the life and teachings of Jesus in the light of faith. They cannot be considered as historical books or biography in the ordinary sense. These books present the historical truths explained and proclaimed in the light of faith.

The plan of God for the salvation of humanity was fulfilled in Jesus. *“In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world”* (Heb 1,1). By Christ Event we mean all the events from Conception to Resurrection (birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection) of Jesus. God revealed Himself and His plan of redemption through the Christ Event. Therefore, the Gospels are the center and also the most important part of the Bible. Hence the Gospels should be the norm of life and also in studying the Bible and interpreting it.

### **III. Proclamation**

The entire Old Testament leads to Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of all promises. The third period, that of Proclamation starts with the Resurrection and exaltation of Jesus and would last until His second coming. 23 books of the Bible, from the Acts of the Apostles to the Revelation are part of this Proclamation. In fact the four Gospels also should be considered as part, or rather the center, of this proclamation. These books give the guidelines and examples of evangelization that the Christians are doing and should be doing.

These books also contain the command of Jesus to his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth, receiving inspiration and strength from the Christ event. This period started with the resurrection of Jesus. Sometimes it is called the rule of thousand years (Rev 20, 1-6) or the persecution of three and a half years (Rev 12,14). This is a time of struggle against the powers of Satan. For this war the disciples are inspired and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. The proclamation of the Good News of the Kingdom of God, inaugurated by Jesus Christ, must continue until the whole world is renewed and the New Heaven

New Earth become a reality. Only God the Father knows when this renewal will be completed. Let us conclude the Bible reading, study and prayer with the prayer of request: “Come Lord Jesus” to renew everything.

MARANATHA

COME LORD JESUS !

Chapter 10  
**DEI VERBUM**  
*DOGmatic CONSTITUTION ON DIVINE  
REVELATION*  
**DEI VERBUM**  
*SOLEMNLY PROMULGATED BY HIS HOLINESS*  
*POPE PAUL VI*  
*ON NOVEMBER 18, 1965*

**PREFACE**

1. Hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with faith, the sacred synod takes its direction from these words of St. John: “We announce to you the eternal life which dwelt with the Father and was made visible to us. What we have seen and heard we announce to you, so that you may have fellowship with us and our common fellowship be with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:2-3). Therefore, following in the footsteps of the Council of Trent and of the First Vatican Council, this present council wishes to set forth authentic doctrine on divine revelation and how it is handed on, so that by hearing the message of salvation the whole world may believe, by believing it may hope, and by hoping it may love. (1)

CHAPTER I  
**REVELATION ITSELF**

2. In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). Through

this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation.

(2)

3. God, who through the Word creates all things (see John 1:3) and keeps them in existence, gives men an enduring witness to Himself in created realities (see Rom. 1:19-20). Planning to make known the way of heavenly salvation, He went further and from the start manifested Himself to our first parents. Then after their fall His promise of redemption aroused in them the hope of being saved (see Gen. 3:15) and from that time on He ceaselessly kept the human race in His care, to give eternal life to those who perseveringly do good in search of salvation (see Rom. 2:6-7). Then, at the time He had appointed He called Abraham in order to make of him a great nation (see Gen. 12:2). Through the patriarchs, and after them through Moses and the prophets, He taught this people to acknowledge Himself the one living and true God, provident father and just judge, and to wait for the Saviour promised by Him, and in this manner prepared the way for the Gospel down through the centuries.

4. Then, after speaking in many and varied ways through the prophets, “now at last in these days God has spoken to us in His Son” (Heb. 1:1-2). For He sent His Son, the eternal Word, who enlightens all men, so that He might dwell among men and tell them of the innermost being of God (see John 1:1-18). Jesus

Christ, therefore, the Word made flesh, was sent as “a man to men.” (3) He “speaks the words of God” (John 3:34), and completes the work of salvation which His Father gave Him to do (see John 5:36; John 17:4). To see Jesus is to see His Father (John 14:9). For this reason Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making Himself present and manifesting Himself: through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, but especially through His death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth. Moreover He confirmed with divine testimony what revelation proclaimed, that God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal.

The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Tim. 6:14 and Tit. 2:13).

5. “The obedience of faith” (Rom. 16:26; see 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5-6) “is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals,” (4) and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him. To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving “joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it.” (5) To bring about an ever deeper understanding of revelation the same Holy Spirit constantly brings faith to completion by His gifts.

6. Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men. That is to say, He chose to share with them those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind. (6)



As a sacred synod has affirmed, God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from created reality by the light of human reason (see Rom. 1:20); but teaches that it is through His revelation that those religious truths which are by their nature accessible to human reason can be known by all men with ease, with solid certitude and with no trace of error, even in this present state of the human race. (7)

## CHAPTER II

### **HANDING ON DIVINE REVELATION**

7. In His gracious goodness, God has seen to it that what He had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity and be handed on to all generations. Therefore Christ the Lord in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion (see 2 Cor. 1:20; 3:13; 4:6), commissioned the Apostles to preach to all men that Gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching, (1) and to impart to them heavenly gifts. This Gospel had been promised in former times through the prophets, and Christ Himself had fulfilled it and promulgated it with His lips. This commission was faithfully fulfilled by the Apostles who, by their oral preaching, by example, and by observances handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with Him, and from what He did, or what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The commission was fulfilled, too, by those Apostles and apostolic men who under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing. (2)

But in order to keep the Gospel forever whole and alive within the Church, the Apostles left bishops as their successors, “handing over” to them “the authority to teach in their own place.”(3) This sacred tradition, therefore, and Sacred Scripture of both the Old and New Testaments are like a mirror in which

the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything, until she is brought finally to see Him as He is, face to face (see 1 John 3:2).

8. And so the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved by an unending succession of preachers until the end of time. Therefore the Apostles, handing on what they themselves had received, warn the faithful to hold fast to the traditions which they have learned either by word of mouth or by letter (see 2 Thess. 2:15), and to fight in defence of the faith handed on once and for all (see Jude 1:3) (4) Now what was handed on by the Apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the peoples of God; and so the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes.

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. (5) For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her.

The words of the holy fathers witness to the presence of this living tradition, whose wealth is poured into the practice and life of the believing and praying Church. Through the same tradition the Church's full canon of the sacred books is known, and the sacred writings themselves are more profoundly understood and

unceasingly made active in her; and thus God, who spoke of old, uninterruptedly converses with the bride of His beloved Son; and the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church, and through her, in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them (see Col. 3:16).

9. Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.(6)

10. Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. Holding fast to this deposit the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers (see Acts 2, 42, Greek text), so that holding to, practicing and professing the heritage of the faith, it becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a single common effort. (7)

But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, (8) has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, (9) whose authority is

exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.

It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.

### CHAPTER III

#### **SACRED SCRIPTURE, ITS INSPIRATION AND DIVINE INTERPRETATION**

11. Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-20, 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. (1) In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him (2) they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, (3) they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted. (4)

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit,

it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings (5) for the sake of salvation. Therefore “all Scripture is divinely inspired and has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, for reformation of manners and discipline in right living, so that the man who belongs to God may be efficient and equipped for good work of every kind” (2 Tim. 3:16-17, Greek text).

12. However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, (6) the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.

To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to “literary forms.” For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. (7) For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another. (8)

But, since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written, (9) 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 worked out. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account

along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith. It is the task of exegetes to work according to these rules toward a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture, so that through preparatory study the judgment of the Church may mature. For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God. (10)

13. In Sacred Scripture, therefore, while the truth and holiness of God always remains intact, the marvelous “condescension” of eternal wisdom is clearly shown, “that we may learn the gentle kindness of God, which words cannot express, and how far He has gone in adapting His language with thoughtful concern for our weak human nature.” (11) For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men.

## CHAPTER IV THE OLD TESTAMENT

14. In carefully planning and preparing the salvation of the whole human race the God of infinite love, by a special dispensation, chose for Himself a people to whom He would entrust His promises. First He entered into a covenant with Abraham (see Gen. 15:18) and, through Moses, with the people of Israel (see Ex. 24:8). To this people which He had acquired for Himself, He so manifested Himself through words and deeds as the one true and living God that Israel came to know by experience the ways of God with men. Then too, when God Himself spoke to them through the mouth of the prophets, Israel daily gained a deeper and clearer understanding of His ways and made them more widely known among the nations (see Ps. 21:29; 95:1-3;

Is. 2:1-5; Jer. 3:17). The plan of salvation foretold by the sacred authors, recounted and explained by them, is found as the true word of God in the books of the Old Testament: these books, therefore, written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable. “For all that was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

15. The principal purpose to which the plan of the old covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming of Christ, the redeemer of all and of the messianic kingdom, to announce this coming by prophecy (see Luke 24:44; John 5:39; 1 Peter 1:10), and to indicate its meaning through various types (see 1 Cor. 10:12). Now the books of the Old Testament, in accordance with the state of mankind before the time of salvation established by Christ, reveal to all men the knowledge of God and of man and the ways in which God, just and merciful, deals with men. These books, though they also contain some things which are incomplete and temporary, nevertheless show us true divine pedagogy. (1) These same books, then, give expression to a lively sense of God, contain a store of sublime teachings about God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers, and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way. Christians should receive them with reverence.

16. God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New. (2) For, though Christ established the new covenant in His blood (see Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), still the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the Gospel, (3) acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament (see Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:27; Rom. 16:25-26; 2 Cor. 14:16) and in turn shed light on it and explain it.

## CHAPTER V

### THE NEW TESTAMENT

17. The word of God, which is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe (see Rom. 1:16), is set forth and shows its power in a most excellent way in the writings of the New Testament. For when the fullness of time arrived (see Gal. 4:4), the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us in His fullness of graces and truth (see John 1:14). Christ established the kingdom of God on earth, manifested His Father and Himself by deeds and words, and completed His work by His death, resurrection and glorious Ascension and by the sending of the Holy Spirit. Having been lifted up from the earth, He draws all men to Himself (see John 12:32, Greek text), He who alone has the words of eternal life (see John 6:68). This mystery had not been manifested to other generations as it was now revealed to His holy Apostles and prophets in the Holy Spirit (see Eph. 3:4-6, Greek text), so that they might preach the Gospel, stir up faith in Jesus, Christ and Lord, and gather together the Church. Now the writings of the New Testament stand as a perpetual and divine witness to these realities.

18. It is common knowledge that among all the Scriptures, even those of the New Testament, the Gospels have a special pre-eminence, and rightly so, for they are the principal witness for the life and teaching of the incarnate Word, our saviour.

The Church has always and everywhere held and continues to hold that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin. For what the Apostles preached in fulfilment of the commission of Christ, afterwards they themselves and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing: the foundation of faith, namely, the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.(1)



19. Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven (see Acts 1:1). Indeed, after the Ascension of the Lord the Apostles handed on to their hearers what He had said and done. This they did with that clearer understanding which they enjoyed (3) after they had been instructed by the glorious events of Christ's life and taught by the light of the Spirit of truth. (2) The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of their churches and preserving the form of proclamation but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus. (4) For their intention in writing was that either from their own memory and recollections, or from the witness of those who "themselves from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word" we might know "the truth" concerning those matters about which we have been instructed (see Luke 1:2-4).

20. Besides the four Gospels, the canon of the New Testament also contains the epistles of St. Paul and other apostolic writings, composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by which, according to the wise plan of God, those matters which concern Christ the Lord are confirmed, His true teaching is more and more fully stated, the saving power of the divine work of Christ is preached, the story is told of the beginnings of the Church and its marvellous growth, and its glorious fulfilment is foretold.

For the Lord Jesus was with His apostles as He had promised (see Matt. 28:20) and sent them the advocate Spirit who would lead them into the fullness of truth (see John 16:13).

CHAPTER VI  
**SACRED SCRIPTURE IN THE LIFE OF THE  
CHURCH**

21. The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body. She has always maintained them, and continues to do so, together with sacred tradition, as the supreme rule of faith, since, as inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the word of God Himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles. Therefore, like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: "For the word of God is living and active" (Heb. 4:12) and "it has power to build you up and give you your heritage among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32; see 1 Thess. 2:13).

22. Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful. That is why the Church from the very beginning accepted as her own that very ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament which is called the Septuagint; and she has always given a place of honour to other Eastern translations and Latin ones especially the Latin translation known as the vulgate. But since the word of God should be accessible at all times, the Church by her authority and with maternal concern sees to it that

suitable and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books. And should the opportunity arise and the Church authorities approve, if these translations are produced in cooperation with the separated brethren as well, all Christians will be able to use them.

23. The bride of the incarnate Word, the Church taught by the Holy Spirit, is concerned to move ahead toward a deeper understanding of the Sacred Scriptures so that she may increasingly feed her sons with the divine words. Therefore, she also encourages the study of the holy Fathers of both East and West and of sacred liturgies. Catholic exegetes then and other students of sacred theology, working diligently together and using appropriate means, should devote their energies, under the watchful care of the sacred teaching office of the Church, to an exploration and exposition of the divine writings. This should be so done that as many ministers of the divine word as possible will be able effectively to provide the nourishment of the Scriptures for the people of God, to enlighten their minds, strengthen their wills, and set men's hearts on fire with the love of God. (1) The sacred synod encourages the sons of the Church and Biblical scholars to continue energetically, following the mind of the Church, with the work they have so well begun, with a constant renewal of vigor. (2)

24. Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation. By scrutinizing in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word. For the Sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and since they are inspired, really are the word of God; and so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology. (3) By the same word of Scripture the ministry of the word also, that is, pastoral preaching, catechetical and all Christian instruction, in which the liturgical homily

must hold the foremost place, is nourished in a healthy way and flourishes in a holy way.

25. Therefore, all the clergy must hold fast to the Sacred Scriptures through diligent sacred reading and careful study, especially the priests of Christ and others, such as deacons and catechists who are legitimately active in the ministry of the word. This is to be done so that none of them will become “an empty preacher of the word of God outwardly, who is not a listener to it inwardly” (4) since they must share the abundant wealth of the divine word with the faithful committed to them, especially in the sacred liturgy. The sacred synod also earnestly and especially urges all the Christian faithful, especially Religious, to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the “excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:8). “For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”(5) Therefore, they should gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose and other aids which, in our time, with approval and active support of the shepherds of the Church, are commendably spread everywhere. And let them remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for “we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine saying.” (6)

It devolves on sacred bishops “who have the apostolic teaching”(7) to give the faithful entrusted to them suitable instruction in the right use of the divine books, especially the New Testament and above all the Gospels. This can be done through translations of the sacred texts, which are to be provided with the necessary and really adequate explanations so that the children of the Church may safely and profitably become conversant with the Sacred Scriptures and be penetrated with their spirit.

Furthermore, editions of the Sacred Scriptures, provided with suitable footnotes, should be prepared also for the use of non-Christians and adapted to their situation. Both pastors of souls and Christians generally should see to the wise distribution of these in one way or another.

26. In this way, therefore, through the reading and study of the sacred books “the word of God may spread rapidly and be glorified” (2 Thess. 3:1) and the treasure of revelation, entrusted to the Church, may more and more fill the hearts of men. Just as the life of the Church is strengthened through more frequent celebration of the Eucharistic mystery, similar we may hope for a new stimulus for the life of the Spirit from a growing reverence for the word of God, which “lasts forever” (Is. 40:8; see 1 Peter 1:23-25).

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