

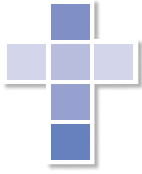


# Catholic Discipleship

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## Spiritual Exercises and Reflections

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# Preface

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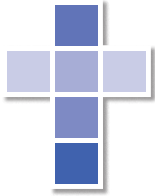
There is much discussion about the state of Catholicism today and, more particularly, the state of Catholics themselves. What’s being said about us Catholics? What are the trends?

We have been through a huge transition, from the pre-1960 urban and small-town ethnic enclaves that our forbearers formed to the suburban, secular, modern world in which we all live. Many observers of Catholic life indicate that we Catholics have not made this transition well. Certainly, statistics about participation in parish and church life show a severe drop in regular worship and other parish activities, particularly among younger generations.

But millions of us still regularly practice our faith, guided more clearly by the Scriptures and by the challenge that the Second Vatican Council laid at the feet of every baptized person—the call to holiness and discipleship. We are surprised, then, when others look at us as mostly “going through the motions” and young people do not seem drawn to celebrate the Eucharist. We feel a disconnect. What might the issue be?

The structures of Catholic life, particularly catechetical methods and sacraments, all presume a personal encounter with Jesus, but this is not often clearly realized by Catholics. That is to say, we Catholics, and other believers, have a hard time talking about the relational side of our faith—how our faith puts us in contact with God through Jesus and the Spirit.

Modern popes, from St. John XXIII through Pope Francis, have laid out paths for us—paths for “pilgrim people,” to use the image of the Second Vatican Council. Pope John XXIII called us to renewal, Pope Paul VI called us to evangelize, and Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict urged a new evangelization and new appropriation of our faith. Pope Francis has called us Catholics to experience “the joy of the gospel” and to be missionary disciples.



## Unit 5. **Revelation**

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Revelation, the process by which God communicates with humankind, is one unified whole.

It begins with creation itself, for nature speaks of God's love and life.

It expands with the emergence of religion, and takes on particular force with the revelation made through the Jewish people which began 3,500 years ago.

This Jewish revelation was brought to completion with the revelation that was Jesus Christ, God's definitive Word spoken to humankind.

The Jewish Scriptures contain a record of God's revelation through Jewish history; the Christian Scriptures contain a record of Jesus' revelation to his first followers, through the Holy Spirit. Together, these compose the Christian and Catholic Bible.

These are simple concepts, but they are still hard for Catholics to absorb; we still remain quite uncomfortable with our bibles. Ask a Catholic to look up a passage; one usually receives a look of dread and confusion. "Where do I find that in the Bible?" they will ask. "Is it in the Old Testament or the New Testament?" It's not hard to make Catholics feel lost when it comes to the Bible.

### **Misreading the Bible**

A friend of mine has spent a long time searching for a community of faith. He has gone to many different churches, all with many different approaches to the Bible. Although he knows the Bible with a thoroughness that would make most other Christians blush, he nevertheless loves to tell the joke about the man who was looking for guidance in life. So he decides he will open his Bible and follow whatever the first sentence he sees will tell him. He flips through the Bible and finds the phrase "Judas went out and hanged himself." Puzzled, he tries again, flipping through the pages. Now the chosen phrase reads "Go and do likewise." Confused even further, he tries again. This time he reads: "Do what you will do quickly."

My friend uses this humorous story to emphasize what he has come to realize: the Bible is not to be read as history, science, personal therapy, or a magic book. Rather, we read the Bible as a collection of writings, written over a long period of time, which illuminate God's relationship with us, our relationship with God, and our relationship with each other as a result of God's love for us.

Indeed, the Bible can be intimidating because, in addition to its thousand-plus pages, it contains so many references that seem obscure, difficult, or even contradictory. In the last several centuries, we have learned to read the Bible in its context—how it was shaped through history—better than at any other time in Christian history. Advances in language and archeological studies have aided this development. So modern bibles often contain notes that help the reader understand the context. Nevertheless, the most important perspective for interpreting the Bible remains this: how it sheds light on God's love for us and our corresponding love for God.

### **Knowing the Bible**

Although we Catholics seem reluctant when it comes to the Bible, we know and absorb much more of it than we realize. Another friend of mine lectures widely on this theme. She points out that, for Catholics who go to Mass regularly, the main parts of the Bible have been read every three years. We've been doing this since 1970—so that means we've heard these passages more than fifteen times. My friend asserts that you can ask almost any active Catholic about a passage in the Bible and you will get a thoughtful response about the passage, its spirituality, and what it has come to mean in someone's life. This is particularly true when it comes to the New Testament, but it also extends to key passages in the Old Testament.

I often verify this by starting off a Scripture passage from memory and asking someone to complete it. There, in front of the rest of the gathered people, this Catholic confidently, with a big smile, will invariably finish off the passage. For those of us who worship regularly, the Bible has become part of our DNA.

What does the Bible do in our lives? It deepens and develops the relationship that we have with God—giving us the language, feelings, opportunities, and even possible failures, in terms of how we accept this offer of love from God. Revelation brings depth, nuance, power, and drama to our relationship with God. It gives us the words and the confidence we need to address the Mystery of

Love that is behind us, beyond us, beneath us, and before us. Coming to know God can cause ecstasy, when we are drawn outside ourselves, and it can also bring that quiet stillness which abides deep within us.

### Two Steps in Revelation

So how do we Catholics, missionaries, grow using the Bible? How do we keep from being overwhelmed by it?

We realize that the Bible has two chronological, and religious, steps: (1) what God did with the Jewish people, and (2) what God did in and through Jesus and his followers. These parts are called the Old Testament (for the Jewish Scriptures) and the New Testament (for the Christian Scriptures). However, it is important not to separate these steps in God's action; as St. Paul says, God's covenants are irrevocable (Romans 11:29). What God began with the Jewish people he completed in Jesus. Jesus' frame of reference was the Old Testament. There is a continuity in the one loving act of revelation, and salvation, from God.

Looking at a Bible, you can see the Old Testament is much longer than the New Testament. The Jewish Scriptures encompass almost two thousand years of experience, from the time of Abraham to the time of Jesus. The New Testament encompasses about one hundred years of experience, from the time of Jesus to the end of the age of the Apostles.

### Approaching the Scriptures

So how do we approach the Bible? With two realizations.

The first one calls us to realize the Bible is unlike any other book we will read. It was not written by a single human who had information to communicate. It was, rather, inspired by God through the history, experience, songs, culture, and language of the Jewish people. God is the author, but God uses many "pens," so to speak: story, genealogy, poetry, records, and styles—composed over a thousand years—to communicate God's relationship with humankind in and through the Jewish experience. As we will see in our next unit, one way to focus this complex of writings is to think of Mount Sinai, where God was revealed to Moses and the notion of covenant became a basic way Jewish people understood themselves.

We also realize that the New Testament itself contains different kinds of writing from different perspectives, but they all center on Jesus Christ. If we can think of

Mount Sinai in the Jewish context, we can think of Mount Calvary—where Jesus was crucified—as the central figure in Christian experience. This helps us not to approach the Bible as if it were a newspaper or historical book. We see the Bible as a collection of books that bring together many different kinds of writing—but all of it to advance revelation: God’s relationship with humankind.

The second realization involves our appreciating how the Bible operates at various levels in Catholic experiences. The General Directory for Catechesis (1997) taught us about the various ways the Word of God operates in our Christian lives. It pointed to five dimensions of the Word: (1) call; (2) initiation; (3) ongoing education; (4) liturgy; and (5) theology (cf. #51). This is a way for us, as disciples, to structure our own relationship to the Bible.

As disciples, we can use these five elements to expand the various ways we can approach the Scriptures.

1. The Bible is always calling us to conversion. As we read the various passages, we constantly ask ourselves how the Scriptures are inviting us to yet deeper change and fuller acceptance of God’s Word in our lives. Our conversion, our evangelization, is never completed.
2. The Bible is always tying us more completely to Christ and his people, the Church. As we are called, we continue our progress in following Christ by studying his words, absorbing the social and moral implications of his teaching, and praying for continued growth.
3. The Bible calls us to expanded understanding of ourselves, and our world, in relationship to God. If our conversion is never complete, neither is our education. The Bible demands study in itself, as we continue to absorb God’s Word and the context in which it came. But the Bible demands study of all human experience with reference to God’s abiding love. All of history, social interaction, science, psychology, and art can somehow be related to the Bible. The perspective of God’s love for humankind comes to illuminate all the other truths that we have come to learn.
4. The Bible leads us to prayer. Prayer, as we will later see, opens us to the dimensions of God that are all around us, bringing us into intimate communication with God. It also brings believers together, to strengthen



our relationship with God by our sharing with others, especially in the great worship of God in the Eucharist. Every time we read from the Bible, we need to let those words lead us into quiet prayer, or expressive prayer, because once we have seen how God touches our lives, we want to respond as fully as we can with our own love and thanksgiving.

5. The Bible, finally, calls us to study God, and God's relation to all of creation and all of human experience. The fancy word for this is theology; while some people become experts in theology, most of us will just try to do what St. Anselm spoke about in his famous phrase "faith seeking understanding." As questions arise, as issues puzzle us, as one idea nudges another, we pursue our reflection, thinking, study, and conversation to come to a better grasp of the wonder of God. In some way, all of us do this whenever we hear or read from the Bible. The Word of God encourages this growth in knowledge.

What advice can we give each other about the Bible? Don't be afraid!

We approach the Bible together. Many of us hear the Scripture, study it, and proclaim it; we are one in doing this. We all can open our Bibles, get the big picture, find the important and favorite passages, and then let these seep into our hearts.

Begin with a little, and let it take you further and further.



## Spiritual Exercise

Open a Bible to the beginning of the Gospel of John (below). Slowly read the opening verses and let them resonate in your heart. Take at least 5 minutes for this.

Reflect on the Word that always is, and that always is God, and that always is with God.

Reflect on the Word creating you, those you love, your life, and your world.

Embrace the Word becoming flesh. Ask what this means for human reality.

Pray a spontaneous prayer to Jesus as God's Word in our midst.



Write any reflections below:

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## Scripture

John 1:1-3

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God.

All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be.

What came to be through him was life,

and this life was the light of the human race;

the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

## Questions for reflection/discussion:

1. What has been your experience with the Scriptures? What sections of Scriptures have stayed with you?

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2. When did you most feel like God was speaking directly to you through the Scriptures? What was the setting?

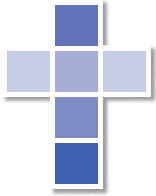
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3. How do you see yourself growing in the Word of God?

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## A Missionary Disciple's Checklist

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- \_\_\_\_\_ Prayer (morning, throughout the day, evening)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Reading of Scripture (daily, weekly)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Involvement in worship
- \_\_\_\_\_ Preparation for Mass (reflection, prayer)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Extended time in prayer (meditation, *lectio divina*, adoration)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Being attentive to family
- \_\_\_\_\_ Involvement in the parish
- \_\_\_\_\_ Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation
- \_\_\_\_\_ Small group sharing about faith
- \_\_\_\_\_ Having prayer events at home
- \_\_\_\_\_ Being a minister in the parish, serving as a volunteer beyond the parish
- \_\_\_\_\_ Forming community in the parish
- \_\_\_\_\_ Responding to the needs of neighbors and the neighborhood
- \_\_\_\_\_ Assisting others with charitable giving, locally and worldwide
- \_\_\_\_\_ Direct involvement with serving the sick, poor, needy
- \_\_\_\_\_ Talking about faith with others
- \_\_\_\_\_ Inviting people to consider becoming believers, to worship
- \_\_\_\_\_ Inviting inactive Catholics to reconnect with the Church
- \_\_\_\_\_ Involvement with diocesan projects
- \_\_\_\_\_ Doing everything with joy and love