

The Essential Bible Handbook

A GUIDE FOR CATHOLICS

With Prayers and a Glossary of Key Terms

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Contents

Introduction ix

Part One: Beginnings 1

1. Creation, the Work of God 4
2. The Human Person 5
3. The Human Person Desires to Know God 5
4. How Can We Know God? 6
5. How Can We Speak About God? 7
6. How Is God's Word Revealed to Humanity? 8
7. The Apostolic Tradition 10
8. Sacred Scripture 11
9. Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church 13

Part Two: The Bible:

Basic Information Before Leaving Earth 17

1. Ancient Ways of Writing and Recording
What Was Written 19
2. What Is the Bible? 23
3. The Oral Tradition 25
4. The Written Tradition 28
5. The Edited Tradition 29
6. The New Testament 31
7. How Did the Bible Become "the Book"? 33
8. The Books of the Old Testament 36
9. The Books of the New Testament 38
10. Non-Biblical Writings and Texts 39

Part Three: How to Read the Bible 43

1. Keep in Mind the Historical Context 48
2. Keep in Mind the Literary Genre and Context 52
3. Myths 55
4. Legends 56
5. Etiologies 58
6. Gospels 59
7. Parables 61
8. Letters 62
9. Different Translations 64
10. Interpreting God's Word Today 67
11. God Said It, I Believe It: Fundamentalism 71

Part Four: Salvation History 75

1. Introduction to the Law (Torah) 79
2. Introduction to the Historical Books 85
3. Introduction to the Writings 97
4. Introduction to the Prophets 101
5. Introduction to the Gospels 112
6. The Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1—28) 118
7. Introduction to the Letters 119
8. The Book of Revelation (Rev 1—22) 133

Part Five: A Selection of Scripture Prayer Services 135

1. Preparing for Advent 138
2. Preparing for Lent 142
3. When You Need to Be Forgiveness 146
4. A Prayer Service for Those Near Death 150
5. Seeking the Spirit of Discernment 154
6. The Seven Penitential Psalms 158

Part Six: The Bible and the Sacraments 167

1. Jesus and Baptism 170
2. Baptism Scripture References 171
3. Jesus and the Holy Spirit 172
4. Confirmation Scripture References 173
5. Jesus and the Eucharist 174
6. Eucharist Scripture References 175
7. Jesus and Sinners 176
8. Reconciliation and Penance Scripture References 177
9. Jesus the Healer 178
10. Anointing of the Sick Scripture References 179
11. Jesus and Marriage 180
12. Matrimony Scripture References 182
13. Jesus the Priest 183
14. Holy Orders Scripture References 184

Part Seven: Praying With Scripture 187

1. A Method for Prayer 189
2. Suggested Scripture References 193
3. An Eight-Day Retreat Experience 194

**Part Eight: Praying With Major Personalities
of the Bible 203**

1. Abraham and Sarah 206
2. Miriam 208
3. Moses 209
4. King David 210
5. The Prophet Isaiah 211
6. The Prophet Jeremiah 212
7. Esther 213
8. Ruth 214
9. John the Baptist 214
10. The Blessed Virgin Mary 215
11. Mary of Magdala 216
12. Saint Peter 217
13. The Apostle Paul 218

Contents

Part Nine: A Scriptural Rosary 219

1. The Joyful Mysteries 223
2. The Luminous Mysteries 223
3. The Sorrowful Mysteries 223
4. The Glorious Mysteries 223
5. The Biblical Rosary 224

Part Ten: For Further Study 227

1. Glossary of Terms 229
2. Reference Guide to Biblical Names and Places 275
3. Favorite Bible Stories: A Quick Reference List 283
4. Bibliography of Reference Sources 286

Introduction

When I was growing up in the fifties, in a traditional Catholic family, our family routinely participated in a regular schedule of activities associated with our local Catholic parish. We attended Sunday Mass as a family and returned to church on Tuesday evenings to attend devotions in honor of the Blessed Mother under the title of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. We made it a point to go to confession on most Saturday afternoons and, of course, prayed the rosary together as a family each evening while kneeling in a circle in the living room. Ours was a family that believed, and my mother probably believed it the most, that “the family that prays together, stays together,” and so we participated in all that was expected of us.

In our neighborhood most of the Catholic families engaged in the same rituals as did our family. Not for a moment did any one of us even question what we were doing because each of us understood that somehow “this is what a good Catholic family does.” Meanwhile, across the street and on either side of our house, the good families that were formed in another Christian tradition experienced other family rituals. They attended services on Sunday morning and on Sunday evening, returned to church on Wednesday evening for yet another service, then spent a portion of their time each evening gathered together as a family reading the Bible.

One Christian family, formed in the Catholic tradition, prayed and found their guidance and nourishment in the devotions and the rituals that had been handed down to us. The other Christian family, formed in a Protestant tradition, prayed and found their

Introduction

guidance and nourishment in the Bible. Although our Christian families were neighbors, living in close proximity to one another, we could not have been further apart in our spiritual understanding and in our faith experience.

Although our Catholic family owned a Bible, and the Bible had a prominent place in our living room, we were never inclined to open it either for family prayer or at any other time for that matter. The thought never even occurred to us, at the time of prayer or perhaps at the moment of decision-making or personal challenge, to select a passage from Scripture and to “break open the Word.” I sincerely doubt if any of us, had we been so challenged or inclined, would have been able to easily find the passages in the Scripture that would have reflected the mysteries of the rosary, for example, that we would have prayed together. Each of us would have assumed that the mysteries of the rosary could be found in the Bible, because we understood the rosary to tell the story of Jesus and the Blessed Mother, but none of us would have had a clue to where to look.

I sincerely doubt if any of us, had we been so challenged or inclined, would have been able to easily find the passages, for example, that reflected the mysteries of the rosary that we prayed together. Each of us believed that all we needed could be found in the traditions and the pious devotions that we were encouraged to practice and incorporate into our daily life.

Catholics looked to their leadership for guidance in what was expected and encouraged and there was very little deviation from the norm. With this beginning assumption, I suppose if we were instructed to read the Bible, and if it was promoted from the pulpit with the same vigor and enthusiasm as were our other spiritual practices, we would have complied. Obedience to the leadership of the Church and the representatives of that Church in the person of our priests and sisters was also very important to us. As it so happened this value played a very important role in what happened next.

Introduction

What occurred after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council was that the emphasis changed rather quickly from a spiritual practice that was highly devotional to practices that encouraged biblical reading and study. Bible-study classes, scriptural prayer services, and other practices were promoted and recommended while traditional devotional practices became less and less important. Probably the single most important change was the emphasis on the Liturgy of the Word at Mass, distinct from the Liturgy of the Eucharist. It was not that Catholics did not read the Scripture at Mass before the Second Vatican Council, but rather that it seemed not to be emphasized and highlighted. After the Council that changed very dramatically.

The emphasis on the Liturgy of the Word, and a complimentary emphasis on the preached word as homily, explaining and interpreting the readings from Scripture just proclaimed as opposed to the traditional sermon that could be on almost any spiritual subject or discipline in a sense introduced most Catholics to the Bible. The lectionary cycle of assigned readings “broke open the Word” of God and the history of God’s salvific action for us all.

These changes in emphasis seemed to accomplish that which was intended. Today, long after the reforms of the Council have been implemented, we have a situation in which most Catholics are more conversant with the Bible, but still relatively few incorporate the praying or the study of the Bible into their daily lives. For an older generation the Bible is much more a part of their lives, but not as comforting as perhaps the more traditional prayers and devotions from their youth. For still others, although they are familiar and comfortable with the Bible, they are possessed with a certain frustration, a frustration that is reflective of the core experience of Catholicism.

For a Catholic to go to the Bible with the expectation that all that is important to them in their faith journey will be easily discovered and explained, disappointment soon sets in. They discover

Introduction

the power of the Word of God, but they do not clearly discover the dogmas, doctrines, and practices of Catholicism. The reason is, of course, that Catholicism has been constructed on the twin pillars of Scripture and Tradition. Sacred Tradition is united to Scripture in the oneness of divine revelation, but the connection is not as clear as some might assume it would be.

For Catholics searching for direction and explanation, a further frustration sets in when they attempt to educate themselves about their spiritual tradition. If they go to a bookstore and pick up a book on the Bible, more often than not the book will help them understand the Bible, but it will be from a non-Catholic perspective, and much of what is important to Catholics in their journey—such as the sacraments, the teaching authority of the Church, and moral theology—will not be explained.

It is into this vacuum, in answer to this frustration, that *The Essential Bible Handbook* is positioned. It is in this spirit that this book is offered as a helpful companion and tool for the Catholic who feels called to study and reflect on the Bible, but who wants to do so with a Catholic sense and feeling to what is being read and reflected on. This book is intended to be a helpful guide and, as such, will be distinctly different from other potential Bible-study books that may appear on the shelves of the local bookstore.

Catholic readers will be guided throughout this handbook in the use of the essential references which have been consulted. The primary reference that will be provided is the appropriate Scripture reference. The Scripture reference provides the name of the book, along with the appropriate chapter and verse, for example, “the Gospel of John, chapter 5, verse 11” (Jn 5:11). A review of abbreviations used is provided in section two of this handbook. In addition to the references provided from Scripture, references to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* are also provided. Catechism references include the specific paragraph reference point, for example, “*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 135” (CCC 135).