

RCIA CLASS 3
A HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC APPROACH TO SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION

I. The early Church both recognized the Bible as inspired and developed traditions regarding its use and interpretation.

A. The early Church had to decide what books make up the Bible, as well as how to interpret them. For there was much debate in the early Church about what books, both before and after Christ, were to be considered inspired by God.

1. The Jewish faith did not settle what books its adherents would consider canonical (i.e. a part of Scripture) until the discussions centered in Jamnia around 90-110 A.D. Believing that the time of Scripture had closed by 400 B.C., with the priesthood of Ezra and the writing of the last prophet Malachi, and believing that the word of God was first written entirely in Hebrew, the Jewish leaders of the late first and second centuries included 39 books in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Catholic Church accepts all of these books as part of the Bible, in what would be called the Old Testament. But the early Church also includes in the Old Testament seven books that the council centered on Jamnia did not include in their Scriptures. These books are: Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Tobit, Baruch, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. The Church also includes in the Bible the last 2 chapters of the book of Daniel, writing that the Jewish faith did not deem to be inspired. That belief continues among Jews until today, and most Protestants follow the Jewish beliefs about the books of the Old Testament.

- Some books, such as the Book of Jubilees and 1 and 2 Enoch were considered but ultimately not accepted as canonical by either Christians or Jews.

- The first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, have always been accepted by all Christians and Jews. To the Jewish people, they are the centerpiece of the Scriptures.

2. In the early Church, there was some debate about what books should be considered part of the New Testament of the Bible. There were several lists, such as the recently discovered Muratorian Canon, and the lists in works of Eusebius, the court historian of the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century.

- Some books that the Church would accept as part of the Bible, such as Hebrews and Revelation, were heavily debated. And other books that would not be accepted as part of the Bible, such as the First and Second Letters of Clement to the Corinthians, the Didache, The Shepherd of Hermas and the Gospel of Peter (not written by St. Peter), were considered by some people to be inspired. See, e.g., Eusebius, Ecclesiastic History, Book III, ch.3, 25; Book VI, ch. 25; "Canonicity" ch. 66 in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (Frs. Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmeyer and Roland Murphy eds. 1990.)

3. In the 370s Pope St. Damasus consulted St. Jerome regarding what books should be included in the Bible. After considering what the early Church

fathers sited as canonical, and what New Testament books had an apostolic origin and were faithful to Christian teachings, they and other theologians settled on what we now revere as the Bible. St. Jerome then published the Vulgate, a translation of the Bible into common Latin, then the language of the people in the western Roman Empire. That translation became the official Latin translation of the Church for centuries; and its production, along with his other Scriptural commentaries, would make St. Jerome the patron saint of Biblical scholarship.

4. In 393, a synod of the African bishops led by St. Augustine, the leading theologian of his day, and meeting in Carthage published the same list of books as the complete Bible. Pope Innocent I gave his approval in 405. This Church has continued to use this list of books ever since. After the Old Testament list was challenged by the Protestants in the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent affirmed in 1546 that the books in Jerome's Vulgate are the complete canon of Scripture, no more and no less.
5. From this translation, accepted by the Popes and local councils, we have our current Bible, with 46 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament.

B. During the early Church, the two leading traditions of Scriptural interpretation were called the Antiochean and the Alexandrian, named after two of the great cities of the classical world. They complemented each other by focusing on more plain interpretation, on the one hand, and deeper, more spiritual and symbolic interpretation on the other.

1. The Antiochan school was led by such figures as St. Ephraim (circa 305-373), a deacon and preeminent theologian of Syria, and St. John Chrysostom (347-407), the Patriarch of Constantinople. This tradition emphasized the more factual interpretation of Scripture, although certainly with moral applications to the present. They focused heavily on the doctrinal implications of Scriptural texts, such as the moral law and the relationship between grace and nature.

2. The Alexandrian school was led by such figures as Origen (circa 183-253) and St. Clement of Alexandria (circa 150-215.) This tradition emphasized the spiritual meaning of Scripture. Thus, for example, they would describe the Chosen People's journey to the Promised Land as an allegory for our spiritual journey, or the parable of the Good Samaritan as an allegory for Christ's saving us from the robbers of our soul. Following the pattern of the Letter to the Hebrews, they heavily used typology, presenting Old Testament figures as types, or prefigurements, of Christ and the Gospels.

3. Theologians from both schools of thought, and commentators promoting other variations, produced numerous extensive commentaries and homilies on different books Scripture during the first four centuries of the Church. These commentaries form a large part of what we now call patristic literature, i.e., writings of the Church Fathers.

II. In the Middle Ages, theologians developed a four-fold method of interpreting Scriptures and strove to combine faith with reason, especially in the Scholastic tradition.

A. Theologians would say that there are four general levels of meaning to a Scriptural text, the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical (or eschatological, heavenly) sense. See, e.g., St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica Book I, question 1, article 10.

1. The literal sense is the sense expressed by the words themselves, as meant by the author for the audience he was writing and, by extension, by the people who were first reading it. This sense may itself be allegorical, for the author may have intended allegory, as in the case of the visions of Daniel and Revelation, the parables of Jesus, and much of the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

- The literal sense must be distinguished from the *literalistic* sense, that is, only the superficial meaning of the words. The literal sense of any writing may have a figurative meaning, as in “White House” meaning the Executive Branch of the federal government or “Wall Street” meaning the financial community.

2. The allegorical sense is the sense of Scripture at a deeper level as applied to Christ, and by extension, to His Church.

3. The moral sense is the moral lessons of a passage and their application to an individual person and to his behavior.

4. The eschatological sense is the meaning as applied to our final destiny, our journey to heaven.

B. Two common examples of these levels of interpretation are the images of Adam and Eve and of Jerusalem.

1. Although it uses a lot of symbolism, the account of Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden and the Fall in Genesis 3 describes realities about original justice, the Fall and resulting original sin. Allegorically, St. Paul presents it as the mirror image of Christ’s redemption. See, e.g., Rom. 5:12-17. Morally, it is an allegory of sin and the resulting shame in general. The anagogical meaning presents heaven as a final Eden (which means garden or paradise in Hebrew), a realm that Satan attacks in vain.

2. Jerusalem is literally a city in the Holy Land and the capital of the ancient nation of Israel. Allegorically, it is an image of the Church. See, e.g., Catechism 756. Morally, it is an image of each human soul, in which God wishes to dwell as He dwelt in the Temple of old. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 3:16. Anagogically, its perfection is an image of heaven. See Rev. 21:2, 9-27.

C. The Catechism expressly endorses this four-fold approach to Scripture, while emphasizing that all of the senses must be built upon the literal sense. See Catechism of the Catholic Church 115-119.

D. The rediscovery of many of Aristotle's works, the flourishing of philosophy and universities, and the beginning of modern science in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, brought new learning into Europe and led to more research in the broad range of academic fields. That increase in learning and scholarship questions brought about a new emphasis on the relationship of faith and reason.

1. In the universities, there arose a type of scholarship called Scholasticism, which emphasized looking into seeming (or actually) contradictory statements and trying to establish a balanced harmony between them. Their approach became central to Scriptural advancements in the High and Late Middle Ages.

a. The Scholastics insisted that there can be no final conflict between faith and reason. They argued well that any apparent conflict can be resolved, like any apparent conflict between passages of the Bible. Furthermore, they maintained that, while faith is higher than reason, reason can help develop the implications of faith. See, e.g., Summa Theologica part I, question I, article 8.

b. Even regarding matters accessible to reason (e.g., the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the natural moral law), the Scholastics maintained that Revelation is often needed so that these conclusions can more easily and without error. See, e.g., Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 2, article 4.

c. The Scholastics also recognized the need for Church teachings to make more clear the things of Scripture that could be ambiguous or difficult. See Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 1, article 9.

2. The Scholastic method would put together two seemingly contradictory passages of Scripture, or from faith and reason, and ask how they can be resolved.

i. For example, the Bible says both that we are saved by faith and not by works, but also that good works are necessary for salvation. Compare Rom. 4; James 2:14-26. One resolution is that God gives man saving faith, but man must act in a fashion befitting that faith in order to keep it.

ii. The Bible also raises the question of whether God give us faith directly, or is it caused by evangelization, or comes from our own decision. Compare Rom. 10:17, John 4:53 and John 3:21 with Eph. 2:8-9. St. Thomas Aquinas argues that, in general, there is usually an external cause for faith, but it is still God's grace which enables us to take advantage of that opportunity, and thus gives us the choice of whether to have faith. See Summa Theologica Part II-II question 6, article 1.

III. In the era of the Renaissance and the Reformation (especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), the Church had to respond to challenges to her authority, while being open to legitimate advances.

A. Starting in the fifteenth century, with an increase in literacy and the development of the printing press, many more people were reading Scriptures. There was also an increasing study in ancient languages, especially Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic, making a deeper analysis of the Scriptures possible.

1. These advances could help people understand the Scriptures more, but there were also difficulties in the indiscriminate use of the methods of science to replace faith.

2. The deeper study of languages led to new translations of the Bible. New Latin translations began competing with the venerable Vulgate, the translation that St. Jerome had made in the 5th century and that had been dominant ever since. Furthermore, there was an increasing demand for translations into vernacular languages.

B. The early Protestants rejected seven books of the Old Testament (Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, and Baruch) as non-canonical. Furthermore, different translations of the Bible could lead to very different results.

C. In response to the Protestant movement and to the challenges of the new discoveries, the Church called the Council of Trent in the mid-16th century. That Council was the centerpiece of the Church's efforts to confirm and explain Catholic teachings, as well as reform practices and eliminate abuses and superstitions that had arisen. With both the opportunities for greater understanding and troubles due to greater confusion about the Bible, the issue of Sacred Scripture became central to the theological debates of the era. And so, in 1546 the Council published its Decree and Canons on Sacred Scripture, which made the Bible and its interpretation among the first issues of the Council.

1. The Council first reaffirmed that the Scriptures are the word of God, written with the Holy Spirit as the Divine Author, who worked through the human authors.

2. The Council then listed once again the 73 books of Scripture translated in the ancient Vulgate of St. Jerome, and used by the Church for a millennium and more, as the authentic Bible. It also defined the Vulgate to be an authoritative translation, correct on every matter of faith or morals. It did not say that no other translation could be used, but affirmed the Vulgate as central and reliable.

3. To deal with the issue of translations, the Council insisted that every translation of the Bible be approved by ecclesiastical authorities.

4. Although Bible reading by the laity was not heavily emphasized, the Catechism of the Council of Trent did say in its commentary on the Second

Commandment (You shall not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain) that reading the Bible is a good way of honoring the name of God.

IV. As the so-called Enlightenment era spread in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Church was confronted with other challenges, both from those who rejected the inerrancy of Scriptures and those who would adopt a more pietistic approach now associated with fundamentalism.

A. In the eighteenth century, geological evidence was beginning to indicate that the world was at least some millions of years old. Furthermore, fossil evidence was beginning to indicate that species had lived and died out long ago. Alone, these discoveries were not a problem for the Church, for many exegetes such as Origen and St. Augustine had read the creation accounts of Genesis in a metaphorical fashion. However, many people tried to pit science and philosophy against religion.

- These attempts reached a height with Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection. The physical application of this theory itself did not contradict the faith. But the implications many people took from it, such as the idea that man is nothing but an advanced ape, are contrary to the faith.

B. Even within the Christian faith, many theologians, exemplified by the German Lutheran Rudolf Bultmann, began to say that the books of Holy Scripture may be inspired, but were erroneous in many details. They said that we have to get beyond the factual assertions to the realm of faith.

- Thus, for example, many people, both liberal Protestants and non-Christians, tried to downplay everything supernatural in the Bible, such as miracles, prophecy and the divinity of Christ. For example, Thomas Jefferson wrote the Jefferson Gospel, in which he excluded from the Gospels all miracles, all references to the divinity of Jesus Christ and likewise many of His harder sayings.

C. The First Vatican Council, called in 1870, issued two decrees, one of which, call De Filius (The Son of God) was on faith and reason.

1. In chapter II, on Revelation, it endorsed the Scholastic notion that Revelation is entirely true, as intended by the author, and reveals both things we could not naturally know by reason alone, as well as other matters accessible to reason, but so important to our salvation that God wanted to confirm them. It affirmed that the Holy Spirit is the author of all of Scripture and that, therefore, there can be no admixture of error in it. It also affirmed that humans using their own industry were also authors of Scripture.

2. The Council affirmed the Church's authority to interpret Scripture definitively. But it also confirmed that the books of the Bible were inspired and inerrant when written, as opposed to the view that the Church's approval is what made them inspired. The Council was confirming that the Bible is not simply a collection of good writings that the Holy Spirit guided the Church to use, but rather was inspired by God from the beginning.

D. In 1893, Pope Leo XIII took on both rationalism, a view that rejects all things that cannot be established by reason alone, and pietism, which rejects the role of reason in interpreting Scriptures with his encyclical letter Providentissimus Deus, On the Study of Scriptures.

1. Pope Leo XIII began the encyclical letter with a clear endorsement of efforts to study Scripture and make it more available to the public, but also a warning about those who would “defile or corrupt it.”

- He said that knowing Scripture is necessary to know the truths of the faith, and essential for oratory regarding the faith. He quoted St. Jerome’s maxim, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ,” a quote that subsequent Church documents on Scripture would continue to use often.

2. After reviewing briefly the history of Scriptural interpretation, he called for clerics and scriptural scholars to confront “our adversaries” who “defuse their deadly poison by means of books, pamphlets and newspapers.” The deadly poison he was referring to is the rationalist belief that would dismiss the Bible as the inspired word of God.

3. Supporting the call for greater study of the Bible, against those who said that its meaning is always clear, he called for a careful preparation of clerics and scholars. In particular, he argued that the Church Fathers had great authority in interpreting the Bible and should be studied carefully.

4. He reiterated the need always to interpret Scripture with the “analogy of faith,” that is in the context of Church teachings, never contradicting them. Within the boundaries of Church teachings, he argued there remains a great deal of freedom.

5. Recognizing the legitimate advances of modern knowledge, he affirmed the value of a greater knowledge of ancient languages and scientific history. But he criticized the excessive use of such studies as though Scripture could be critiqued like any other book.

a. He argued very strongly that there can never be any real conflict between faith and science, and that any apparent conflict is due to a misreading of one or the other.

b. In particular, he affirmed that, while Scripture deals with real historical events, the authors “did not seek to penetrate secrets of nature, but rather described and dealt with things in more or less figurative language, or in terms which were commonly used at the time.” This conclusion was in large part a response to: (1) those who argued that modern science had debunked the Scriptures; and (2) those who would reject the conclusions of modern science as contrary to the Bible.

6. He concluded by affirming strongly the inspiration and therefore inerrancy of all of Scripture, although granting that study is needed to understand the true meaning that the sacred authors were conveying.

V. In the twentieth century, the Church continued to steer a path of combining the rightful advances in understanding Scriptures with the ancient faith in her inspiration and inerrancy.

A. In 1943, during the 50th anniversary year of Providentissimus Deus, Pope Pius XII published the next great encyclical letter on Scriptures, Divino Afflante Spiritu, in which he called for greater studies in Scripture and for care in understanding the literal sense and building upon it.

1. At this point, in the midst of World War II, Pope Pius was dealing with a different problem, namely, those who would defend the value of the Bible, but wanted to put a primarily “spiritual” meaning on it, avoiding the historical meaning.
2. Pope Pius XII began by reviewing the progress in studies that had occurred since Providentissimus Deus, including the founding of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the increase in Scriptural studies in seminaries and among the laity.
3. Given the new advancements in the understanding of archeology, linguistics, and history, Pope Pius XII called for a great use of them. He also approved of the study of ancient texts to establish exactly what the ancient codices of the Bible said and what the best translation of them would be. He argued that, when the Council of Trent said that the Vulgate was authoritative, it did not mean that there could be no improvements, but rather that it was reliable and accurate on all matters of faith and morals.
4. Pope Pius XII then emphasized strongly that one should always begin reading Scripture by understanding the literal sense, i.e. the sense that the author intended. He argued that other academic fields, such as history, literary analysis and the study of languages should be used for this purpose so that the sacred texts may be more understandable. Like Pope Leo XIII, he emphasized that all interpretations must be consistent with Catholic teachings.
5. He then said that there are other spiritual senses that spring from the literal sense. The human author may not have known about these senses, but the Holy Spirit did, and thus the deeper senses are still a part of the Bible. But the Pope also warned about depending too heavily on “figurative” meanings from Scripture that have little to do with the plain meaning. He said that such meanings may be sometimes helpful, but are not as powerful as the word of God.
 - As with Leo XIII, he emphasized that one should especially consult the Church Fathers in deriving meanings from a text.
6. Pope Pius XII cautioned against getting too far afield with extraneous research so that people study about the Bible in an academic fashion, but do not draw forth the riches of the Bible itself. For Scriptures are “of themselves rich in original meaning; endowed with divine power, they have their own value; adorned with

heavenly beauty, they radiate of themselves light and splendor” and offer to the intelligent “treasures of wisdom and prudence.”

7. In speaking of the literal sense, Pope Pius XII drew even more attention to the fact that one must recognize the author’s way of writing. As he said, “the ancient peoples of the East, in order to express their ideas, did not always employ those forms or kinds of speech that we use today.” He praised efforts to understand ancient ways of writing in order to understand the Bible.

8. He recognized that there will be continual difficulties in understanding Scripture and in reconciling some different passages of the Bible, or aspects of the Bible with beliefs from other fields of knowledge. But he said that such difficulties are nothing new and in fact are a motive for further studies. In particular, he cited St. Augustine in saying, “God wished difficulties to be scattered through the Sacred Books inspired by Him, in order that we might be urged to read and scrutinize them more carefully.”

B. The Vatican II Council returned to the subject of Divine Revelation in Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation (1965), one of its four central documents.

1. In that document, the Council called for an understanding that there is one unified plan of salvation, manifested in God’s saving actions, of which His Son’s Incarnation, life, death, and Resurrection are the climax. God gave us Revelation to make this plan of salvation clear.
2. The Council emphasized a teaching that had been taught by the Church for centuries, but was often in the background. In particular, it declared that Sacred Tradition is part of Divine Revelation alongside of the Bible. This Sacred Tradition consists of the practices and traditions handed down from the Apostles throughout time, the “wealth [that] is poured into the practice and life of the Church.” Examples of Sacred Tradition are the canon of books in the Bible, the roles of the clergy, the veneration of Mary and the saints in general, prayers for the dead, and the structure of the Mass.
 - The Council emphasized that the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church, can authentically interpret Revelation. The Magisterium “is not above the word of God,” but instead at its service.
 - Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium make up what would come to be called the “tripod of truth.”
3. The Council reaffirmed that the inspired character of each and every part of the Bible, individually and as a whole, is the inspired word of God and thus without error. It said in a crucial line, “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 the truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.”

4. But the Council then emphasized that the inspired writers used various literary forms; and thus one must understand the types of literature in the Bible to understand what the author was really asserting, which may not be the surface level meaning. Building on an image from Pope Pius XII, it said, “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.”
5. Crucially, the Council reaffirmed three principles that must be used in interpreting the Bible.
 - a. First, one must focus on “the content and unity of the whole of Scripture.” In other words, one part of the Bible should be interpreted in light of the rest, not in contradiction to it.
 - b. Second, one should interpret the Bible in the context of “the living tradition of the whole Church.”
 - c. Third, one should interpret the Bible consistently with the teachings of the Church, who has “the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God.”
6. The Council emphasized the unity of the Old and New Testaments, saying that “the books of the Old Testament, with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the Gospel, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament and in turn shed light on it and explain it.” This statement was in part meant to encourage the study of all of the Bible.
7. The Council affirmed that the whole of the New Testament “had an apostolic origin.” Although parts of it were written by people other than Apostles, such as Luke and Mark, those authors were directly connected to the Apostles. (Thus arguments that some of the Pauline letters were written by someone other than St. Paul do not contradict this teaching, so long as it is understood that the authors were connected to St. Paul or another Apostle.)
8. The Council also affirmed the historicity of the Gospels, saying that “the four Gospels . . . , 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.” The Council did say that the words and deeds of Christ recorded in the Gospels are often a “synthesis,” but an accurate one.
9. In the conclusion the Council called for a greater study of the word of God with a “constant vigor of renewal.” 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 of 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.”