

# READING THE BIBLE

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## INTRODUCTION

Read the Sacred Scripture day and night was the advice given by St. Jerome in the 4th century and it was repeated by the Church. The II Vatican Council made a definite appeal to the Christians of all levels to read the Scripture.

## 1. HISTORY OF READING THE BIBLE

### 1.1 In the early Church

The Bible was read from the very beginning. The law book of Moses ( Deut 31:24-26) and Ezra ( Neh 8), The scrolls of Isaiah (Is 8:16-17) and Jeremiah (Jer 36) and the book of secret revelation of Daniel (Dn 7:1) are vivid reminders that God's Word was always associated with a book that has to be read in and to a community of faith.

The history of the reading of the Bible shows how it had its own importance. In the early Church, the Scripture was considered as divine, providing an access to God, a way of connecting with God. In the early period of the Church the reading of the Scripture was never a scientific study or reserved to the scholars or as a learned discipline. The Scripture was the very matrix out of which the Christians coined their own idioms, so much so Biblical phrases became the parlance of the day. The Scripture reading gave unity to the Church. It shaped all the Christian attitudes towards life and death, whole spectrum of beliefs about heaven and hell or about the beginning or the end of the time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. Kannengiesser, "The Bible as Read in the Early Church", *Concilium*, 1991/1. 29-36

## 1.2. Bible Reading in the Middle ages

In the middle ages the religious congregations were flourishing the bible exerted great influence. The scripture was read, sung, illustrated and copied. Biblical concepts were shown in music, sculpture and legends. At this period, monks, clergy and upper class were literate and majority of the people were illiterate. The Scripture was read by the monks. The Bible became the subject of the meditation. The Scripture was read as an expression of the desire for God and as a testimony to the salvation history in which God constantly seeks to make himself known through human beings. However, the practice of reading the Bible for spiritual meaning gradually gave place for intellectual quest, paying more attention to the literal meaning. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), most important theologian of this period, paid attention to the roll of Scripture in theology. For him, Scripture was not used in theology, but theology is a scientific form of Scripture reading. The theology interprets Scripture in the best possible way to show what God has to say for the people of each new time

The reading of the bible in the middle ages produced mendicant orders. These are the religious orders that followed the apostolic life in the steps of Jesus and his disciples. Valdes and his followers began to travel around preaching and distributing the gospels in vernacular. The mendicants practiced evangelical poverty, an itinerant life of poverty and emphasised on the reading of the Scripture. Their study of the scripture led to the emphasis on discipleship of Christ according to letter of the Gospels and central place of Christian life.

Most of the people in this period were illiterate. They could get to know the Scripture only through what they heard and saw of it. The preaching was the most important means of making Scripture accessible to the majority of the population. The Scripture message was made available to the illiterate in images, stories and catechesis.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> P. Valkenberg, "Readers of Scripture and Hearers of the Word in Mediaeval Church" *Concilium*, 1991/ 1,47-57.

### 1.3. Bible Reading in Reformation Period

In the 16th century Protestantism brought a new enthusiasm for the Bible and a keen curiosity about the Bible and the message of the Bible. In the late middle ages people longed to come closer to God. But the Church and theology did not go in for renewal but emphasised on usual means like more Masses, pilgrimages, more veneration of saints etc. But the Reformation Movements showed Bible par excellence to satisfy the quest for direct contact with God. In the 16th century the Bible, the Word of God was usurped by the Protestants. To achieve this end, the Protestants made translations of the Bible. But the most important factor was the reading of the Bible and preaching in the liturgy. Perhaps, the Protestant Movements made the Catholic Church to become less interested in the reading of the Scriptures.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.4. Church's Emphasis on Bible Reading

However the Church has not neglected the reading of the Scripture. The daily reading of the Bible was emphasised by the church very strongly for over the last century. For example Pope Benedict XV in his encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus* written in 1920 to commemorate the 15<sup>th</sup> century of the death of St. Jerome says, "With Jerome as our example, we will never cease to encourage the Christian faithful to read daily the Holy Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles in such a way as to assimilate them completely".<sup>4</sup> Pius XII, in his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) wrote, "...Scripture be read daily in Christian families with piety and devotion... The priests should have themselves searched the sacred pages by assiduous study and made them their own prayer and meditation".<sup>5</sup> The II Vatican Council in its dogmatic constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) emphasises on the need of Scripture reading for

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<sup>3</sup> C. Augustijn, "The Sixteenth Century Reformers and the Bible," *Concilium*, 1991/1, 58-68.

<sup>4</sup> D. J. Murphy (ed.), *The Church and the Bible Official Documents of the Catholic Church*, Bangalore: TPI, 1991, 197.

<sup>5</sup> D. J. Murphy, 263.

all the members of the Catholic Church, whatever be their status in the Church". "Therefore all clerics, particularly priests of Christ and others who, as deacons or catechists are officially engaged in the ministry of the Word, should immerse themselves in the Scriptures by constant sacred reading and diligent study... The sacred Synod forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful, especially those who live in religious life, to learn "the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ". Therefore, let them go gladly to the sacred text itself, whether in the sacred Liturgy, which is full of the divine words, or in the devout reading, or in such suitable exercises and various other helps which, with the approval and guidance of the pastors of the Church, are happily spreading everywhere.... So may it come that, by the reading and study of the sacred books "the Word of God may speed on and triumph" (2 Th 3:1) (Dei Verbum n.25).

## **2. THE WORD OF GOD AND THE BIBLE**

The divine Word is living Word of God. "The Word of God is living and active" (Heb 4:12). It is the traditional view of Jews and Christians. The living Word of God is also active (Gen 1:1-2:4a). The Word is creative and gives life to the dead (Rom 4:17; Ez 37:1-14) and it is the light that illumines the Spirit of man (Ps 119:130).

In the Old Testament the men never encountered the living Word of God. "We have heard the voice of the Lord" (Deut 5:24). Even in Mt. Sinai the voice of God resounded through thunder and sound of the trumpets (Ex 19:6). For them the divine Word came through the written text. "Moses wrote down all the Words of the Lord" (Ex 24:4). The prophets who received the Word of God in personal encounter (Jer 15:16) put them in writing (Jer 36:1-2) and the Word of God was presented to Ezechiel in a scroll which had writings in the front and the back (Ez 2:9). Nobody can add or remove anything from the written Word of God (Rev

22:18). The II Vatican council reaffirmed this saying that Scripture is properly and fully the Word of God. "Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit" (*Dei Verbum* n.9).

### 3. HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

Before seeing the practical guidelines to read the Scriptures, let us see the approach to the reading of the Scriptures. In the Acts of the Apostles we come across a beautiful passage, how the Ethiopian official seated in the chariot, traveling from Jerusalem to Gaza, was holding the scroll of Scriptures in his hand. The scroll is open, fascinating, stimulating and promising... The text of Scriptures presents itself unconditionally to its reader whoever he/she may be.<sup>6</sup>

#### 3.1. Reading beyond the Written Word (God has spoken, twice I have heard)

This verse from Ps 62:12 has been used by the Rabbis to show the overflowing meaning of the Scripture. Each word in the Bible bears a load of meaning far beyond its capacity. "Every word is the concentration of the infinite so the reader must go beyond the verse".<sup>7</sup> Orientals, by nature have intuitive knowledge. They do not make long comments or giving long explanations for their religious writings or classical books, because the fruitfulness of the Word is not in multiplying the words. This will make it easier for us to see the reading of the Bible as something ever new. Reading the Bible must never be reduced to a technical decodification of the text. We must approach the Scripture humbly and gratefully.

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<sup>6</sup> Maria Ko Ha-Fang, "Reading the Bible in Asian Context", *Bulletin Dei Verbum*, 1996/3-4.11.

<sup>7</sup> E. Levinas, *L'au-dela du versel*, Paris: Les editions de minuit, 1982.

### **3.2. A Wisdom Reading (Your word is a lamp for my feet - Ps 119:105)**

Mahatma Gandhi talking about the interpretation of Hindu sacred writings said that the first rule for the understanding the meaning of the text is a practical experience of the truth. The truth sought in the sacred book is not abstract, speculative and metaphysical. Rather it is practical. It teaches how to live well. The word of God is light for the journey and leads to the "knowledge of the right way" Pr (14:8). The teaching on Wisdom takes an important place in Old Testament and even in the New Testament many wisdom sayings are found in Jesus' teaching. "He is greater than Solomon" (Mt 12:42). Wisdom is practical and the Wisdom literature in the Bible is an interpretation of life. The Scripture reading must lead us to live a better life. It must be a source of inspiration and guide to our life.

### **3.3. A Heart to Heart Reading - "This word is very near to you, in your heart" (Deut 30:14)**

The Word of God is to be guarded in one's heart. In Biblical mentality, heart is the source of interior life- seat of not only sentiments, of love, of desire but also of intelligence, wisdom, decision and all of moral life. It is here we celebrate our encounter with Christ. It is the ground where the Word grows, bears fruit and transforms the life. On the way to Emmaus Christ met the two disciples and explained the Scriptures to them. The disciples felt that their hearts were burning with in them (Lk 24:27). Welcoming the Word of God means a change of heart. Often the Word of God appeals only to our intelligence and does not reach our heart.

### **3.4. Encountering Christ - "It is I who speak to you" (Jn 4:26)**

Every Bible reading must aim at encountering Christ. "There is no religion of Bible; it is the religion of Christ" (Henri de Lubac). Thus Bible reading must lead to the mystery of Christ.

The Samaritan woman meets Jesus in the guise of unknown Jew. Jesus himself guides the woman to himself patiently and gradually. He speaks to her heart entering into the depths of her life, leading her towards faith and told her, "It is I who speak to you". The same must happen to all who read the Bible: They must hear Jesus telling them, "It is I who speak to you".

## **4. PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR BIBLE READING**

The following are the directions for a personal and regular reading of the Bible. It is a simple proposal which can be adapted, revised and enriched.

### **4.1 Where to begin in the Bible? Which text to read first?**

There are many possibilities. It is each person's prerogative to choose from the following suggestions in accordance with personal taste, need and situation.

- Take the books of the Bible in sequence and read everyday three consecutive chapters beginning with the book of Genesis. If preferred read one or two chapters at a time instead of three.
- Begin the daily reading with the New Testament, and then proceed with the Old Testament.
- Read every day one or two chapters of the Old Testament and one or two chapters of the New Testament. It is not necessary to follow absolutely the sequence of the Bible (i.e. starting with the Pentateuch, and then proceeding with the Historical books and so on). One may begin with the first book of Pentateuch, then proceed with the first book of the prophets, then the first book from Wisdom books, then a gospel, then letter of Paul, then return to the next book of Pentateuch and soon.

- Begin by choosing books that appear to be easier and leave more difficult books like Leviticus, Numbers, and Daniel. Revelation for later.

#### **4.2 Which Bible to use?**

You can use the one you already own. (The New Jerusalem Bible/ New American Bible are preferred by some). Nevertheless, all catholic and interconfessional bibles will serve the same purpose. During the reading one should ignore the title, subtitles, and commentary notes in the Bible and focus exclusively on the biblical text. Only refer to these notes at a later time if deemed necessary.

#### **4.3 How much time to spend on Scripture reading**

There are no rules in this matter. The ideal is to maintain a regular and consistent time, for example 15 to 30 minutes every day; however the time is flexible according to each one's convenience.

#### **4.4 How to perform the reading**

- Begin with a short prayer of petition and praise to signify clearly that this reading will be done in faith.
- Read the chosen text slowly and audibly (not silently in your head). Reading text the loud is precious because it brings another dimension to the reading.
- Make a short meditation by asking yourself following questions:  
What has struck me most in this passage? Which word or expression? What firm belief is expressed in the passage?
- Conclude with a short prayer and use the words, images and expressions from the text that have particularly attracted your attention.

#### **4.5 Convictions to be kept in mind**

For a fruitful reading of the Bible we must have certain fundamental convictions that the entire Bible is based on.

- God is unique. He is the Totally - Other... There is no other god besides God. He has taken the initiative to make himself known to a people, for the good of all nations.
- God wants happiness of all men and women. This is what most important themes of the Bible signify, themes like covenant, salvation and liberation.
- The love of God cannot be separated from the love of the brothers and sisters. Jesus Christ makes God known to us .He is the Word of God. The Lord God calls us to faith.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4.6 Lectio Divina**

Lectio Divina is a reading, on individual or communal level, of a more or less lengthy passage of Scripture, received as the Word of God and leading at the prompting of the Spirit, to meditation, prayer and contemplation. It is highly recommended by the document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church".<sup>9</sup> There are two types of Lectio Divina. We give here in summary the characteristics of Lectio Divina.

##### ***4.6.1 Characteristics of one type of Lectio Divina***

- The reading-personal or in community- of sufficiently long passage of the Bible.
- period of quiet
- period of prayer-personal and shared prayer-brief and personal in response to God who is encountered in and through the Word.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Bulletin Dei Verbum*, 1992/3,4-5.

<sup>9</sup> Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, IV, C, 2.

#### ***4.6.2 Characteristics of another type of Lectio Divina***

- The reading of a short yet coherent passage from the Bible
- The rereading very slowly of a few phrases or of one or two short verses
- A period of chewing over a word , phrase which appeals to a person
- A period of silence before God.
- A period of brief prayer of few words
- The re reading of again of some more phrases / of one or two short verses.<sup>10</sup>

The reading of the Sacred Scripture will create and nourish an efficacious and constant love for the Word of God and become source of interior life.

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<sup>10</sup> P. Meagher, Ministry of the word, 18.