

Choosing and Using a Bible

- What Catholics Should Know

by Ronald D. Witherup

If you are like many people, the Bible is at once an old friend and a stranger. You recognize it easily, as you would an old friend, and trust it as a companion. You know that it contains a record of God's sacred word to humanity. You take comfort in knowing that you can pick it up at any time and find something in it of value. Yet go into a bookstore to buy a Bible and most Catholics are somewhat at a loss. There are so many choices, even in a Catholic bookstore! And if some of your friends or neighbors include non-Catholics you'll see all sorts of Bible versions from one family to another. What does such a variety mean? Where did the versions come from?

In this Update we'll take a look at some of the issues involved in choosing the right Bible for yourself. We'll also try to give good background information on the many versions available today. And we'll also provide some tips on using your Bible for study and prayer.

A family tradition

Many people have a Bible in their home. Sometimes the Bible is a family heirloom. Perhaps grandparents or great-grandparents had a family Bible that passes from generation to generation. Often people record in their Bibles important family events, especially the dates of weddings, funerals, Baptisms and the like. While these are family keepsakes, the particular translation of the Bible may not be suitable for contemporary Bible study and prayer. The reason for this judgment lies in the nature of language.

The Bible was written originally in Hebrew and Greek. Obviously, for most of us to access the Bible we must use translations. The King James Version of the Bible (Authorized Version) is the most common authoritative translation in use by many Protestants. The difficulty is that this 16th-century translation is woefully outdated.

Not only do we no longer speak the style of English employed in this translation, but also biblical scholarship has advanced considerably in the knowledge of the ancient biblical languages to warrant new translations. Many Catholics in earlier decades also relied on an older edition of the Bible, the Douay-Rheims translation, based upon the Latin translation (the Vulgate) that at one time was the only official Catholic edition of the Bible. It, too, is out of date and the names of some of the Old Testament books may be confusing.

If some of you are still relying upon one of these or another older Bible edition, I recommend that you buy a newer edition. People frequently ask me, "Which is the best translation?" My response is to ask, in turn, "For what purpose?" You see, there is no best edition as such. It depends on what use you want to make of the Bible.

Choosing the right Bible

Which version is the best for you? It depends on whether you want it primarily for prayer, for study, for Sunday school classes, to take to Church to follow the sermon or for other purposes. Any of the listed translations would do, though you will likely hear only one translation, the New American Bible, proclaimed during Mass.

Like people, the translations come in different sizes and shapes. Some are hardback, some are paperback. Some, that we can call study Bibles, are large with supplementary notes, cross-references or comments, and others are pocket editions. They can be found in most bookstores.

Rather than recommending a specific Bible, I provide (see box below, "Modern Bible Translations") the most common editions currently available. You do not need to have an expensive edition. Bibles with gilded edges and suave leather covers are lovely as gifts but are not essential to Bible prayer or study. Most important is having a modern edition of the Bible that makes you comfortable.

If you feel you can handle a study Bible edition, it will be a bit thicker and heavier, but it will also contain lots of other information that you will find helpful for more intensive Bible study.

Some Tips for Reading, Praying and Studying the Bible

Reading your Bible

Don't begin at the beginning or end. Begin with the familiar. For Christians the New Testament is a better place to start than the Old Testament. Perhaps begin with Mark, the shortest Gospel, or the letters of Paul. Do not start with the Book of Revelation, a complex and symbolic book. Read sections rather than sentences. The Bible will make more sense if you pay attention to sections that are grouped together. Read aloud. Everyone used to do it, especially when the books of the Bible were written. The Bible was meant to be heard—it originated as an oral tradition. Reading aloud involves you more completely than reading silently.

Studying your Bible

Read the introductions. Most Bibles have introductions added by the editors, and they will prepare you for what comes next. Read the introduction first!

Read the footnotes. The Bible often contains material that is very foreign to our world. Customs, terms, symbolic names, etc., often require explanation. The footnotes are there for everyone, not just for scholars.

Use the cross-references. Most Bibles place these references to other biblical passages in the footnotes or on the side of the page. Often New Testament passages contain quotations or allusions to Old Testament passages. These cross-references will help you further understand what you are studying. This takes some time, but your reward will be a richer understanding of the text.

Be flexible in your interpretations. You don't need to be afraid of misinterpreting the Bible if you remember that your interpretation is not necessarily the interpretation. This is especially good in a group setting: Sharing ideas about Bible passages is a wonderful way of studying the Bible, especially when you remain open to further guidance about your views. The ideal group would have a leader with some professional experience, or who has taken time to carefully learn and prepare a historical or scientific perspective.

Praying your Bible outside of Mass

Invoke the Holy Spirit. Every time you sit down to pray with the Bible I suggest you begin with a brief prayer to call upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Something as simple as "Come, Holy Spirit, be my guide as I try to understand this word" reminds us that we need to surrender to God in order to understand the Word properly.

Choose a passage to reflect on. Working through the whole book of the Bible prayerfully is more effective than random interpretations. Another way of doing this is to pray along with the lectionary selections for the upcoming Sunday Mass. That can help you prepare to hear the Word more fruitfully when it is proclaimed and preached upon the following Sunday. In three years' time, you'll have prayed along with most of the Bible!

Read the passage once through fully. Getting the big picture first helps you understand each section or passage better.

Read each section of the passage slowly. Slow, meditative reading is an ancient Christian practice known as *lectio divina*. Sitting with the text, mulling over its words and phrases and soaking in its images or themes, truly brings one to a prayerful understanding. Let the words sink in, and you will feel yourself in the presence of God.

Use your imagination. Although this approach may not work for every passage, it can be very prayerful for some. Imagine yourself in the text. Where are you? Are there characters with whom you identify? Do you see yourself in any actions?

Reread the entire passage. Once you have spent time reflecting on some sections of a passage, reread it in its entirety. Though some parts may have spoken to you more clearly, this exercise will help you remember to keep the section in context.

Conclude with a prayer of thanksgiving. Thank God for the gift of the Word as you conclude your prayer exercise. It is God's Word that gives us life.

Modern Bible Translations

We are fortunate to live in a time when many reliable biblical translations are available. The most common are in the following list. I'll note the Catholic edition where there is one.

Revised Standard Version

(Oxford University Press, 1962). This translation is based upon a revision of the standard King James Version and is still a wonderful, very literal translation. It has also been republished in some new attractive editions and remains a standard for good Bible study because of its fidelity to the original text. Yet it retains some antiquated expressions in English and makes no attempt to be inclusive in its language. This standard translation is found in many different editions, including various study Bibles. There is a Catholic edition, from Ignatius Press.

New Revised Standard Version

(Oxford University Press, 1989). This is a wholly redone translation in line with the Revised Standard Version but with sensitivity to inclusive language for human beings. It retains traditional language for God. Although it is fairly literal in its translation, the English expressions have been updated to reflect current American cultural preferences. It comes in several different study editions, which include introductory essays, extensive footnotes and brief commentary. There is a Catholic edition.

New International Version

(International Bible Society, 1984). This version is intended to be ecumenical and to appeal to a broad range of English-speaking people. The translation is considered somewhat more conservative than the New Revised Standard Version. Its language is suitable for private study and for public reading. There is no Catholic edition.

New American Bible with revised New Testament and Psalms

(Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1991). This has become the standard American Catholic edition of the Bible. It is the Bible Catholics hear during Sunday Mass readings, and thus a popular choice among Catholics. It is a revision of the New American Bible (1952-70) done with a sensitivity to accurate yet easily understood language that can be used in public worship. It is also sensitive to gender-inclusive language wherever references to human beings are concerned. The Old Testament section of this Bible underwent recent revision, and one can expect a new edition of the entire translation to be published soon.

New Jerusalem Bible

(Doubleday, 1985). A translation from the new French edition of this famous Bible, *La Sainte Bible* (1966), the text is the most poetic of the translations we are considering. Its poetic character lends itself to prayer. This Catholic Bible is also justifiably praised for its extensive footnotes, filled with informative background material.

Revised English Bible

(Oxford University Press, 1989). This translation contains British English that may seem unusual. Yet it is readable and reliable for study.

There is no Catholic edition.

Good News translation

(American Bible Society, 2004). This is a totally new edition of The Good News Bible, published by the American Bible Society. A major goal of this translation is sensitivity to the hearers of God's Word. It employs popular contemporary English that is more colloquial in nature. It might appeal to young people. There is a Catholic edition. The earlier Contemporary English Version (1991) has a Catholic-edition New Testament.

Reader's Digest Bible

(Reader's Digest Association, 1982). This is truly a short version of the Bible. It has clipped out all repetition. Unfortunately, the result is a distortion of the text because repetition is a vital part of the message of some biblical stories or poetry. Again the aim is praiseworthy. The purpose is to entice people to pick up and read the Bible, something more attractive in a short version rather than a long one, with the hope that they would advance to further Bible study. But if you are serious about studying the Bible in the most enlightened way, I do not recommend using such shortcuts. They can cheapen the Word of God.

New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Language Version

(Oxford University Press, 1995). This is actually an adaptation of the New Revised Standard Version that employs radically gender-inclusive language. Critics have dubbed it the "PC Bible" (for political correctness). To illustrate, an admittedly difficult title used by Jesus such as "the son of man" becomes "child of the human one," and the Lord's Prayer begins with the awkward address, "Father-Mother." The result is a clumsy and offensive translation that shows how distorted modern sensitivities can sometimes be with regard to ancient texts.

The Living Bible

(Tyndale, 1971) is not a translation but a paraphrase of the biblical text. Paraphrases are not reliable for Bible study. Although it is true to say that every translation is an interpretation, paraphrases contain too much editorial judgment about the meaning of a given passage to be of use. The danger of such works is that they try to clarify ambiguity where sometimes it exists in the biblical text. This is an admirable but misdirected goal. Sometimes the very ambiguity of the text reminds us that, like all great literature, some mysteries are open to more than one possible interpretation.

New Living Translation

(Tyndale, 1996). A much better product, it is a translation and not a paraphrase, but it retains tendencies to make predetermined judgments about the meaning of the text.

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