

The Bible

Chapter 1 of Catholicism Made Simple

What Is This Chapter For?

To cook roast chicken, we are told, first catch your chicken. To find out about the Catholic Faith, first get yourself a Bible and know how to use it. The Bible is part of the heritage of the Church which God has given to us. The purpose of this opening chapter is to help you to become familiar with such a very important tool of the Catholic Faith. It is up to you to use it wisely!

A Missionary was once visiting a parish in England making an appeal for money to pay for a new translation of the Bible into the language of the country where he was working. At the end of Mass one of the parishioners came up to him and said, "Father, I just want you to know that I disagree heartily with what you are trying to do. If English was good enough for St. Paul, it's good enough for anyone".

Well, we may all know that God is an Englishman (!) but there are limits.

In fact, the Bible (also known as Holy Scripture, or the Scriptures) was not written in English. Nor was it written by one person in one style. Instead the Bible is a collection of books, formed and then written by a countless number of people, over many centuries, in a mixture of languages – mainly Hebrew and Greek. Any Bible that you pick up is almost certainly someone's translation of the original language (and therefore someone's interpretation of the original meaning).

Having said that the Bible was written by many people, we must immediately think a bit more about it. In fact, we believe that the Bible ultimately did only have one author, and that author was God. We believe that, working in ways we cannot even begin to understand, God influenced people, or *inspired them*, to write down what He wanted them to record.

God wants us to know about Him, and the Bible is one way in which he reveals Himself to us. The Bible is part of God's *revelation* to us.

That, in a way, is the answer to the question at the top of this section.

What is the Bible?

It is the word of God. It is His message, recorded in writing, using the tongues, pens, languages and ways of expression of human beings. And the reason He wanted them to record it was so that **we could read it**. That gives us something to think about, doesn't it! *We* are the reason the Bible was written.

What Are Its Main Parts?

The Bible is divided into two major sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament, the obvious difference being that the Old Testament (or Old Covenant) is a record of things that happened before Jesus was born, and the New Testament

or (New Covenant) is a record of what happened in the lifetime of Jesus and immediately after His lifetime.

The Old Testament is a history of how God revealed Himself over a period of hundreds and even thousands of years to a people, and taught them His Law; how He made a Covenant with them that was sealed by the blood of a Sacrificed animal.

The New Testament is much shorter, and is an account of what Jesus did and said during His life on earth, how He died and rose again, how the Church was formed and spread, and how God made a new Covenant with us all, sealed in the blood of His Son.

Fact File

- Catholics accept that there are 46 books in the Old Testament (Protestants only accept 39), and 27 books in the New Testament.

- The Bible is the world's best-selling book, and has been translated into nearly 2,000 languages or dialects.

- Many of the stories of the Bible existed long before they were written down. Instead they were handed down by word of mouth until writing was invented.

- The first Catholic translation of the Bible was done in about 400 AD, by one man: St. Jerome. It took him about 15 years to translate it all from Greek and Hebrew into Latin. Latin was the common language at the time, and so his translation was called "The Vulgate", from the Latin for "common".

- There are now many translations of the Bible into English. The best to use for this course are probably either the New Jerusalem Bible, which is the translation that is mostly used in church, or the Revised Standard Version, the RSV.

How Do We Use The Bible?

The Bible is a big book. Suppose you have been told to find a section of the Bible to read, how do you go about it? Well, the first thing to do is to get familiar with the contents page at the front of the Bible.

As I said, the Bible is a collection of books, each with its own name. Some of those names are well-known, such as *Genesis* or the Gospel According to Matthew. Others are less familiar, like *Zephaniah* or *Obadiah*. When you are given a section, or text, of the Bible to find, the first word will be the name of the book in the Bible. You will find all the books listed at the front of the Bible, together with the page where each starts.

That's the easy bit. The next bit is not difficult either. Back in the dim, distant past, some clever monk worked out a way of numbering each bit of the Bible for easy reference. The first thing he did was to divide each book of the Bible into chapters. That is the first number you have been given, following the name of the book. Then each chapter was divided into verses. Those are the numbers that follow the colon in your reference.

And there you have it! All Bibles are divided into books, chapters and verses, and if you know the reference you can find anything, anywhere in the Bible. Let's try an example. Suppose you were asked to look up *II Peter 1:20-21*. I have deliberately chosen a slightly difficult one, so let's take it slowly.

II Peter 1: 20-21. This means that we want the Second Letter (or Epistle) written by St. Peter. If you look that up in the contents page you should find it comes quite near the end of the New Testament *II Peter 1:20-21*. This means that we want the first chapter of the book. *II Peter 1:20-21*. Finally, this means that we want just two verses from that chapter. Each verse is numbered, so find 20 and 21. You should read:

"First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

(This is from the translation known as the Revised Standard Version).

Did you find it? Easy, isn't it! What it means is that we should be very careful about reading the Bible, because it was ultimately written by God, using human beings as His instruments. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us to understand the Bible whenever we read it, and we should also find out what the Church, as the authority established by Jesus, says about it.

Each part of a biblical reference is important. Try this as an example: a priest wanted to send a telegram to a friend who was getting married, and he decided to send a biblical reference. What he wanted to send was I John 4:18.

That is, the First Letter of St. John, chapter 4, verse 18. if you look that up you should find, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear". A very nice sentiment for a marriage. Unfortunately, when the telegram arrived the first "I" had been left out of the reference, so that it read John 4:18. That is, the Gospel According to St. John, chapter four, verse 18. If you look that up you should find a very different sentiment for a wedding!

Praying with the Bible

The Bible is a good way to start praying. Through it God speaks to us, and we should allow ourselves to be open to receive His word. The most obvious place where we hear the Bible is in church. That's right and proper. The Bible was intended primarily for reading aloud in a community, and when we take part in the Liturgy of the Word we are sharing something precious. But private use of the Bible is encouraged too.

First, try to find some quiet place and time when you can raise your heart and mind to God. Don't rush into "prayer", but first take time to calm your mind. Then, ask the Holy Spirit to help you in your reading. After that you can pick up the Bible.

You can read through the Bible methodically, or you could look at it for a specific reason, such as looking for consolation or encouragement, in sickness or to give thanks. There are many lists of readings for different purposes, or you may want to use the readings listed under "Masses for Various Occasions" in the Lectionary in church. As you become better acquainted with the Bible you could make your own list of readings which particularly speak to you.

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Work sheet for Chapter 1 of Catholicism Made Simple

For practice, look up the following biblical references in order to answer these five simple questions:

Start with a trick question:

1. Who was the first person to break the Ten Commandments? (See Exodus 32:15-19).

Answer:

2. Who does Jesus say is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven? (See Matthew 18:1-4).

Answer:

3. What well-known saying, in its original form, do you find in Proverbs 16:18?

Answer:

4. Whom did King David defeat at Hamath? (See I Chronicles 18:3)

5. What is the last word in the Bible? (See Revelation 22:21)

Which came first, the Bible or the Church? Why do you think so? Does it matter?

Read through the chapter again and try to think of one question to ask your tutor about this topic.