

How to Start and Sustain a Parish Bible Study

The good news is that Bible study is already happening in every parish. As the pastor prepares the weekend homily, as lectors practice to proclaim the Word, as catechumens gather for faith formation, as religious educators instruct the young, as those who attend daily Mass offer their faithful attention, as parish leaders quietly use the Scriptures in their personal prayer—the Catholic faith community is reaping the rewards of Bible study. No parish has to invent the concept of Bible study from scratch, for it already exists. What parish leaders can do is create opportunities for guided and more purposeful explorations of Scripture. This will ensure that the supreme Christian vocation “to encounter, pray, and live the Word” (Lineamenta for the 2008 Synod, no. 24) is being nurtured in the fullness of Church Tradition.

DEFINING YOUR PURPOSE

Bible studies are not created equal. Some function like prayer groups with no regular facilitator, while others involve classroom-style exegesis led by a trained catechist. Bible groups with faith formation as their primary goal often employ a discussion format with light facilitation. They may also be steered toward preparing the liturgical ministry team for their service to the community. So before writing the bulletin announcement inviting people to join a Bible study, be sure to determine the purpose of your gathering.

No matter which approach your parish takes—and there’s no reason to limit your community to only one—every Bible study should be grounded in the conviction that the Word of God is fundamentally God speaking with us. Authentic communication involves sharing information; some catechesis is required to unlock Scripture’s many meanings. Genuine communication also involves self-expression. The Bible expresses God’s love in action yesterday, today, and forever. Finally, God speaks to make an appeal for our response in faith. No communication is complete without a reply (see Lineamenta, no. 9).

RECRUITING LEADERS

Once the nature of your parish Bible study is identified, recruiting leaders and members will naturally follow. If, for example, the goal of your Bible study is to prepare liturgical ministers to proclaim the readings more powerfully, then this Bible study will want to focus on the weekly readings. Someone connected with the liturgy, like the presider, homilist, or director of liturgy, may want to facilitate the discussion. Such a facilitator will require only a few basic resources (see the section “Selecting Materials” below) to inform sessions. On the other hand, catechetical Bible teaching aimed at a fuller understanding of Scripture, like Bible study within RCIA, is best delegated to those who have studied Scripture in diocesan leadership programs or theology

schools. Bible study for faith formation in such settings as RENEW or other discussion-based programs will work best with trained leaders who have demonstrated a facility with the Catholic understanding of Scripture and the ability to guide group discussion. General Bible study for people who simply want to gather to read and discuss the Bible will need leaders who have a clear understanding of the Church's approach to the Bible and who possess a basic understanding of leading a group. The usefulness of a multilayered approach to parish Bible study is apparent, as each group creates leadership for the next layer.

There are many dangers connected with having unprepared people lead Bible study groups: Bible literalism, cultural misappropriation, or an ideologically exclusive devotional interpretation. While the lack of a trained leader shouldn't prevent groups from studying the Bible, groups will simply be better served by leaders who really know the Bible and who can lead a group effectively.

Is it okay if some parishioners simply meet in homes to read the Bible together and talk about it? Obviously they don't need permission or parish oversight to do this. But parish staff can guide these groups by providing a list of Catholic source materials for their study. Having an accessible parish library of good Scripture commentaries helps, as does subscribing to a monthly Scripture service (such as those listed below) for Bible study leaders or members. It's also useful to have a parish staff member serve

as liaison to Bible-sharing groups who may have questions they cannot resolve internally.

SELECTING MATERIALS

Parish professionals involved in Bible study should have access to *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* edited by Raymond E. Brown, SS, et al. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2002). It remains the best one-volume source for Catholic biblical scholarship. *The Dictionary of the Bible* by John L. McKenzie, SJ (New York: Touchstone, 1995) saves hours of research. Leaders should be familiar with the relevant Church documents on Sacred Scripture (See <http://www.usccb.org/bible/books-of-the-bible/index.cfm>).

For the non-professional facilitator, simpler materials may suffice. *The New Jerome Bible Handbook* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993) is a scaled-down version of *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* that provides concise background as well as key themes for each Bible book. *The Collegeville Bible Handbook* edited by Nancy McDarby (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997) offers outlines of each book with helpful maps and illustrations.

To assist groups using the lectionary approach or to encourage parish-wide Bible reflection, the subscription service *Exploring the Sunday Readings* (New London, CT: TwentyThird Publications) can be inserted in bulletins each month. *Scripture from Scratch* by Virginia Smith and Elizabeth McNamara (Cincinnati:

St. Anthony Messenger Press) is now available as a sourcebook or on DVD. Take Five for Faith (Chicago: TrueQuest Communications) is an electronically delivered five-minute dose of Scripture, Church history, saint bios, and catechesis. It can be e-mailed to parishioners to help them encounter God's Word within the mission of the Church.

Groups studying Scripture by book or theme may find the following resources especially useful: God's Word Today edited by Jean-Pierre Prevost (New London, CT: Bayard, Inc.), Six Weeks with the Bible edited by Kevin Perrotta (Chicago: Loyola Press), and Threshold Bible Study by Stephen J. Binz (New London, CT: Bayard, Inc.).

For groups with younger members, non-book resources such as music by contemporary Church artists, Catholic-sponsored Internet sites, and movies can be valuable approaches. In the latter category, see the Turner Home Entertainment series The Bible Collection, covering figures from Abraham to David; Gateway Films' Peter and Paul; and any number of intriguing portrayals of the Gospel

story, from Jesus of Nazareth to the Cotton Patch Gospel. Be prepared to explore the distinctions between these portrayals and biblical accounts.

RUNNING THE SESSION

All gatherings should include prayer, direct proclamation from the Bible (however brief), and regular reminders that we gather to encounter a living and dynamic Word. Facilitators should stress the unity of the canon, so that even while studying one Testament, the other is perceived in thematic solidarity. Each session should include a "moment of decision" when conversion is tendered. We are invited by God's Word not simply to read, but to do (Lineamenta, no. 10). Finally, Bible study should always conclude on a note of hope. This Word was written, after all, "that our joy may be complete" (1 Jn 1:4). Participants in Bible study should find the encounter with God's Word a reason to rejoice.

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