THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



Reading the Bible

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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The Everyday Apostle

INTRODUCTION

The Book on the Shelf

Somewhere in your house, there is a Bible.

It might be on a shelf. It might be in a drawer. It might be the one your grandmother gave you for your confirmation, or the one your wife picked out for a wedding gift, or the one a hotel left in a drawer that you accidentally took with you. Wherever it is, it is probably not in your hands at the moment, and it is probably not in your hands most weeks.

This is not an indictment. It is the ordinary state of the modern Catholic. Roughly one in four Catholics in this country reads the Bible at all in a given month. Of those, very few read it consistently. Most of us hear the readings at Mass, half pay attention, and consider that our weekly relationship with the Word of God.

Meanwhile our Protestant brothers and sisters, on average, know their Bibles far better than we do, can quote chapter and verse on dozens of passages, and structure their spiritual lives around daily reading. They have something we used to have, that we let slip, and that we are slowly getting back.

This book is about getting it back.

Saint Jerome, the fourth-century monk who translated almost the entire Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, gave us the sentence that should haunt every Catholic who owns a Bible and does not read it:

> *Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.*
>
> *St. Jerome*

If you want to know Jesus, really know Him, not just affirm the right propositions about Him, you have to know the book in which He revealed Himself. There is no other way. The catechism is wonderful. The saints are wonderful. The Mass is the highest reality on earth. But the Bible is the place where the Word who became flesh has chosen to keep speaking to His Church, in fifteen hundred years of voices that the Holy Spirit guided to write exactly what He wanted written.

If you have been intimidated by it, this book will untangle the intimidation. If you have tried and given up, this book will show you why you stalled. If you have never really started, this book will get you started. By the end you will know what the Bible is, what to buy, how to read it, what to skip when you are getting going, and what to do when it goes dry.

Pick up the book on the shelf. Let's read.

CHAPTER ONE

What the Bible Actually Is

Before we open it, we need to know what we are holding.

The Bible is not, primarily, a moral handbook. It is not a history textbook. It is not a collection of inspirational sayings. It is not a magic eight ball you consult by opening at random. It has elements of all of those, but reducing it to any of them is the source of a great deal of bad reading.

The Catholic tradition says the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Three words in that sentence matter, and each is worth taking apart.

Inspired

The Greek word in the New Testament is *theopneustos*, which literally means God-breathed. Paul uses it in his second letter to Timothy:

> *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."*
>
> *2 Tim 3:16*

Inspiration, in the Catholic understanding, means that God is the primary author of every book of the Bible, while real human authors are the secondary authors. The Holy Spirit moved them to write, guided what they wrote, and ensured that what they wrote, in the originals, taught without error those truths necessary for our salvation.

This is not dictation. The human writers were not transcribing while in a trance. They wrote in their own styles, with their own vocabularies, addressing their own historical situations. Paul's prose is recognizably Paul's. Luke's is recognizably Luke's. The personality of each writer is on the page. And yet, beneath those personalities, the Holy Spirit is the deeper author, ensuring that what the human writer freely produced was exactly what God wanted produced.

This is why Catholics speak of the Bible as the Word of God in human words. Both at once. Fully divine, fully human. Like a smaller cousin of the Incarnation itself.

Word

The Greek word *logos* means more than what English speakers think when they hear "word." It can mean a single utterance, but it can also mean reason, meaning, message, communication, even a living principle. When John opens his Gospel by writing "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*," he is making the staggering claim that this Logos is a Person, that He became flesh and dwelt among us, and that He is Jesus Christ.

So when the Church calls Scripture the Word of God, she is not making a casual claim. She is saying that the same Christ who is the eternal Word of the Father speaks through the Scriptures. They are not separate things. The written Word and the Incarnate Word are intimately related. To read Scripture seriously is to meet Christ. The early Church Fathers said this so often it became a commonplace.

> *When you read the Scriptures, you should be conscious that God is speaking to you.*
>
> *St. John Chrysostom, 4th century*

Of God

The Bible is not the Word of one tribe to itself. It is the Word of the Creator of the universe to all of His creatures. Every book of it is for you. Every page of it is meant for the formation of the human person made in His image.

This means a few practical things.

- **The Bible has authority.** Not merely the authority of a wise teacher we might choose to listen to. The authority of God Himself. When the Bible says something clearly, the question is not whether we agree. The question is whether we will conform our lives to it.
- **The Bible is true.** Not in the modern reductive sense that every sentence is a literal factual claim, but in the deeper sense that everything the human authors intended to assert in the genres they were using, with the help of the Holy Spirit, is true. Genesis is not a science textbook. The Psalms are not weather reports. But what each is teaching, in its proper register, is reliably true.

- **The Bible is alive.** The Word is not dead text. The same Spirit who inspired the writing inspires the reading. Hebrews calls the Word "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword." The man who reads expecting only to gather information will find very little. The man who reads expecting to meet a Person will find more than he came for.

CHAPTER TWO

Why Catholics Lost Their Bible

If the Bible is what we just said it is, the obvious question is why Catholics have, on average, treated it as if it were optional reading.

There is a popular story, told mostly by Protestants, that Catholics historically were not allowed to read the Bible. That the Church locked it up. That she kept it in Latin so the laity could not understand it. That she chained Bibles in churches so they could not be taken home.

Almost none of this story is true.

The Actual History

For roughly the first fifteen hundred years of Christianity, the average Christian could not read the Bible because he could not read anything. Mass literacy is a recent achievement, mostly post-1700. The Bible was read aloud in churches and explained from pulpits, which was the universal experience of Scripture for the vast majority of believers in every Christian tradition. The few who could read had access to manuscripts where they existed, and the Church produced many: copied by monks, illuminated by artists, displayed in cathedrals. Bibles were chained in some churches not to keep them from people but because they were expensive (a single manuscript Bible took years of labor to produce), and chaining was the medieval equivalent of bolting a reference book to a library table.

Latin, far from being a barrier, was the common language of educated Europeans for over a thousand years. A Latin Bible was as accessible to medieval scholars as an English Bible is to American ones. The vernacular translations many people associate with the Reformation existed in Catholic Europe well before Luther. There were German Bibles in the early 1400s, English Bibles in fragments going back much further, French and Spanish and Italian translations in widespread use.

What changed at the Reformation was not access to the Bible. It was who controlled the interpretation of the Bible. The Protestant principle of

sola Scriptura (Scripture alone) held that the Bible by itself, without the Church's authoritative teaching, was sufficient to settle questions of faith. The Catholic Church rejected this for reasons we won't fully argue here, but which boiled down to: the Bible itself nowhere claims to be self-interpreting, and putting the Bible in everyone's hands without the guidance of the Church's tradition produced exactly the doctrinal chaos that has fragmented Protestantism into thousands of denominations.

The Defensive Crouch

After the Reformation, the Catholic Church grew defensive about Bible reading by laypeople. The concern was real (untrained readers were drawing strange and contradictory conclusions from Scripture) but the response was overcorrected. For centuries, the message to ordinary Catholics was effectively: leave the Bible to the priests and theologians. The Mass and the catechism are enough for you. The result was generations of devout Catholics who knew their rosary and their saints and their feast days, but who could not have found the book of Habakkuk if you paid them.

This was a pastoral failure. The Bible has always belonged to the whole Church, not just her scholars. The Fathers of the early Church preached relentlessly that all Christians should know the Scriptures intimately.

The Recovery

In 1943, Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical called Divino Afflante Spiritu that encouraged Catholic biblical scholarship and lay Bible reading. Twenty years later, the Second Vatican Council went further with its document Dei Verbum, which contains some of the most powerful exhortations to Scripture reading ever written by the Church:

> *Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful… For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.*
>
> *Dei Verbum 22, 25 (quoting St. Jerome)*

Since the Council, the renewal of Catholic Bible reading has been slow but real. Parish Bible studies have multiplied. New Catholic study Bibles have been published. Apostolates devoted to Scripture have grown. The daily Mass readings are followed by more laypeople than at any time since the early Church.

You are now living in the most favorable moment in centuries to read the Bible as a Catholic. The resources exist. The encouragement of the Church is plain. What is needed is your decision to begin.

CHAPTER THREE

Choosing a Bible

Before you can read, you need a Bible. This is more important than it sounds. The translation you choose, the study notes you have access to, even the physical quality of the binding will affect whether you actually pick it up.

Catholic vs. Protestant Bibles

A Catholic Bible has seventy-three books. A Protestant Bible has sixty-six. The seven extra books in the Catholic Old Testament (Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and First and Second Maccabees), plus some passages in Esther and Daniel, are called the deuterocanonical books. They were part of the Greek Septuagint that the apostles and early Church used. They were affirmed as Scripture at the Councils of Hippo and Carthage in the late fourth century and have been Catholic Scripture ever since.

Protestants at the Reformation removed them, following Luther's preference for the shorter Jewish canon that had been settled long after Christianity began. This is why, when you compare a Catholic Bible to a Protestant one, the Old Testament is different. It is not that Catholics added books. It is that Protestants removed them.

For Catholic reading, get a Catholic Bible. Look for one with an imprimatur (the Church's seal that the translation is faithful to Catholic teaching) and that includes the deuterocanonical books in their proper places, not pushed off into an appendix.

Translations Worth Knowing

RSV-2CE (Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition)

Generally regarded as the best balance of accuracy and literary quality for serious Catholic reading. Reads beautifully. Faithful to the original languages. The Ignatius Bible uses this translation. If you buy one Bible for daily reading and prayerful study, this is the standard recommendation.

NABRE (New American Bible Revised Edition)

The translation used at Mass in the United States. Reading it daily reinforces what you hear on Sunday. The notes vary in quality. A solid working translation, especially valuable for liturgically minded readers. The Catholic Study Bible uses this translation.

NRSV-CE (New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition)

An academic standard. Widely used in seminaries and Catholic universities. More inclusive language than the RSV-2CE, which some readers find clarifying and others find distracting. Good for study; some find it less devotionally warm.

Douay-Rheims

The traditional English Catholic translation, predating the King James and using similarly archaic language. Beautiful, but the language is now genuinely difficult for modern readers. Worth owning if you love older English; not the place to start daily reading.

The Word on Fire Bible

Bishop Robert Barron's project. A new edition (currently being published in volumes by Testament) that combines the RSV-2CE text with commentary drawn from saints, artists, and theologians, along with beautiful art. Expensive and physically large. Not a daily-carry Bible. A treasure for the home, especially if you want to be invited deeper into Scripture by the Church's tradition.

Study Bible or Plain Bible?

Both have their place. Plain Bibles are clean, distraction-free, and let the Word speak without interruption. Study Bibles have footnotes, cross-references, introductions to each book, maps, and topical articles. The footnotes are where you find out, for example, that the strange list of names in chapter five of First Chronicles served a specific theological purpose in the post-exile community, or that the wedding at Cana likely happened on the seventh day of a week that mirrored the seven days of creation.

For a beginner or intermediate reader, get a Catholic study Bible. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible (with study notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch) is excellent. The Didache Bible (with notes drawn from the Catechism) is also strong. The Catholic Study Bible from Oxford is widely used. Each will deepen what you read in ways a plain Bible cannot.

You may eventually want both. A plain Bible for prayerful reading where you do not want footnotes pulling your attention; a study Bible for when you are working through a passage that needs help.

Physical Quality

A Bible you do not enjoy holding is a Bible you will not pick up. If you can afford it, buy one bound well. Leather or bonded leather. Good paper that does not tear when you turn it. A ribbon marker. Print large enough to read without squinting. The thirty extra dollars for a quality binding is the best investment you will make in your Bible reading life. The Bible should look and feel, on your nightstand, like an object you want to spend time with.

Mark it up. Underline what catches you. Write notes in the margins. Date passages that landed on a particular day. The Bible is a working tool, not a museum piece. The Bibles of the saints we have inherited are heavily marked. Yours should be too.

CHAPTER FOUR

How the Bible Holds Together

Here is the thing that, once you see it, changes how you read forever.

The Bible is not seventy-three random books. It is one story, told in seventy-three voices, across roughly fifteen hundred years of writing, with a unity that no other ancient collection of texts comes close to matching. The story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Every part of it serves the whole. Once you can see the spine of the story, every individual passage you read takes its place inside something larger.

Most Catholics never get taught this. They were given the Bible as a collection of disconnected stories, with the Christmas pageant readings and the Sunday gospel as discrete pieces. The story behind the stories was never sketched. Let us sketch it now.

The Covenant Spine

God enters into relationship with humanity through a series of covenants. A covenant is a sacred bond, stronger than a contract, that creates a family-level commitment between two parties. The whole Bible can be read as the unfolding of these covenants, each one larger than the last, each pointing toward the final and eternal one in Jesus Christ.

- **Adam and Eve.** God establishes the original covenant with humanity in the garden. Humanity breaks it. God promises a future deliverer (Gen 3:15).
- **Noah.** After the flood, God renews His covenant with creation, promising never again to destroy the earth by water. The rainbow is the sign.
- **Abraham.** God calls one man, makes him the father of a nation, and promises that through his offspring all nations will be blessed. This is the seed from which everything else grows.
- **Moses.** God brings Abraham's descendants out of slavery in Egypt, gives them the Ten Commandments at Sinai, and forms them into the people of Israel.
- **David.** God promises a king from David's line who will reign forever. This is the messianic promise that the prophets will spend centuries unfolding.

- **Jesus.** The new and eternal covenant in Christ's blood. Every earlier covenant pointed at this one. Every earlier covenant is fulfilled here. "This is My Blood of the new covenant."

If you can hold this spine in your head, the Old Testament stops being random. Genesis is the foundation. Exodus is the covenant at Sinai. Samuel and Kings tell the David story. The prophets call Israel back to her covenant when she wanders, and they sharpen the promise of the coming Messiah. The Gospels are the arrival of that Messiah. Acts and the letters are the spread of the new covenant to all nations. Revelation is the consummation, when the covenant reaches its eternal form in the marriage of Christ and His Church.

Typology: The Old in the New

The early Church, including the apostles themselves, read the Old Testament through what they called typology. They believed that persons, events, and institutions in the Old Testament were divinely arranged to prefigure realities in the New. A type is the foreshadowing. The fulfillment is the antitype.

This is not a way of explaining away the Old Testament. The historical events really happened. But they were also pointing forward, designed by God to be both real in their time and predictive of what was coming.

Some examples to put this in your bones:

- **Adam** is a type of Christ. The first Adam brought death to all through his disobedience; the second Adam (Paul calls Him this explicitly) brings life to all through His obedience.
- **Isaac** on Mount Moriah, carrying the wood of his own sacrifice up the mountain, is a type of Christ carrying the cross up Calvary. Both are beloved sons. Both are offered by their fathers. Isaac is spared; Christ is not.
- **The Passover lamb** is a type of Christ, whose blood marks the doors of our hearts so that eternal death will pass over us.
- **The manna in the desert** is a type of the Eucharist, the true bread from heaven that gives life to the world (Jesus says this explicitly in John 6).
- **The bronze serpent** Moses lifted on a pole, that healed the Israelites when they looked on it, is a type of Christ lifted on the cross to heal all who look on Him in faith (John 3:14).

- **David** is a type of Christ, the shepherd-king from whose line the eternal Shepherd-King comes.

> *The New Testament is concealed in the Old; the Old Testament is revealed in the New.*
>
> *St. Augustine*

Once you have eyes for typology, the Old Testament stops being a foreign country. It is the foreshadowing of the Gospel. The men and women in it are not just historical curiosities. They are pointing, beyond themselves, to Christ.

CHAPTER FIVE

Reading the Old Testament

Most Catholics avoid the Old Testament. They have tried Genesis, gotten lost somewhere in Leviticus, and never come back. They know a few stories (David and Goliath, Daniel in the lions' den, Jonah and the whale) but the rest is a fog.

This is fixable. The Old Testament is not impossible. You just need a map.

The Five Sections

The Catholic Old Testament has forty-six books, traditionally divided into five sections.

The Pentateuch (the first five books)

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. These are the foundation. Creation, the patriarchs, the Exodus, the giving of the Law, the wandering in the desert, the entrance to the Promised Land. Read these first. Genesis and Exodus especially are story-driven and accessible. Leviticus and Numbers have long stretches of legal and ritual material that can be skimmed on first reading; you can come back to them later when you have more context.

The Historical Books

Joshua, Judges, Ruth, First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, First and Second Maccabees. The story of Israel from the conquest of the Promised Land through the monarchy, the exile, and the return. The most important to know are Samuel, Kings, and Tobit. The David story in First and Second Samuel is some of the greatest narrative writing in world literature. Read it slowly.

The Wisdom Books

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach. These are the prayer book, philosophy, and practical wisdom of Israel.

The Psalms deserve special mention. They are the prayer book of the Bible, the prayers Jesus prayed, the songs the Church has prayed in her Liturgy of the Hours for two thousand years. There is a psalm for every human emotion, especially the ones we are not supposed

to bring to God in polite religion (rage, despair, vengeful fury, brokenness). The Psalms teach us that all of these are welcome at the altar.

Sit with the Psalms. Read three a day. Read them when you have no words of your own. Read them when you have too many. They will reshape your prayer life over years.

The Major Prophets

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel. Called "major" because of length, not importance. Isaiah is the messianic prophet par excellence. Jeremiah is the prophet of the broken heart. Daniel contains the great apocalyptic visions. These are essential reading because the New Testament constantly quotes them and the Gospel cannot be fully understood without them.

The Minor Prophets

Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. Twelve short books at the end of the Old Testament. They feel obscure, but each addresses real situations in Israel's history and each contributes to the prophetic chorus pointing toward Christ. Hosea, Amos, and Jonah are the most accessible starting points.

A Practical Plan

If you have never seriously read the Old Testament, here is a working order to attempt.

- Genesis (creation, the patriarchs)
- Exodus (the Exodus and Sinai)
- Skip ahead: Joshua and Judges (the conquest, the chaos of the judges)
- Ruth (a short, beautiful interlude)
- First and Second Samuel (Saul and David)
- First Kings 1 through 11 (Solomon, then back to chaos)
- Psalms (begin reading three a day, perpetually)
- Proverbs (a chapter at a time)
- Isaiah (the great messianic prophecies)
- Jonah (one sitting)

- Daniel (one or two weeks)

Now you have the spine. The rest of the Old Testament can be filled in over years.

CHAPTER SIX

Reading the New Testament

The New Testament is shorter, more accessible, and unavoidable. Twenty-seven books. The story of Jesus, the founding of the Church, the letters that shaped her, and the vision of her end.

If you have read nothing else of the Bible, read the New Testament. The Old Testament is its foundation, but the New is where you actually meet Christ in His own words and through the men He sent.

The Four Gospels

Four portraits of Jesus, written by four different authors for four different audiences, working from many of the same memories and traditions but each shaping the material to reveal something different.

Matthew

Written to Jewish Christians, emphasizing that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. More Old Testament quotations and allusions than any other Gospel. The Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 through 7) is here. Read Matthew if you want to see how the entire Old Testament was reaching toward Christ.

Mark

The shortest and fastest. Probably written first. Action-oriented, with Jesus moving constantly from place to place, healing and casting out demons. The Gospel to read in one sitting if you can. A good starting place for a beginner.

Luke

The Gentile Gospel. Written by a doctor (Paul calls Luke "the beloved physician") and the most polished prose stylist of the four. Luke gives us the Annunciation, the Visitation, the birth of John the Baptist, the parable of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the road to Emmaus, and many other passages found nowhere else. The Gospel most attentive to women, the poor, and the marginalized. Read Luke if you want the most accessible introduction to Jesus' compassion.

John

The theological Gospel, written likely by the apostle John in his old age. Different in structure from the first three. Long discourses by Jesus rather than rapid action. Deeper meditation on who Jesus is. The Bread of Life discourse (chapter 6) and the farewell discourse (chapters 13 through 17) are the heart of it. Read John slowly. Read it more than once. The Fathers of the Church called it the spiritual Gospel because it goes deeper than the others into the mystery of Christ's identity.

Acts of the Apostles

Luke wrote two books, his Gospel and Acts. Acts picks up where the Gospel ended, with the Resurrection and Ascension, and follows the early Church from Jerusalem through the missionary journeys of Paul to Rome. Pentecost, the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus, the spread of the Gospel into the Gentile world. Read Acts to understand how the Church became the Church. It is also fast-moving and reads like an adventure story.

Paul's Letters

Thirteen letters traditionally attributed to Paul, some written to specific churches, some to individuals. They are arranged in the New Testament by length, not chronology, which means they jump around. Here are the most important to know.

- **Romans.** Paul's masterwork. A systematic exposition of the Gospel. Dense; takes patience. The book that converted Augustine.
- **First and Second Corinthians.** Letters to a messy church Paul founded. Practical, occasionally funny, deeply pastoral. First Corinthians 13 is the great chapter on love.
- **Galatians.** Paul's defense of the Gospel against those trying to add Jewish law to it.
- **Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians.** The "prison letters," written by Paul under house arrest. Shorter, more devotional, beautiful.
- **First and Second Timothy, Titus.** The "pastoral letters," written to younger leaders Paul was forming.

Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles

Hebrews is a profound theological treatise on Christ as the eternal High Priest and the fulfillment of the Old Testament priesthood. James, First and Second Peter, First through

Third John, and Jude are the seven "Catholic" or "general" epistles, addressed not to single churches but to the whole Church. James on faith and works. First Peter on suffering. First John on love and discernment.

Revelation

The last book of the Bible. A vision of the heavenly liturgy, the spiritual warfare of the Church, and the final consummation in the marriage of Christ and His Bride. Apocalyptic literature, which means it uses symbolic imagery to communicate spiritual realities. It is not a coded prediction of the end of the world in any literal way; it is a sustained vision of what is happening now in heaven and what will be revealed at the end of time.

Read Revelation with a study Bible, at least the first few times. The imagery requires guidance. Read it knowing that it is more closely related to the Mass than to the news. Once you see the Mass and Revelation as two sides of the same liturgy, both books are unlocked.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Building a Daily Practice

Knowledge of what the Bible is matters very little if you do not actually read it. This chapter is about the practice.

The Chair, the Time, the Bible

Three concrete commitments make daily Bible reading sustainable.

- **A specific chair or spot.** The same place every day. Your body learns the routine. The chair becomes a cue.
- **A specific time.** Most successful daily readers do it first thing in the morning, before the day catches them. Twenty minutes. Same time every day.
- **A specific Bible.** The one you marked up. The one with the ribbon in the spot you left off. Always in the same place. Always within reach.

These small commitments matter more than the most ambitious resolution. The man who reads twenty minutes a day for thirty years has read the Bible many times over. The man who tries to read three hours every Saturday almost always gives up by March.

Lectio Divina

Latin for divine reading. The ancient Christian practice of reading Scripture not for information but for encounter. Four movements, traditionally.

Lectio (Reading)

Read the passage slowly. Out loud if you are alone. Read it twice. Let the words settle. Notice what catches your attention. A word, a phrase, an image, a verse that will not let you go. The Holy Spirit highlights what He wants you to receive today.

Meditatio (Meditating)

Sit with what caught you. Turn it over. Ask why it might be the word for you today. What is happening in your life that this passage is speaking to? What is God showing you in it? This is not academic analysis. It is prayerful pondering. Mary, after the visit of the shepherds, "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). That is the posture.

Oratio (Praying)

Respond to God. Tell Him what the passage stirred in you. Praise, repent, ask, thank, simply love. The passage opens a conversation; the conversation is the prayer. This is not formal liturgy. It is the natural response of a soul that has heard something.

Contemplatio (Contemplating)

Rest. Stop talking. Be silent in His presence. Let what He has given you sink into the soul without analysis or words. Five minutes is enough. Sometimes more. The early monks said this is where the deepest formation happens, in the silence after the words have done their work.

Done daily, even briefly, this practice transforms a reader. The man who reads thirty verses lectio-style over twenty minutes will, over years, be deeper in the Word than the man who reads three chapters quickly every day.

Reading Plans

Several options, depending on what you want.

- **The daily Mass readings.** The Church gives you a small portion of Scripture every day at Mass. Following the daily readings (available in apps, in missalettes, online, and in printed daily missals) ties your reading to the rhythm of the liturgical year. Highly recommended. Over three years of Sundays and one year of weekdays, you hear the great arc of Scripture preached by the Church.
- **A book at a time.** Pick a Gospel. Read a chapter or half-chapter a day. When you finish, pick the next book. This is the most natural way to read the Bible the way it was written.
- **A whole-Bible plan.** If you want to read the entire Bible in a year, plans exist that walk you through it (look for Catholic plans that include the deuterocanonicals). The Great Adventure Catholic Bible from Ascension Press has a popular one that walks through the salvation story in a sensible order rather than book-by-book.

Memorization

The Catholic tradition has been weaker on this than the Protestant. We should reclaim it.

A handful of verses, committed to memory and prayed often, become the spiritual furniture of your interior life. When temptation comes, they rise up. When grief strikes, they are there. When you cannot think what to pray, they pray for you.

Start with these:

- John 1:1 through 14 (the prologue of John)
- Psalm 23 (the Lord is my shepherd)
- Romans 8:35 through 39 (nothing can separate us from the love of Christ)
- First Corinthians 13 (love is patient, love is kind)
- Philippians 4:4 through 9 (rejoice in the Lord always)
- The Beatitudes from Matthew 5

Memorize one short passage every month. In ten years you will have something most Catholics in modern history have lacked: a Bible inside you.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When It Goes Dry

Every serious reader of the Bible eventually hits dry stretches. The book that was alive for months goes flat. The verses that used to leap off the page now feel like just verses. The chair you were so eager to sit in now feels like a duty.

This is normal. It is not, by itself, a sign you are doing something wrong. The dryness is often part of how God forms readers. There are two kinds of dryness, and the response is different for each.

Dryness of Material

Sometimes the passage is genuinely difficult. The genealogies in First Chronicles. The temple measurements in Ezekiel. The ritual codes in Leviticus. You are not failing as a reader. The material is hard.

Skip and come back

It is allowed. The Bible is not a novel you have to read in order. If Leviticus is killing you, skim it and move on. You can come back to it later when you have more context and the cultic system means more to you. Some of the saints recommended skipping the hard parts entirely on first read-through of the whole Bible and saving them for a second pass.

Use a study Bible

This is exactly what the footnotes are for. A good Catholic study Bible will explain why a genealogy exists, what a particular ritual was for, who the obscure prophet was addressing. The notes turn what feels dead into what is alive. Read with the help on hand.

Try a different translation

Sometimes the language itself is the obstacle. A passage that feels stiff in one translation reads beautifully in another. The Psalms especially benefit from comparison; the same psalm in the Grail translation feels different from the same psalm in the NABRE or the RSV. Keep a second translation accessible for moments when the first is not landing.

Ask someone

A priest, a spiritual director, a knowledgeable Catholic friend, a parish Bible study. The Bible was always meant to be read in community. The man trying to read it entirely alone will get stuck in ways the man with conversation partners does not.

Dryness of Spirit

The harder kind. The text is fine. You are the one feeling nothing. The words pass under your eyes and do not stir anything. The encounter that used to happen has stopped happening.

Saint John of the Cross, the great Spanish mystic, called this the dark night of the senses. He thought it was usually a sign of spiritual progress, not regression. When God is forming us at deeper levels, He often withdraws the consolations we used to get from prayer and the Word. The withdrawal is purifying. It is forcing us to choose Him for His own sake, not for the feelings He gives us.

> *When the senses are dry, the spirit is being fed beneath them. The man who keeps showing up in dryness is being trained for a love that does not depend on consolation.*

Show up anyway

This is the most important practice. Keep your appointment with the Bible even when you feel nothing. Read your passage. Sit your minutes. Refuse the temptation to skip because it isn't doing anything. The faithfulness is what matters, not the feeling. God is at work in the silence in ways you cannot see.

Shorten without abandoning

If your usual twenty minutes is feeling impossible, do ten. Or five. Do not let the all-or-nothing trap shut you down completely. A short faithful reading beats a long resentful one.

Pray the dryness

Tell God what you are experiencing. "Lord, the page is dead today. I do not feel You. I am here anyway because I love You." That sentence, spoken honestly into the dryness, is itself one of the highest forms of prayer. You are loving Him without payment. You are showing up for Him rather than for what He gives you. The saints say this kind of fidelity, sustained over years, is the engine of real spiritual growth.

Wait for the return

Dryness eventually breaks. Sometimes after weeks. Sometimes after months. Sometimes longer. When it breaks, the reader who stayed faithful in the dry season finds the Word alive in new ways he could not have reached if he had been spared the desert. Bring this assurance to the silent days. They are part of the formation, not a failure of it.

CONCLUSION

A Lifetime in the Word

If you take nothing else from this book, take this.

The Bible is not a project to complete. It is a Person to know.

You will not read it once and be done. You will read it for the rest of your life. The Gospel of John that confused you at thirty will speak in new ways at fifty. The Psalms that felt foreign at twenty will feel like home at seventy. The Old Testament prophets who seemed obscure when you started will start to sound like the only honest commentary on the world you live in. The Bible grows up with you, because it grew out of the same Spirit who is forming you.

> *"So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."*
>
> *Is 55:11*

The promise in that verse is the long arc of a life in the Word. The Bible you read does not return empty. Every time you open it, something is being formed in you, even when you cannot see it. The man who has read the Gospels carefully for forty years is not the same man he was at the beginning. He could not be. The Word, faithfully received, does its work.

Pick a place to start. Mark if you have never read a Gospel. Luke if you want the warmth. John if you want the depth. Open it tonight. Read a chapter. Underline what catches you. Pray it back. Come back tomorrow.

And the day after.

And the day after that.

For the rest of your life.

The Word is waiting. It has always been waiting. Begin.

✦ ✦ ✦