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Biblical Literacy Made Easy

A Practical Guide for
Catechists, Teachers, and Youth Ministers



Brian Singer-Towns

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Dedicated to my dear friends and mentors, Ray Tetrault and Jerry Walsh.

The publishing team included Roxane Kadrlik Chlachula, development editor; Lorraine Kilmartin, reviewer; prepress and manufacturing coordinated by the production departments of Saint Mary's Press.

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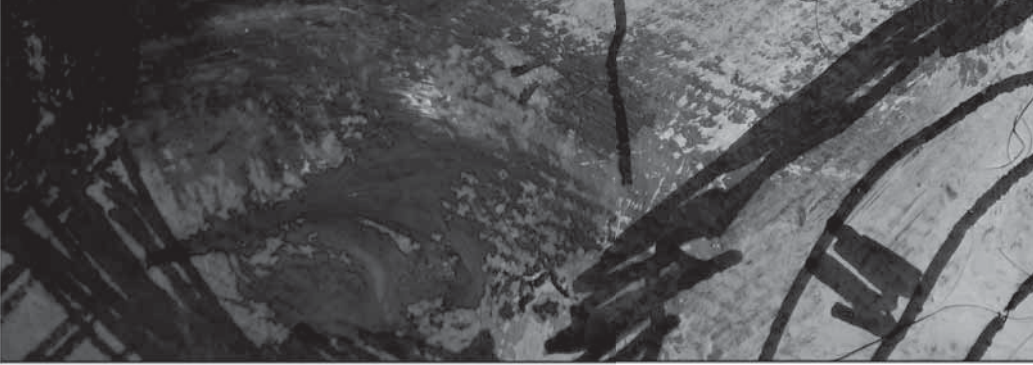
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Introduction

“The sacred synod also earnestly and especially urges all the Christian faithful, especially Religious, to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the ‘excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil. 3:8).” (*Dei Verbum*, no. 25)

I grew up at a time when, in Catholic homes, the Bible was admired and revered but very rarely read by ordinary Catholics. We had our big, leather-bound Catholic Bible displayed in our family room. For many years, it was opened only to record the dates of Baptisms and First Communions. Reading and understanding the Bible was something reserved for priests and religious, not for the average lay person.

Then along came the Second Vatican Council, and everything changed. The quotation from the council’s document on divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) reflects the more recent attitude of the Catholic Church toward reading the Bible. After Vatican Council II, Catholic Bible study groups increased in number

and Catholics now join their Protestant friends and neighbors in ecumenical Bible study groups. New resources for helping the average Catholic read and understand the Scriptures are continually being released. In many ways, you might say we live in the golden age of the Bible in the Catholic Church.

However, if you are a catechist or a teacher working with a typical group of middle school or high school youth, you know much work has yet to be done. What seems like a simple direction—“Let’s all turn to Matthew, chapter five”—is met with questions like, “Is Matthew at the beginning or end of the Bible?” or “What page is that on?” Or if you ask, “What can you tell me about Abraham?” you might well hear in response, “Wasn’t Abraham the guy Jesus raised from the dead?” Truth be told, we are still a Church that does better at teaching the *Catechism* than the Bible. We’ve had a lot to learn in the forty years since Vatican Council II about teaching the Scriptures to young people, and we are still learning.

“Catechesis should take Sacred Scripture as its inspiration, its fundamental curriculum, and its end because it strengthens faith, nourishes the soul, and nurtures the spiritual life.” (*National Directory for Catechesis*, p. 70)

Perhaps the most important thing we’ve learned is that teaching young people about the Bible cannot be limited to one course or one specially trained catechist, teacher, or youth minister. Even if you do not teach a specific course on the Scriptures, you share the responsibility for teaching biblical literacy. “Oh,”

you say, much like the prophets of the Bible, “I know not how to do this.” Don’t worry; you are not alone. Many of us Catholic adults did not receive a thorough introduction to the Scriptures in our own catechesis; thus, we suffer the disadvantage of not having our own sound learning experience as a model for our teaching.

That is why I wrote this introduction to biblical literacy for catechists, teachers, and youth ministers. I will teach you a simple—but not simplistic—model that describes our three main goals for forming biblically literate people. Then I will break those goals down into a few important competencies for you to focus on. For each competency, I will provide some necessary information and then suggest ways you can work on the competency with the young people you catechize. You can read this book in a couple hours, but I hope you review it periodically to refresh your memory and evaluate your own progress in teaching biblical literacy.

The Goals of Biblical Literacy

Let’s start by describing a biblically literate adult. Such an adult is comfortable in reading and using the Bible. He or she knows how the books of the Bible are arranged and how to quickly and easily locate a specific book or passage. This person has a solid understanding of the biblical story of salvation history. He or she is familiar with key people and events of salvation history and can tell how God’s saving power worked through those people and events. This biblically literate adult understands that any book or passage from the Scriptures must be understood in its proper context. When reading the Bible, this person considers things like the literary genre, the culture of the time, the original

author's intended message, how this message fits into the bigger picture of salvation history, and how the passage is understood in the Church's Tradition.

We can help young people become such biblically literate adults by working toward the following three catechetical goals:

- A. Our ministry with young people should help them become knowledgeable and comfortable in using the Bible.
- B. Our ministry with young people should help them know and understand the biblical story of salvation history.
- C. Our ministry with young people should help them understand how to interpret Bible books and passages in their proper contexts.

Goal A is the **Access** goal. Goal B is the **Big Picture** goal. Goal C is the **Context** goal. Taken together they are the ABCs of biblical literacy.

There is a certain progression with the three goals. The **Access** goal is the most basic goal, its competencies creating a foundation for working at the **Big Picture** and **Context** goals. The **Big Picture** builds on the **Access** competencies and creates greater knowledge that the **Context** competencies can build on. Here are some good guidelines:

- With elementary-age children, start working on the **Access** competencies and introduce some **Big Picture** knowledge.
- With middle school youth, work hard on the **Big Picture** competencies and introduce some **Context** background.
- With high school youth, be intentional about working on the **Context** competencies (while reinforcing the **Access** and **Big Picture** competencies).

All three goals are closely related; working on any one goal usually reinforces the others.

The ABCs of Biblical Literacy

By working at the following three goals, we can help young people become biblically literate:

<u>A</u>ccess	Help young people become knowledgeable and comfortable in using the Bible.
<u>B</u>ig Picture	Help young people know and understand the biblical story of salvation history.
<u>C</u>ontext	Help young people understand how to interpret Bible books and passages in their proper contexts.

Using the ABCs of Biblical Literacy

Once you become familiar with the three goals of biblical literacy and their related competencies, which are explained more fully in the next three chapters, you will find that the goals become a natural part of your teaching. I have also found it helpful to consciously consider them in three situations: initial assessment, curriculum or program planning, and final assessment.

Initial Assessment

When you first meet with a group of young people and start using the Bible with them, employ the framework of the three goals to assess the group's biblical literacy learning needs. You can do this informally, just by noticing the young people's reactions to using the Bible. No matter what age the young people are, if you direct them to turn to a Scripture passage and most

of them need help finding it, that's a pretty good clue that you need to work on **Access** competencies. If you are talking about the meaning of an important biblical person or a critical event in salvation history and you can see that the group has little or no knowledge of the person or event, you know you will need to focus on some **Big Picture** teaching.

Curriculum or Program Planning

As you make your plans for teaching an upcoming course or for leading a youth program or activity, consider how the Scriptures will be used in that class or program. Given your topic or theme, what biblical literacy knowledge and skill competencies does it make the most sense to focus on? Does the textbook contain Scripture references that you could have the young people look up themselves? Could you devote an entire class or session to the biblical stories and teachings connected to your topic or theme? Could you have the group read a passage from the Scriptures as a prayer?

Final Assessment

The conclusion of any course or program provides an opportunity for assessing the young people's growth in biblical literacy. Even if your class or program was not on a biblical topic, you can still assess the young people's general level of biblical literacy, especially for the **Access** and **Big Picture** goals. This assessment does not have to be through a formal written test; it can happen by simply observing the young people's skill and knowledge. Are they more adept at finding Scripture passages? Is their knowledge of biblical people greater or more complete? Are they better

at asking questions that help put a particular passage into its appropriate context? Your answers to these questions can help you improve the young people's biblical literacy the next time you teach the class or lead the program.