

A New Counter-Reformation Starts at the Vatican

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For most of October, more than 200 Catholic bishops, along with sundry theologians and experts, met at the Vatican to figure out how to get Catholics to read the Bible -- a project easily dismissed by Protestants and some Catholics as too ambitious and about 500 years too late. After all, wasn't it Rome's fears about letting mere lay people consult Holy Writ that stoked the Reformation? And Catholics don't want to read the Bible anyway, right? They're all about the Mass and the sacraments.



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Martin Luther (1483-1546) didn't have the corner on reading scripture.

The first supposition has some merit, though the truth is a good deal more complex, and the Reformers -- pace, Martin Luther -- a good deal less enlightened on that score than is generally assumed. And, yes, Catholics continue to be sacramentally centered Christians who find the "summit and source" of their spiritual nourishment in the Eucharist.

But a funny thing happened on the way to modernity: The Catholic Church opened itself to the Word in a way it hadn't done before. In the process, it fostered a balanced culture of biblical exegesis and devotion (at least among most scholars and clerics) that many in sola scriptura Protestantism might envy. Especially in light of trends in mainline denominations that foster a radical deconstruction of biblical texts on the one hand, or, on the other hand, a blinkered literalism that appeals to many conservative pew-sitters.

The revolution in Catholic scholarship really began in 1943, when Pope Pius XII issued a key encyclical called "Divino Afflante Spiritu" ("Inspired by the Divine Spirit"). Pius did not give an unqualified imprimatur to using secular historical criticism on sacred texts, but he did welcome close readings of the Bible that spurred a renaissance in Catholic exegesis. Father Raymond Brown, the widely respected scriptural scholar, would later call the encyclical the "Magna Carta for biblical progress."

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) expanded on Pius's initiative in the document "Dei Verbum" ("Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation"), which firmly placed Scripture at the center of Catholic life alongside the Eucharist and noted that the church and its leaders are at the service of the Word, not the other way around. The council encouraged biblical scholarship by experts and easy access to the Bible for the faithful.

Liturgical changes after the council then transformed the experience of going to Mass, as worshipers heard and read more biblical texts than ever before -- including, for the first time, passages from the Old Testament -- and in their own language. Catholic scholars, meanwhile, emerged as among the best in the field. Even Pope Benedict XVI, a theologian by trade, has drawn on his love of Scripture to write a well-regarded book, "Jesus of Nazareth."

So what's the problem? Why did the pope call leading churchmen from around the world to a three-week "Synod on the Word"? For one thing, the Catholic Church -- at least in the U.S. -- is in no position to claim a high level of biblical literacy among its members. In fact, no church can. Almost all American homes

have at least one Bible (93%), and about two-thirds of Americans claim to read it with some regularity. Yet in recent polls only half of U.S. adults could name a single Gospel, and most didn't know that the first book of the Bible is Genesis. Six in 10 Americans can't name five of the Ten Commandments. Few can distinguish literary forms like epistles, prophecy and history, and too many confuse inerrancy and literalism.

While the numbers don't quantify the difference between Catholics and Protestants, a 2000 survey did show that 60% of evangelicals thought Jesus was born in Jerusalem, not that "little town of Bethlehem." And there are indications that Catholics are open to more literary and metaphorical readings of the Bible, especially the Old Testament stories, than many Protestants.

Indeed, a Vatican document prepared for the synod called biblical literalism a dangerous kind of "fundamentalism" that is "winning more and more adherents . . . even among Catholics." It "demands an unshakable adherence to rigid doctrinal points of view and imposes, as the only source of teaching for Christian life and salvation, a reading of the Bible which rejects all questioning and any kind of critical research." Moreover, despite the riches in the treasury of Catholic biblical study, too many Catholics do treat Mass as one-stop shopping for spiritual uplift, contenting themselves with receiving Communion and listening to a homily that may -- or may not -- refer to the readings that worshipers may -- or may not -- have paid attention to.

Did the Vatican meeting change that dynamic? The attention at the top is certainly welcome and can tap into a genuine curiosity about the Bible that is too often satisfied by questionable archaeological "discoveries" or cable-television glosses.

But the synod's 55 final recommendations to the pope (he will likely approve most of them in a document of his own next year), while filled with lovely language about better homilies, could have used a greater focus on small-group bible studies outside the liturgy. Living biblically is hard to do if you don't understand the Bible or, worse, if you are afraid of what you might find there. The message of the Bible is simple, in a sense. But even Christ spoke with human words, which were related by human followers and preached by human beings through the centuries. That means the Scriptures are complex, and challenging.

It is no coincidence that the most popular Catholic Bible study program in the U.S. remains the Little Rock Scripture Study, which was begun in 1974 as a way for Catholics in central Arkansas to hold to their faith amid the region's dominant Bible-quoting Protestants. The response was overwhelming, and today the program has been used in more than a third of U.S. parishes. But much more needs to be done to promote a Catholic version of the kind of small-group Bible study that is a staple of American Protestantism -- and a draw to Catholics who don't find that kind of engagement in their own church.

In fact, one of the most concrete suggestions at the synod -- for "a clear and direct guide that would highlight the rich and useful methods of the Church for reading and sharing sacred Scriptures" -- came from Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston. He noted that in the Bible Belt, as elsewhere in the U.S., Bible studies are often the locus of grass-roots ecumenical contact, as church-going Catholics and evangelicals often find their passion for issues in the public square coincides with an interest in exploring their respective beliefs. But then they are at odds over Bible and doctrine. That contact becomes a spur to Catholics to learn the Bible but also a challenge to the Catholic Church to equip them with resources that are "totally ecclesial and Catholic."

Unfortunately, the cardinal's recommendation did not make the final cut. Still, the tools are there, and besides, most reformations start from below. Only this time, perhaps Catholics can lead the way.

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