



Build Your Bible Study Library

As with any pursuit, Bible study is enhanced when you have the right tools and know how to use them. Here's a list of the basics to get you started, as well as some helpful extras. My recommendations are arranged under these headings:

- [1. Invest in a good Bible or two](#)
- [2. Get the basics: The *Catechism* and a good Bible dictionary](#)
- [3. Learn to read Scripture as a Catholic](#)
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1. Invest in a good Bible or two:

One for personal reading

A well-bound, leather Bible can last a lifetime. Or at least a couple of decades if you read it all the time, and you can have it re-bound then if you need to. Invest in one for reading that you can take with you in the car, to mass, on the airplane. E-versions are okay in a pinch, but you'll find that the more time you spend in an “actual” Bible, the easier you'll find your way around it, the more you'll be aware of the context when you read, and the more comfortable you'll be just picking it up and spending time there on a daily basis. Underline meaningful passages, note prayers in the margins, write down things that impact your spiritual life. Buy a Bible you can live in, and some day it will be a treasured hand me-down.

Another (or more) for study or illustrating

The first Bible class I took in college, the professor told us to buy a new Bible to use for class. He recommended the RSV as being good for study and told us to get a paperback so we wouldn't mind marking it up. I mark up my good Bible too, but mainly to draw attention to passages that move me or things that I've learned. Getting that other Bible allowed me to add historical notes and commentary, definitions, key narrative points, and so on without cluttering up the one I pray with.

If you're interested in the creative expression of “Bible journaling” and illustration, I recommend using a sketchbook or buying a separate Bible specifically for this purpose. (That might be hard to find in a Catholic Bible. Look for one made with extra wide margins and heavier paper to handle colored pens and even paint and glue.) While this kind of illustration

can be an aid to meditation, heavy marking can draw attention away from the Word itself on subsequent readings — which is why I recommend a separate Bible for it.

A note on translations

The more you study, the more important the translation becomes. Some are made with ease of reading in mind: as *The New American Bible* (which you hear at Mass), for example, or *The New Jerusalem Bible*. Others are more literal and thus better for study: I use the *Revised Standard Version-Catholic Edition* (RSV-CE or 2nd CE) for that. Those are the three approved translations most-used by Catholics today.

Also excellent for study is the newly-approved *English Standard Version-Catholic Edition* (ESV-CE). Based on the RSV, the ESV is widely regarded as the finest English translation available today for the way it combines literary excellence with word-for-word accuracy and faithfulness to the original languages. First published in 2001 as a Protestant version, it was later released “with Apocrypha” (the Deuterocanonical books) and then amended and released as an approved Catholic version in 2018.

While not as widely read today as the translations named above, many Catholics still prefer the old-English grace of the *Douay-Rheims Bible*, a translation from the Latin Vulgate that dates from the 1600s and was updated a century later.

An approved paraphrase (a translation that aims to get across the sense of the text in modern language) is *The Way - Catholic Edition*. This is good for people who are new to the Bible but is not recommended for study.

Protestant Bibles do not contain all 73 books of the Catholic Canon of Scripture and some of the notes and some of the translation reflect theology opposed to Catholic teaching.

For more information about the various Bible translations, there’s a helpful article on the Catholic Answers website (as of this writing, it has not been updated to include the new ESV-CE): [Bible Translations Guide](#).

The Bibles I use

For personal reading, I have for many years used a leather-bound Bible (RSV-CE) that has no notes or commentary, mainly because notes tend to lure me away from prayerful meditation and into study mode. The lack of notes keeps the size down, so as an added benefit it’s easy to read in bed or carry with me. When the new ESV-CE is made available in leather, I may well switch to that. I also have a small Bible (RSV-CE) with just the NT and Psalms, which fits in my purse or the glove compartment. For study I primarily rely on the RSV-CE. In addition, I have an array of translations, study Bibles and commentaries at my desk that are also easily accessed and searched online.

The RSV-CE is published by Ignatius Press under the title *The Ignatius Bible*. The new "2nd Edition" has been typeset for greater readability. Another RSV-CE, *The Didache Bible*, Ignatius

Bible Edition, contains commentaries based on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

If you love praying the Psalms as I do, you might look into *The Revised Grail Psalms: A Liturgical Psalter*, by the Benedictine Monks of Conception Abbey. The translation has been made with an ear to rhythm suitable for liturgical song and chant. There's an inexpensive paperback available that leaves plenty of room to make notes as you meditate.

Search a Catholic Bible on the web:

- RSV-CE – <http://www.biblegateway.com/>
- NAB – <http://www.usccb.org/bible/books-of-the-bible/index.cfm>
- New Jerusalem – <http://www.catholic.org/bible/>
- Revised Grail Psalms —
https://www.giamusic.com/sacred_music/RGP/psalmDisplay.cfm

2. Get the basics: The *Catechism*, a Bible dictionary, an introduction

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

If you can only get one book besides your Bible, get this one. Because the *Catechism* presents the teaching of Sacred Scripture, the living Tradition in the Church and the Magisterium, as well as the spiritual heritage of the Fathers, Doctors, and Saints of the Church, it is an indispensable aid to Bible study. It's worth investing in the hardback because of the additional appendices in the back and because the paperback seems to fall apart after a bit of use. For occasional use (for example – answering questions in a Bible study that refer to a particular paragraph), you can search it online. But you'll get more of the context and possibly get more out of it if you have one in hand.

A user-friendly, searchable version of the *Catechism* is available online from the Knights of Columbus: <https://www.kofc.org/en/catechism/index.html>.

A number of books have been written that restate the teachings of the *Catechism* for a popular audience. I highly recommend *Catholic Christianity: A Complete Catechism of Catholic Church Beliefs Based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church* by Peter Kreeft. Another excellent one is *This is Our Faith: A Catholic Catechism for Adults* by Michael Pennock.

A Good Bible Dictionary

Even if you don't normally consult a dictionary while reading, you'll want to have one at hand when you read the Bible. Here's a good one to start with:

Catholic Bible Dictionary (Scott W. Hahn, Gen'l Ed.) Doubleday Religion, a division of Random House, New York. Milwaukee. Much more than a dictionary, this is an excellent all-purpose resource for understanding not just Scripture but the Catholic faith in general. It provides a comprehensive and very readable guide to the Bible, its language and imagery; people, places, and events; social and religious traditions; and important civilizations along with detailed maps.

There's a helpful introduction to every book of the Bible and it touches on Catholic teaching related to Scripture reading and interpretation. This book should be on every Catholic's bookshelf.

If you're looking for a more traditional dictionary-style reference book, one I like is *Dictionary of the Bible* by John L. McKenzie, SJ (Simon and Schuster, Touchstone). I reach for this one when, for example, I want an overview of the words used for "grace" in each Testament, specific examples of their usage, and an idea of the development of the idea over time.

Get an in-depth introduction to the Bible

This might be the best introduction available for serious student of the Bible who has questions about the historical-cultural context of the books of the Old Testament and how to interpret them in light of the New Testament: *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*, by John Bergsma and Brant Pitre (Ignatius Press). A unique feature is the way it places each book in its liturgical context, showing how it is used in the Mass lectionary. As of this writing, a similar reference book is being written on New Testament books as well.

3. Learn to read Scripture as a Catholic

The Bible Compass: A Catholic's Guide to Navigating the Scriptures by Edward Sri gives lots of information about the Bible itself and its place within the Catholic Church; provides guidelines for reading and interpreting the Bible as Catholics, and gets you started on some helpful resources.

***Making Senses Out of Scripture: Reading the Bible as the First Christians Did*, by Mark Shea:**

This book goes through the biblical story, explaining how to explore the literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical senses of Scripture the way Christians have done for 2000 years. It is a valuable guide to learning to read the Bible as a Catholic.

Church Documents on Scripture

Anyone studying the Bible as a Catholic should be familiar with the various Church documents dealing with Scripture. I especially recommend reading the paragraphs cited from the *Catechism* and also *Dei Verbum* and *Verbum Domini*. Following are the main ones, with documents beginning with the most recent. Sometimes one or more is printed in the front of Catholic Bibles. All may be purchased from Catholic bookstores or accessed free on the Vatican website or elsewhere on the web:

- ***Catechism Nos. 50 – 141*** (sections on the Revelation of God; the transmission of Divine Revelation; and Sacred Scripture)
- ***Verbum Domini*** (Apostolic Exhortation "The Word of the Lord") — Pope Benedict XVI, 2008
- **"The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church"** — Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993

- *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) — Vatican II, 1965
- **“Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels”** — Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1964
- *Providentissimus Deus* (Encyclical “On the Study of Holy Scripture”) — Pope Leo XIII, 1893
- *Dei Filius* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith) — Vatican I, 1870
- *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (On Promoting Biblical Studies) — Pope Pius XII, 1943
- *Spiritus Paraclitus* (Encyclical “On St. Jerome” with norms and guidelines for Scriptural exegesis) — Pope Benedict XV, 1920

4. Scripture Notes and Commentaries

If you’re looking for a study Bible or good notes or Scripture commentary, try one of these:

The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible (RSV - 2nd Catholic Edition; available in a one-volume New Testament; some OT books available separately. As of this writing, entire Bible expected in Fall 2015 or Spring 2016.)

Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Baker Academic). I highly recommend this new commentary series, edited by Dr. Peter S. Williamson and Dr. Mary Healy, for both lay and academic use. It combines serious, faithful scholarship with practical spiritual application and is clearly written and inviting.

Other fine Catholic commentary series:

- *The Navarre Bible*
- *Sacra Pagina*

5. Add some helpful books

Get to know the books of the Bible

If you’re not familiar with the Bible, it is helpful to have a book that summarizes the key things you should know about every book of the Bible in order to understand it. Here are three I like, or you can find summaries in the Catholic Bible Dictionary described above:

- *You Can Understand the Bible: A Practical and Illuminating Guide to Each Book in the Bible*, by Peter Kreeft
- *A Guide to the Bible*, by Antonio Fuentes
- *Inside the Bible* by Kenneth Baker, SJ

Learn to Pray with Scripture

Even if you don't study the Bible – learn to read it as a person word from God to your heart using *lectio divina* (the divine reading). Two books I recommend are *Praying Scripture for a Change*, by Tim Gray, which provides a clear overview of the practice; and *Transformed by God's Word*, by Stephen Binz, which also introduces *visio divina* (“divine seeing” to read icons, for example) and provides excellent practice in doing both.

6. Get “the Big Picture”

A friend once described the way she sees the Bible – based on years of listening to the Sunday readings – as looking at it “through a doily.” She could see lots of pretty colors and interesting pieces, but they didn't make sense: until she learned the underlying story of salvation that ties it all together. “Getting the big picture” is the aim of *The Great Adventure* Bible study program that I co-developed with Jeff Cavins, based on his popular *Bible Timeline* learning system. If you can't do the Bible study (or even if you do), one of the following books will help you learn the story. I promise that if you do, reading the Bible will never be the same.

Walking with God: A Journey through the Bible by Tim Gray and Jeff Cavins: this companion to *The Great Adventure* program walks you through the biblical narrative one historic period at a time, providing historical and theological background to help you understand the big picture.

A Father Who Keeps His Promises: God's Covenant Love in Scripture by Scott Hahn: Hahn traces God's plan of salvation through Scripture as it is revealed through a series of covenant promises.

The Bible Timeline Guided Journal by Sarah Christmyer – if you want to read through the story of salvation by yourself, this guided journal will take you through 14 books of the Bible that give the narrative from beginning to end. It includes an introduction to each period of salvation history, helpful questions for each set of readings, and space for observations, questions, and prayer. Based on the Bible Timeline 90-day reading plan by Jeff Cavins.

7. Consider the “extras” – Bible maps, encyclopedia and concordance

Bible Maps or an Atlas

Don't underestimate how much it helps to be able to visualize where things are taking place as you read. If your Bible doesn't contain a set of good maps, you might want to invest in an atlas. Here are two good ones:

- *Hammond Atlas of Bible Lands* (Hammond) Scripture Press
- *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Barry J. Beitzel) Moody Press, 1985.

A Catholic Encyclopedia

I can't tell you how helpful I have found the Catholic Encyclopedia and other resources you can access through this website: www.newadvent.org.

A Concordance

If you like tracing words or themes around the Bible as you study, you will find the use of a concordance invaluable. (A concordance is an alphabetical list of important words that occur in the Bible. Each word is followed by a list of places where that word is used.) Some Bibles include a mini-concordance in the back that will often do the job. The “search” feature of an on-line Bible can also be used.

If you like printed reference books, here is one for the RSV-CE:

The Catholic Bible Concordance for the Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition, from Emmaus Road Publishing.

Sometimes a website is easier. Here's one that allows you to search the RSV-CE and NAB Bibles as well as the Catechism, Lectionary, and documents of the Magisterium: <http://www.catholiccrossreference.com/bible/nab-search.cgi>

Serious students will want to be familiar with this:

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance: This tool alphabetically lists every word in the Bible with its corresponding scripture reference. Each word is assigned a number which corresponds to the original Hebrew or Greek word indexed in the back of the book. It is based on the King James Version but remains valuable due to the Strong's numbering system, which is utilized by many other study tools. There are a number of websites available that will help you use the Strong's system to search the Bible. Here is one: <http://biblehub.com/concordance/>

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