

## Why I Am Catholic

### Complete Interpretation of Scripture.

Back on November 16, I wrote about the "Proper Interpretation of the Bible." In the following weeks I covered the topics of Scripture and Tradition and understanding the Book of Revelation. We then hit Advent and I saved other Scripture topics for the New Year.

An individual attempting a personal "literal" interpretation of the Bible, will more than likely follow a narrow process that leads to misinterpretation and an incomplete understanding. The Word of God has different dimensions and is richer than merely having only one meaning. These are called "the senses of Scripture."

"According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two *senses* of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral and anagogical senses. The profound concordance of the four senses guarantees all its richness to the living reading of Scripture in the Church." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 115)

"**The literal sense** is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation: 'All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal.'" (116) The Catholic Church's use of the word "literal" is different than most other Christian denominations. For them, "literal" most often means line-by-line interpretation without a proper consideration of the whole. This is the "literal interpretation" I cautioned against on Nov. 16. It historically leads to misinterpretation.

The true "literal" is much more comprehensive, looks at the words of Scripture as a whole, understands the author's cultural situation and background, is guided by the Holy Spirit, and is an understanding that resonates with the understanding of the Church and its teaching authority. A personal interpretation will be wrong when it is not guided by these principles. Often we see examples of what is called *eigesis*: reading into the Scriptures a person's own bias, own agenda, own belief system—what they want to see there—rather than allowing the Scriptures to interpret themselves.

A person must always be ready to submit their interpretation to an authentic body of knowledgeable scholars and individuals well versed in our historical understanding of the Scriptures. We must always be cautious of "new" interpretations and see them in the light of the Holy Spirit and what God has previously given to us. For example, people over the centuries have claimed the end is near based supposedly on Scriptural evidence. They have been proven wrong, usually after causing quite a commotion. Scripture says "but of that day and hour no one knows." (Mt 24:36) Yet still new groups try to attract members based on fear and secret knowledge.

"**The spiritual sense**: Thanks to the unity of God's plan, not only the text of Scripture but also the realities and events about which it speaks can be signs.

1. The *allegorical sense*. We can acquire a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance in Christ; thus the crossing of the Red Sea is a sign or type of Christ's victory and also of Christian Baptism.
2. The *moral sense*. The events reported in Scripture ought to lead us to act justly. As St. Paul says, they were written 'for our instruction'.
3. The *anagogical sense* (Greek: *anagoge*, "leading"). We can view realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us toward our true homeland: thus the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem. (117)

"A medieval couplet summarizes the significance of the four senses:  
The Letter speaks of deeds; Allegory to faith;  
The Moral how to act; Anagogy our destiny." (118)