

Finding 1

Engaging with the Bible as a group

The focus group loved meeting together, discussing the Bible and sharing their faith and lives with each other. Indeed if a resource did not include a weekly sharing time the participants met anyway. They learnt a lot from each other about Scripture. At the end of the year, reflecting on the impact that his fellow group members had upon him, John wrote:

"I would also like to thank the amazing members of the group [...]. Everybody has been patient, selfless and generous to all members of the group. I found many of their comments to be perceptive and enlightening regarding the meaning of the Scriptures – what an amazing resource the parish has – and it remains largely untapped."

There was not always consensus about the biblical passage or subject being discussed, but the act of sharing tentative thoughts and listening to one another resulted in a greater commitment to each other and the ability to look at things from different perspectives. The weekly meeting was especially important for those who were struggling with a particular resource, the group aspect kept them going. Lee found that the group provided the "support to keep going, because I would have said 'no bother', but I've carried on for the full year."

Of course, as with any group at times the weekly meetings felt "flat" or "hard work" and a flippant comment made by one participant could hurt another. These though were usually resolved and in the long run did not significantly detract from the corporate aspect of Bible engagement that was found to be so "enriching".

Thanks are due to those who produced the five resources used:

- CaFE and Bible Society for The Big Picture
- Biblica for The Story
- The Catholic Bible School for a series of Bible reading plans
- Jesuits in Britain for Pray as you Go
- Alive Publishing for Bible Alive

Thanks to the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle and St William of York Roman Catholic Church in Castlenorth who hosted this research.

Thanks also to Elizabeth, Gary, Joan, John, Leah, Lee, Luke, Maria, Sarah, Sophia and Thereasa, the eleven participants who gave a year of their life to explore the Bible together. As a group they are all over the age of 50 and from the North East of England. They and the findings of this study should not be thought of as representative of British Catholicism. However what has been presented is valid, accurate and indicative of how other Catholics may find it helpful to engage with the Bible.

This research was carried out between May 2017 and May 2018 by David G. Ford a researcher at the CODEC Research Centre, Durham University. This centre specialises in Digital Theology and its staff oversee a number of institutional and personal research projects along with teaching in academic, community and ecclesial contexts. CODEC offers a MA in Digital Theology, as well as a shorter 5-day training course called MediaLit. These offer students the very best of theological reflection, academic interaction and practical training on digital culture, communications and media.

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Which ways of engaging with Scripture do ordinary Catholics find most helpful?

Transforming our Lives with the Bible

"We do not blindly seek God, or wait for him to speak to us first, for 'God has already spoken, and there is nothing further that we need to know, which has not been revealed to us'. Let us receive the sublime treasure of the revealed word."
Pope Francis, "Evangelii Gaudium", III, 175



Overview

The Catholic Church has been encouraging everyone to read the Bible.

In 1965 Pope Paul VI famously wrote: "easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful" ("Dei Verbum", VI, 22) and since then successive pontiffs have reiterated this call. Most recently Pope Francis described the Bible as a "sublime treasure" and affirmed that:

the study of the sacred Scriptures must be a door open to every believer. ("Evangelii Gaudium", III, 175)

In Britain this has manifested itself in weekly parish Scripture groups, diocesan Scripture days, Bible study courses, podcasts, books and daily devotionals produced by Bible agencies, publishers and others. However despite such endeavours Catholics lag behind other Christians in their Bible use, with between 4-17% of Catholics engaging weekly with the Bible, compared with 8-24% of Anglicans, 27-49% of Baptists and 62-75% of Pentecostals.¹

In light of this context eleven ordinary (i.e. lay) Catholics volunteered to take part in a research project. They formed a focus group that met for a year and trialled five different Bible engagement resources (see back page for more details of resources). The aim was to identify the most helpful ways of engaging with Scripture.

The findings of that research are summarised in this report in the hope that others will build upon what has been learnt and the Church will more and more "receive the sublime treasure of the revealed word."

¹See: P. Brierley, (2006), *Pulling out of the Nosediver: A Contemporary picture of churchgoing*. London: Christian Research; And ComRes (2017) 'Church of England – Church Mapping' (available at: <http://www.comresglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Church-of-England-Church-Mapping-Survey-Data-Tables.pdf>)

Finding 2

Reading the literal and spiritual sense of Scripture

When it came to the Bible, these Catholics engaged with it as a collection of literature and as God's word. This corresponds with the Catechism's teaching that Scripture has two senses: the literal and the spiritual.

The group were uncomfortable simply reading a Bible verse in isolation and would often read the surrounding verses or chapters. Similarly they asked questions about the historical and cultural background inferred by the text. In both instances they did this in order to more clearly understand the verse under consideration. Elizabeth recounted the impact which reading the whole of Luke's gospel and the Acts of the Apostles as a narrative had upon her:

"I found out about the Holy Spirit. I know the Holy Spirit is there, but I felt I got to know more about the Holy Spirit from here [Luke and Acts] than I have ever have done before."

Nonetheless the Bible was not treated as just literature, it was also viewed as a text through which God speaks. To that end it was engaged with in the expectation that in some way or other God would be at work. Thus prayerful and imaginative approaches to the Bible were valued for they drew the reader into the text or the text into the reader. For example, Leah asked:

"OK, God is great I know that, I know he's wonderful but what does that mean to me in a personal way?"

She went on to read Isaiah 48:17-19 and found that it resonated directly with her.

"I thought yes, if I had paid attention I would probably be a much better person if I had listened to God [...] God is a teacher and he will direct us, always, if we let him."

This was something she did not want to forget.

Finding 3

Using an accessible format

From the plethora of Bible translations and resources that are available, accessibility was the key.

1. The Bible version was important, for some a familiar translation enabled a more meaningful engagement with the text whilst others preferred a modern readable version. Choice was greatly appreciated.
2. Some resources provided questions for reflection. At times these were difficult to answer because they used language that was too direct, narrow and abstract. However, other questions helped the reader's engagement with the text, providing space for them to reflect on the text and its relevance for today.
3. The materials and technology involved also helped or hindered people's engagement. Whole Bibles were cumbersome in comparison to individual Gospel booklets. So too websites, apps or podcasts that were well designed were appreciated. Luke captured this sentiment by describing a good resource as one that *"it's easy to hold, it's manageable [and] it's user friendly."*
4. The workload of each resource was also a factor. Those that provided a daily Scripture session, with each standing alone so that if a user missed a few days they were not lost, was appreciated. So too were those requiring consistent daily engagement but which only had five sessions a week so that there was space to catch-up.
5. Resources that did not assume any prior knowledge of the Bible were ones the participants felt they could more easily engage with.
6. Bible readings that tied in with the readings of the Church had a degree of familiarity and this was well received. In addition, they provided Scripture input to those who could not attend Mass and resulted in greater understanding for those who did.

Finding 4

Using a variety of resources

By the end of the year everyone in the focus group was glad that a variety of resources had been used, as seen in this discussion:

Joan: *I think the fact that we changed resources [was very helpful] [...]. It was better than just having the Bible for the year.*

Sarah: *That would have been heavy weather.*

Gary: *We are all different and have different ways of doing things. I think if we'd have tried to just do one thing it would have appealed to some but not to others. At least with these [five resources] we can all say, 'well I liked that one but I didn't like that one'.*

Joan: *That was a strength.*

Gary: *Yes absolutely.*

Maria: *Like sampling a box of chocolates, one likes one and one likes another.*

There was no resource that everyone liked or disliked. At least one participant specifically liked each resource. There will be many reasons for this, these include different personality types, learning styles, spiritual formation, interests, levels of business, and their pre-existing devotional life. Once again choice and variety was appreciated.

Finding 5 and 6

Drawing significantly on the Old Testament and secondary expertise when needed

So far what have been presented are components of the resources that the focus group found to be particularly helpful. These final findings are ones that none of the resources dealt with satisfactorily and were highlighted as lacking by the group.

Many in the focus group were aware that their Bible knowledge was limited, especially the Old Testament. This is no surprise, for even though the new lectionary has three times more Bible content than the older Latin Missal, it still incorporates less than 30% of the Bible in its three year cycle. The figure is worse for the Old Testament, with less than 20% of it included (this drops to 6% for the Sunday lectionary). Thus when asked to design their own Bible resource many incorporated an Old Testament element. For instance Sarah simply wrote:

"To understand and learn more from the Old Testament"

The participants were also aware that they were not "experts", and at times their discussions did not reach a satisfactory conclusion due to a perceived lack of biblical, historical or doctrinal knowledge. They wanted an expert/leader who could help illuminate the text and point towards its relevance. They discussed the pros and cons of a Priest playing such a role, and whilst this was not available to them they sought out other experts. Sophia and Thereasa both bought books. Sophia's explored specific biblical texts and Thereasa's traced the development of the Bible, other participants made use of Study Bibles and the internet. In addition to this they all drew on their Catholic faith, life experiences and wisdom to compensate for the lack of an expert/leader. Even so there remained a sense that one would be welcome.