

You've Got Mail!

THE CATECHIST'S GUIDE TO

READING THE NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

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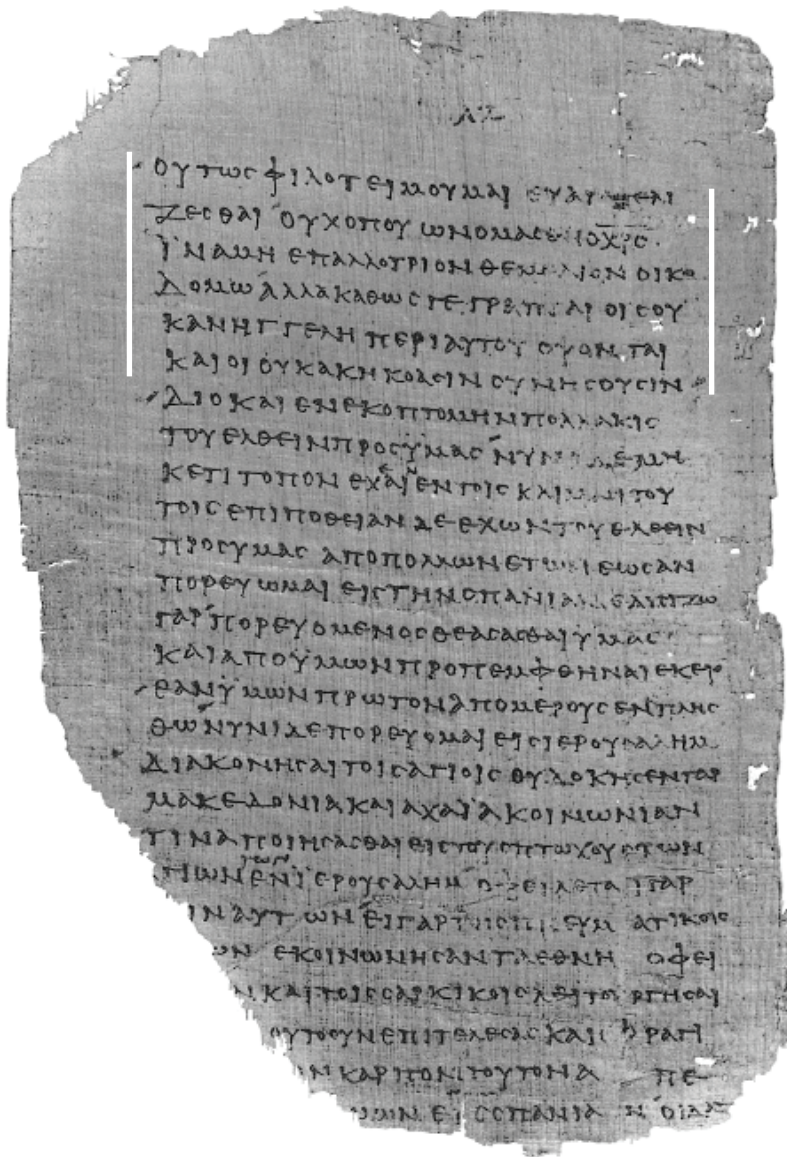
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AN EARLY GREEK PAPYRUS MANUSCRIPT, c. 175–225

(P⁴⁶ from the University of Michigan Papyrology Collection)

One of the oldest New Testament manuscripts, this page from a codex (bound like a book not a rolled scroll) shows Paul's Letter to the Romans, 15:20-29. The top 6 lines read:

“Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the Good News, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, “Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand” (Rom 15:20-22).”

The Catechist & the New Testament Letters

“What is sacred Scripture but a kind of letter from Almighty God to us? And surely, if you were resident somewhere else, and were to receive letters from an earthly emperor, you would not loiter, you would not rest, you would not sleep until you had learned what the emperor had written. Study then and daily meditate on the words of your creator. Learn the heart of God in the words of God, so that you may desire more ardently the things that are eternal, that your soul may be kindled with greater longings for heavenly joys. May God pour into you the Spirit, the comforter. May you be filled with God’s presence, and in being filled, be composed.”

—**POPE ST. GREGORY I (THE GREAT)**
Letter to Theodorus (the emperor’s physician) (c. 595)

No doubt many of us remember when email was a novelty and how exciting it was to open our computer and hear the tinny voice announce “You’ve got mail!” So likewise it must have been exciting in the first-century Christian communities gathered on a Saturday night for their eucharist to be told that they had received a letter. And as they read the letter aloud, the absent and distant writer once again became present to them. His voice, now made alive through the letter, brought him once again into their midst, to share their cherished beliefs and encourage them

“to live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel” (Phil 1:27).

The Letters as Catechetical Documents

So as we begin our examination of the New Testament Letters, we must constantly keep in mind that they are the first examples of Christian catechetical writing. They are not the initial proclamation of the Good News that Paul and the first missionaries used to challenge their listeners to repent, believe, be converted and join the Christian community, but rather

they facilitate the ongoing conversion and nurturing of those who already believe, have been baptized and are now trying to put on “the mind of Christ” (Phil 2:5) by following Jesus’ example (1 Cor 4:16, 11:1; Phil 3:17) so they can carry on Jesus’ ministry in the service of the gospel (Rom 15:16; 1 Cor 9:16). In response to these Letters, the community’s task is to proclaim the gospel to all nations (Rom 10:14-15; 2 Cor 10:16; Gal 1:16) and to build an alternative community of believers whose lives are to be characterized by “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6).

We might even say that Paul was the first catechist on record and his Letters, which are our earliest New Testament documents and antedate the written Gospels by at least a decade or two, are the original way that we discover how to carry out the work of catechesis not only to explain our beliefs and encourage Christian behavior but also to grow in our relationships with Jesus Christ and one another.

“At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a person, the person of Jesus of Nazareth, ‘the only Son from the Father...full of grace and truth,’ who suffered and died for us and who now, after rising, is living with us forever. Jesus is ‘the way, and the truth, and the life,’ and **Christian living consists in following Christ**. Accordingly, **the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ**: only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.”

—POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II

On Catechesis in Our Time (Catechesi Tradendae) (1979), #5

Like Paul and the other Letter writers, our challenge as Christians and as catechists is how to make the mystery of God in Christ come to fruition in us through the Holy Spirit and draw others into that mystery of communion with Christ. We do this first by immersing ourselves in God’s Word in order to make God’s Word an important part of our ministry with others. The Letters do not just inform us but challenge us to respond to what we are reading and make its vision, values and vocation our own.

Reading the Letters also directs and molds us as Christians by disclosing the Christian worldview (see ch 2) that reveals the vision and the vocation that are the foundation for our Christian identity. We must be participants in what we read and not just interested spectators. When we read the Letters to discover their meanings for us and our lives, we are

confronted with a spiritual urgency that requires our complete involvement and defines us as *Christians*—disciples or followers of Christ today.

Becoming More Respectful & Responsible Bible Readers

Whether as catechists or just as Christians, our aim is to become better, more respectful and more skilled Bible readers. Reading the Bible is a skill that like any other must be learned and developed through practice. Being a skillful Bible reader will depend on using effective methods to discover the meaning of what we read. We need not only to recognize what the Letters *say*, but to understand what they *meant* to the original authors and communities so we can discern what they *mean* for our lives today. So reading the Letters will always be both interesting and challenging.

As people discover when they share their biblical insights with family, friends or faith-sharing groups, the meanings we discover in the Letters seem endless. One reason for this is that our minds can never fully grasp the divinely revealed mysteries about God. But the Letters do help us to discover and understand better our relationships with God and one another, challenge us and call into question who we are and how we live.

“The scholar, the student of the Bible, is first of all an ardent and fearless listener to the divine message, who knows that it is not a dead letter locked away in archival documents, but rather a living and still intact message that comes from God and is to be welcomed in its entirety with the open, and we might say the impassioned, mind with which it was listened to by the prophets, the apostles and the countless legions of people who feared God in the Old and the New Testament.”

—POPE ST. JOHN XXIII

Address to the Italian Biblical Association (September 24, 1962)

Another reason for so many different meanings is that meanings change when contexts change. When our reading situation and our personal needs change, so will what we discover in the Letters. Sooner or later we learn that whatever we think we now know about God and about Christ is never the complete answer. There is always more to discover.

Reading the Letters, which we believe reveal the person and activity of God, requires penetrating beyond the surface appearances to the hidden depths of reality. Since the Bible mediates between our familiar world and that of a richer spiritual world infused with God’s presence,

by learning to read the Letters we learn to read our lives. In particular, we must consider what we need to know about how to approach, read, understand and apply the New Testament Letters. If you are familiar with previous books in the *Catechist's Guide Reading Series*, (see especially *The Catechist's Guide to Reading Your Bible: A Catholic View*, ch 3–4, 10–11), then you already have a basic grasp of the following explanation of the 3 worlds of the text and the ABC method that I have explained and used as the basic foundation for a helpful approach to scriptural interpretation.

Developing Skill in Reading for Meaning

Believers who accept the sacred character of the Bible, approach their reading and application of it differently than do nonbelievers. But accepting the sacred character of the biblical text does not excuse us from following all the procedures demanded for skillful interpretation. Although the Bible may be a divinely inspired text, our personal interpretations of it are not. They depend on our own reading ability, skills and effort.

“The task of interpretation is to determine what a text means. Critical study has an important role to play in the enterprise. Communication across barriers of time and cultures requires considerable imagination, for others are not exactly like us. They heard Greek in a way we never will, however practiced we become. They knew things we will never know, things that could make sense of what is for us nonsense. For this reason our confidence is tempered by a recognition of what work must be done if we are to become a decent audience. Respect for the otherness of the New Testament should involve some schooling in the basic competencies presumed by New Testament authors.”

—DONALD H. JUEL

A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted (1994)

As a written text, the Bible works like any book. It is a human composition by an author for an audience in a particular place and time. So it must be read and interpreted by using the various methods that careful and capable readers have devised. Biblical texts demand that we use all our skill to read and interpret properly the meanings inscribed within them. Reading and interpreting ancient texts also demand special attention to their textual, historical, literary and sociopolitical issues. To read texts adequately, we must consider all of these historical and critical factors.

Perhaps the most important factor we confront in reading the Letters

is with the historical and cultural gap between their situation and ours. When the Letters were first written, the authors and audiences shared the same situation, which made understanding what the author meant much easier for the recipients. When an author and audience share the same world of experience, fewer presuppositions are needed to discover the meaning that the author intended to communicate. This is why reading our daily newspaper or a contemporary novel seem to us so effortless. But as the ancient world of the author (then) and that of later readers (now) become distanced by history and by culture, difficulties in reading soon begin to emerge. (For more about how scripture scholars help us overcome these historical, cultural and language difficulties in reading the Bible, see *The Catechist's Guide to Reading Your Bible*, ch 9.)

“The personality of the writers is much less important than the religious content of their letters. The writers, indeed, do not write primarily as individual persons but in their role as apostles—as the conveyors of divine truth in a manner reminiscent of the Hebrew prophets. The destination of the epistles is usually the believing community, either a local church or a group of churches. Everything considered, the New Testament epistles are an extension of the Gospels. Both were written by authoritative Christian leaders and both existed to explain the life and teachings of Jesus.”

—LELAND RYKEN

The Literature of the Bible (1974)

The different methods and approaches used for modern biblical scholarship grow out of the diverse questions that curious and competent readers ask of the texts. Each method and approach arises to solve specific questions and concerns. The Greek root of the word *method* means a way of getting from “here” to “there.” Methods of Bible interpretation help us get from the strange, ancient world with its unfamiliar language, customs, and ideas, to our present world. The Pontifical Biblical Commission reminds us that there is, strictly speaking, no Catholic *method* of scriptural interpretation (see the quote, p. 325). But there is a distinctive Catholic *approach* to interpreting the biblical texts, which links the biblical text to the tradition of the Church and holds together our modern scientific culture and our Judeo-Christian religious tradition. The Catholic approach also demands, as the context for all understanding, a faith perspective that is rooted in a relationship with God.

Contexts of Meaning: The Three Textual Worlds of the Letters

Modern biblical scholarship begins from the fundamental linguistic truth that all meaning is determined by context. Because the meaning of any word or a text depends on its context, to read a text for its meaning means paying close attention to the contexts in which the text is read. (For more on this see *The Catechist's Guide to Reading Your Bible*, especially pp. 39-50, 135-156.) Since every text has three contexts or worlds of meaning, our strategy for reading the Letters must attend to each of these contexts if we are going to get the most out of our engagement with the texts.

The World Behind the Letter: The Author & His Audience

This world refers to the historical, cultural, social and literary situation in which the original authors and audiences lived, roughly between the years 50–120 in the Roman empire. This “world” controls the Letters’ meaning because it was in this situation and in response to the pressing problems of the original audiences that the authors first composed their letters. We must first ask what their letters *meant then* to the author and to these original audiences to begin to grasp their intended meaning.

The World of the Letter: Concerns of the Early Christian Communities

This world refers to the letter itself as a specific text. Each author shaped his letter in a particular way in order to communicate something and to make the desired impression on his readers that would change their lives as Jesus’ disciples. So our task is to consider the problems and concerns that each author had, the conclusions they reached and the arguments that reveal why they arrived at the conclusions that they did. We must first ask what the Letters *say*, and notice especially the various techniques that the authors use to achieve their intended results. In a letter this includes the choice of the beginning, the specific Christian beliefs that ground the author’s response to the situation, and the practical behaviors that are suggested as the course of action for the community to adopt.

The World in Front of the Letter: Readers Then & Now

This world refers to the situation of later readers throughout history like ourselves who attempt to read the Letters and apply their meanings to their own lives and the problems of their times and cultures. In reading

the Letters, we do not just want information about what was causing the original problems and the author’s suggestions for how to remedy them. We also want to know what the Letters and their message *mean now* for us as we shape our Christian lives today.

SOME EXAMPLES OF TEXTS & THEIR THREE WORLDS

Text	World within Text (STORY WORLD)	World behind Text (AUTHOR’S WORLD)	World in Front of Text (READER’S WORLD)
Boris Pasternak’s <i>Dr. Zhivago</i>	Russia, 1903-43	Italy, 1957	—original audience —anytime in history —in the U.S. today
Charles Dickens’s <i>Tale of Two Cities</i>	French Revolution, 1790s	England, 1859	same
Shakespeare’s <i>Julius Caesar</i>	Rome, 44 BC	London, c. 1600	same
Mark’s <i>Gospel</i>	Galilee, c. 30	Rome, c. 70	same
Paul’s <i>Letters to the Corinthians</i>	Corinth, 50s	Corinth, 50s	same
John’s <i>Book of Revelation</i>	Roman Asia, c. 95 and a timeless mystical journey	Patmos & Ephesus (in the Roman province of Asia), c. 95	same

Moreover, simply knowing what the Letters are about is not enough for our ministry. The ministry challenge is to unleash the power of the Letters to transform ourselves, our lives and our world. Paul described the gospel as “the power (Gk: *dunamis*) of God for salvation for everyone who believes” (Rom 1:17). Like dynamite that can blast away what is rigid, the gospel message can blow apart the hardness of heart that plagues us all.

“We seek a translation that opens our ears to hear the critique of ourselves to which we are deaf.”

—ROBERT A. ATKINS
Egalitarian Community: Ethnography & Exegesis (1991)

Thus these Letters can be an important and useful source for our conversion to the way of seeing the world as Jesus did of being in the world as Jesus wanted. The authors’ revelation of God’s ideal for human community—which Jesus called the kingdom of God and Paul called living “in Christ”—continues to invite us to follow their way today.

Using the ABC Method

To become more skillful Bible readers, it helps to have a handy practical method to go about the task of reading and interpreting the Bible. Thus I suggest using the helpful “ABC method” for reading Scripture that focuses on the three basic steps of the reading process:

- **A**pproaching the text
- **B**reaking open the text
- **C**onnecting the text to our life

Approaching the Letters: Examining Our Assumptions

As readers, what we get out of a text depends largely on what we bring to it. The written words fixed on the page are the same for all readers, but various readers soon discover many different meanings. Some of this dissimilarity arises from differences in personal knowledge and experience that readers bring to their interpretation of the texts. Other differences arise from the different personal interests that guide their reading and also from the various connections that they make to their lives.

“Competency in reading a literary text is to some degree the reward of discipline, practice and desire, but the quality and depth of one’s insight and understanding are unpredictable. Biographical circumstances and psychological makeup, the occasion in which the text is encountered, other people with whom it is being discussed, familiarity with other literature of the kind, and so on, have a complex relevance to interpretation.”

—PATRICK GRANT
Reading the New Testament (1989)

When we read the Letters, we approach the texts with two levels of assumptions. First, we bring several background assumptions such as our beliefs about the biblical texts as sacred, about ourselves as readers and about the interpretation process. Second, we are also influenced by more immediate questions or interests that guide our reading (for more on how these translate into methods and approaches see ch 9, pp. 325-326).

Assumptions about the Letters as Sacred Texts

For Christians, the Bible is not just another book on the local bookstore shelf. As Catholic Christians, we have certain beliefs *about* the Bible before we ever come to read it. As sacred or holy, our Bible is the book we pick

up when we want to know about God and our relationship with God. Reading the Bible provides *clues* about the reality of God and *cues* for responding to God in appropriate ways. It is a collection of many texts written in different literary forms, which are not merely the product of human imagination and effort. While we recognize that the Letters were composed by human authors using their literary gifts to express their experience of God, we believe that God also mysteriously cooperated in the production of the Letters so that these Letters also contain a divine message. In brief, as Vatican Council II summarized it, we believe that our Bible contains “the words of God, expressed in human language” (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* [1965], #13).

“The words of Sacred Scripture are unlike any other texts we will ever hear, for they not only give us information, they are the vehicle God uses to reveal himself to us, the means by which we come to know the depth of God’s love for us and the responsibilities entailed by being Christ’s followers, members of his body. What is more, this Word of God proclaimed in the liturgy possesses a special sacramental power to bring about in us what it proclaims. The Word of God proclaimed at Mass is *efficacious*, that is, it not only tells us of God and God’s will for us, it also helps us to put that will of God into practice in our own lives.”

—U. S. CATHOLIC BISHOPS
Hearing the Word of God (2010)

The Bible tells the story of God with us, and this story continues to shape our lives and our world. Our goal here is not to argue in theological detail for our Catholic beliefs about the Bible but rather to acknowledge them and understand how they influence our approach to the Bible. But we need to be very clear that these assumptions do not come explicitly from the Bible itself but are our theological beliefs **about** the Bible that will shape our approach to understanding the meaning of the Letters. These beliefs are like eyeglasses through which we see everything else but hardly notice wearing them because we get so used to them.

When we identify these Letters as **sacred Christian texts**, we are declaring our beliefs about them. The sacred character of the Letters can be summarized in our four Catholic beliefs about them, namely that they are:

- **inspired:** God has had a special role with the author in their production
- **canonical:** limited just to these particular sacred books in our Bible

- **revealed:** disclosing the hidden truth of God's own mysterious reality
- **inerrant:** without error in these divinely revealed truths.

This sacred character sets these Letters apart from all other letters.

Assumptions about the Interpretation Process

The Bible is not only God's Word but also the Church's book. There was divine revelation before the Bible was written, and God's self-revelation to us today is not limited to the Bible's pages. But the Bible is one special way in which God comes to meet us. What we get out of it will depend on how attentive, careful and skillful we are at discovering what it contains. Thus as texts, the Letters must be read and interpreted through our human efforts. Understanding their meanings does not work magically, without our effort, nor do they give us all the answers for every problem we face. But they do reveal the character of God who invites us into a relationship and who always encourages us to move more deeply into that relationship.

Assumptions about My Personal Motives & Interests

Since we want to read these Letters, it helps to investigate our own personal assumptions by asking some basic questions about why we want to read these Letters and what specific interests are drawing us to them.

- *What is going on in my life that points me toward these Letters?*
- *Why would I want to read these Letters and not some other book?*
- *What do I want or expect to discover from reading these Letters?*
- *What questions, concerns or needs do I wish to answer?*
- *What am I most interested in now?*
 - the theological issues of who God is and how God acts
 - historical issues about the author and audience and their situation
 - psychological issues about the motivations or values that prompt the choices and behaviors of the author or audience
 - the application to my own problems by seeing how the events of the author and audience connect with my life today.

Breaking Open the Letters: What They Say & What They Mean

Breaking a text into its intelligible meanings is interpretation, i.e., understanding not only what the text **says** but also what it **means**. As Vatican II

reminded us, “To understand what God has wished to communicate to us, we must carefully investigate what meaning the biblical writers actually had in mind; that will also be what God chose to manifest through their words” (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* [1965], #12). So breaking open the meaning of a biblical passage moves in two stages.

To adequately interpret the meaning of the human words of Scripture, we must discover what the words meant to their original author and audience. This is the revealed and inspired meaning, so it must be sought with utmost care. Thus we must use methods of interpretation that require more than a superficial reading that expects that by simply picking up the modern translation that we can know exactly what the text means.

First we must ask ourselves what the text **says**, and then what it **means**. The first issue focuses on the words of the text and how they fit together into a coherent unity. The second issue concerns how the words refer to realities outside of the text itself.

“First of all, we need to be sure that we understand the meaning of the words we read. I want to insist here on something which may seem obvious, but which is not always taken into account: the biblical text which we study is two or three thousand years old; its language is very different from that which we speak today. Even if we think we understand the words translated into our own language, this does not mean that we correctly understand what the sacred author wished to say.”

—**POPE FRANCIS**

The Joy of the Gospel (2013), #147

To understand **what the biblical text says** we need to rely on an accurate modern translation like the *Revised New American Bible* or the *New Revised Standard Version* (for more on different Bible translations see ch 9, pp. 319-322). First read the selected passage all the way through without looking at any footnotes or other material. Sit quietly with the reading for a minute, reflecting on it. If any words or phrases or religious terms are not clear, look them up in a dictionary or a Bible dictionary.

To understand **what the biblical text means**, we must first ask what the original author wanted the original audience to understand by these words. After all, this author was the one who put these words together to convey a meaning to someone. Determining **what the text meant then** to its original author and audience is not always easy because the text was

composed centuries ago in a culture and language that were very different from ours. So we mostly rely on scripture scholars to identify this original meaning. The introductions and footnotes in your Bible give this kind of information, and commentaries help when we have further questions.

“The central message is what the author primarily wanted to communicate; this calls for recognizing not only the author’s ideas but the effect which he wanted to produce. If a text was written to console, it should not be used to correct errors; if it was written as an exhortation, it should not be employed to teach doctrine; if it was written to teach something about God, it should not be used to expound various theological opinions; if it was written as a summons to praise or missionary outreach, let us not use it to talk about the latest news.”

—*POPE FRANCIS*
The Joy of the Gospel, #147

The Historical-Critical Method & the Six Questions to Ask about Any Text

Most critical biblical scholarship for the last century and a half has been guided by this quest to discover the original meaning of the text—what it meant to the author and the original audience for which it was intended. But since the world of the original biblical author and audience was so different from our own, biblical scholars had to devise a general method of interpreting texts that recognizes this historical and cultural difference and tries to overcome the gaps it creates in our understanding.

This method of interpreting the meanings of texts, especially ancient ones, is called **the historical-critical method**. It is **historical** because it first attempts to understand the meaning of ancient texts in their original context (the historical, social and literary situations in which they originated). Often some helpful background material is provided in the introductions to the Letters in your Bible. It is **critical** (from the Greek word for making judgments) because it also compares and analyzes texts in order to arrive at historical and literary judgments about the results of the research. It is based on the principle that any adequate reading of a text requires attention both to issues resolved by historical research:

- **who** (*the author*)?
- **addresses whom** (*the audience*)?
- **in what circumstances** (*the original situation*)?

and also to issues resolved by literary criticism:

- **in what way** (*the literary form*)?
- **with what message** (*the content*)?
- **for what reason** (*the function*)?

These questions structure the historical-critical method and contribute to its goal of learning what the text meant to its author and first readers.

Connecting the Letters to Life: Following the Christian Way Today

Since we believe that God’s revealed Word communicates a message that still applies to us today, once we have a sense of what the text meant to its author and its first readers, we can then consider **what the text means now** by connecting that original meaning to similar situations and needs in our own life. Through reading and interpreting the Letters, we detect God’s presence and discover God’s vision for a transformed world.

For Bible reading, merely gaining an intellectual insight is never the end of the interpretation process. When we discover a letter’s original meaning, we then can move from information to application and action. So our reading of the Letters can never be content with just information and ideas but must contribute to our formation as Christians. Besides understanding the information or message of the Letters, we also need to use this information to live a better Christian life. Reading is for living better lives, and Bible reading is for living better lives in relationship with God.

“It is true that being a Christian means saying *yes* to Jesus Christ, but let us remember that this *yes* has two levels. It consists in surrendering to the word of God and relying on it, but it also means, at a later stage, endeavoring to know better and better the profound meaning of this word.”

—POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II

On Catechesis in Our Time (Catechesi Tradendae) (1979), #20

Our goal in reading the Letters is ultimately to live our relationships with God and others in a fuller Christian way. Connecting a letter’s meaning with our life can occur many ways. Thus we need to ask how the ideas, values, perspective on life and behaviors found in the letter relate to us and our world. One way to discover possible connections to our life is to focus either on the author or on the community’s concerns. If we focus on

the author, e.g., Paul, then we seek connecting points between his ideas, feelings, values and behavior as examples for our own. The root of the similarity is our relationship with God. How he worked out the details of living the relationship can provide some clues for how we might do it too.

If we focus on what was happening to the community, then we seek connecting points between their situation and problems and ours. Like us, the Letters always exist in a temporal context that presupposes (1) a past situation shared by the sender and recipient; (2) a present situation shared when the letter is being read and (3) a future shared situation that anticipates a response from the reader about what was understood in the letter.

Our main concern is always the community in their relationships to God, Jesus and one another. These relationships move through the ordinary pattern of invitation and **call**, hearing and a response involving a faith **commitment** and covenant, a **co-mission** and shared responsibility to build a relationship, challenges of changing ourselves through **conversion** to meet the obligations of the relationship and accepting the **cost** of maintaining the relationship (see ch 4, pp. 118-122). Our task is to connect where we are and where they are in this dynamic process of relationship. What are the challenges and demands that the Letters open to us? How do they help us live more fully our relationships today?

How This Book Is Structured

The main goal of this book is to encourage you to read the Letters themselves and help you engage with them by understanding their message and how that message can change your life and the lives of those around you.

The overall format of the book is divided into three parts that are coordinated to both the three general steps of the ABC method and the three worlds of the text that were explained earlier.

Part 1, The World of the Early Christians, chapters 1–4, focuses on some basic information for **approaching the Letters** and about the **world behind the text**, that is, the first-century world of the original authors and their audiences, which was so very different from ours both in culture and mentality. We need a general grasp of its essentials for a better understanding of the original context of the New Testament Letters.

Chapter 1, The First-Century Roman World, examines the social

and historical situation of the early Christians. Their social world was agrarian and subjugated to the domination system of the Roman empire. Their social experience was organized by four basic institutional patterns—the realms of kinship (families), politics (nations), economics (goods) and religion (gods). Their historical situation was dominated by the demand to carve out their distinctive identity as followers of Jesus the messiah in relation to the competing identities of Jews who shared basic Israelite beliefs but were advocating different ways to practice their covenant obligations—the Priests, the Pharisees, the Essenes and the Zealots.

Chapter 2, A New Christian Identity in a Non-Christian World, examines the new Christian worldview that summarized the religious perspective or **vision** of the world as it had been changed by God’s action through Jesus the messiah and the consequent **vocation** to realize that vision in the existence and life of the new covenant community. Although not yet worked out in systematic form, this worldview reveals their Christian theology by the way they talk about God, their Christology by the way they talk about Jesus, their understanding of salvation history and their expectations about the obligations for living a Christian life and building a community. This worldview, with its vision and vocation, provided the basis for their new Christian identity with its distinctive beliefs and behaviors and the guidelines for a new type of alternative community.

Chapter 3, A New Christian Mission: The Good News in the Cities, examines first the Christian “Good News,” i.e., the message that emerges from the Christian worldview about how God had acted in Jesus the messiah to transform the world into a new creation and then how the Christian community’s mission to spread this message led it to focus on the urban cities as the best chance for appealing to possible new members. Finally, it describes how the community celebrated the eucharist or Lord’s supper to express their unity and identity as a community “in Christ.”

Chapter 4, Paul the Convert, Missionary Disciple, Pastor & Letter Writer, considers the life and ministry of Paul, the author we know most about, by using four important categories for understanding him and his ministry: his conversion from being a persecutor of the Christian Way to a follower, his missionary outreach to non-Israelites or Gentiles, his work of

gathering communities (using his work in Corinth as an example) and his continued pastoral care for their welfare, in particular by writing letters when he could not visit or send any of his co-workers to visit.

Part 2, The New Testament Letters, Chapters 5–7, focuses on **breaking open the Letters** and the **world of the text** to understand what the Letters *say* and what they *meant* to their original authors and audiences.

Chapter 5, Paul’s Genuine Letters, provides the necessary introductory background material for approaching each of the 7 letters that Paul undoubtedly wrote—1 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Galatians, Romans and Philemon—and also a brief **Reading Guide** for each letter focusing on the key passages that have been chosen by the Church to be read aloud at Sunday Masses throughout the year. These Lectionary readings are not only the most important texts for use in the liturgy but also those most important for their catechetical importance. These Sunday Lectionary readings represent about 31% of Paul’s Genuine Letters, 37% of the Pauline Letters and 25% of the Apostolic Letters.

Chapter 6, the Pauline Letters, provides the necessary introductory background material for approaching these 7 Pauline Letters (sometimes called “Deutero-Pauline,” i.e., secondarily Paul’s) that many scholars do not think Paul himself wrote but have been attributed to his authorship—2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus (the “Pastoral Letters”) and Hebrews—and brief **Reading Guides** that explain the Sunday Lectionary passages chosen for reading aloud at Mass.

Chapter 7, the Apostolic Letters (also called the General or Catholic Letters in the sense that they are not so much for individual communities but rather for the whole Church), offers the necessary background to approach these 7 letters written or attributed to well-known apostles in the latter third or so of the first century—James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John and Jude—and **Reading Guides** that explain the most important passages.

Part 3, Reading Others’ Mail, chapters 8–11, focuses on **connecting the Letters to our lives** and the **world in front of the text**, that is, our response to the Letters and how we might apply what we have learned to our own spiritual lives as Christians today.

Chapter 8, Maturing in Christ & Building Up the Community,

takes up two important themes from the Letters to apply to our lives and situation today. These first catechists' letters were not focused on initial conversion but instead on the ongoing conversion (wholistic, life-long transformation) for maturing or growing into adulthood in the faith and for developing practices to build up the community into an alternative society that could realize in their lives God's guidelines for right living.

Chapter 9, Reading & Studying the New Testament Letters, offers information and suggestions about various scholarly resources to help you understand and apply the Letters through further reading and study. This includes information about various Bible translations, methods and approaches for biblical interpretation, helpful commentaries and other resources for understanding the early Christian world, Paul and the Letters.

Chapter 10, Sharing the New Testament Letters, offers some suggestions for using a eucharistic format ("Take, Bless, Break, Share") for your personal reflection, for sharing with members of your household or with a faith sharing or Bible study group. Questions both for your personal reflection and/or for small group discussion with others are also provided for the content chapters of this book and for each of the Letters.

Chapter 11, A Brief Glossary of Terms for the New Testament Letters, offers a short explanation of several important terms that are related to reading and studying the New Testament Letters.

The New Testament Letters: A Two-sided Conversation

As we pay attention to the three worlds of the text and use the ABC method in order to read the Letters for their meanings, we will notice that interpreting God's Word is not a one-sided process but very much like a letter itself—an ongoing conversation. Since we believe that these Letters are God's Word for us, we read and understand them as communications about our relationship with God and our life together in the Christian community. They become part of an ongoing conversation that involves a listening and responding by which we are changed and transformed.

Since God's Word is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12), when we approach these Letters, at the same time God is approaching us

through them. As we break open the meaning of God’s Word, at the same time God breaks us open through the Word so that we can be transformed into Christians—Christ for others and our world. And as we connect the Letters to our lives, God connects us more closely through the words that we read. In short, as we work on God’s Word, God’s Word works on us.

“The Holy Scriptures are the Word of God. The Word of God forms us into living Christs, and this formation goes far beyond information, instruction, edification or inspiration. This formation requires eating the Word, chewing on it, digesting it and thus letting it become true nourishment. Thus the Word descends from our minds into our hearts and there finds a dwelling place. This is what meditation is all about. It is the discipline of inner attentiveness to the Word. Among the many texts the church presents to us each year, there might be one word, one story, one parable, one sentence that has the power to turn us around, to change our whole life, to give us a new heart and new mind, to conform us to Christ.”

—HENRI J. M. NOUWEN
The Selfless Way of Christ (2007)

Clearly the Letter writers hoped through their letters not only to work on us as readers but also to shape us as Christians. By understanding the community’s problems in the framework of the new Christian worldview with its beliefs and behaviors that were rooted in the message and ministry of Jesus, they not only solidified their audience’s identity as Jesus’ disciples, but also guided them to appropriate Christian behavior in a world that had not yet been influenced by the Christian way of life.

Consequently, engaging with the Letters has several implications for us as readers. The first thing they do is to create a bond or community between the sender and recipient. Every communication, whether spoken or written, creates a communion of speaker/writer, listener/reader and the word/text that is shared between them. The audience is invited into the world of the text in which through their hearing or reading they are shaped by the text and so are better able to understand who they are and how to relate with others. The letter and its message become their own through their participation in it. So the community for whom the letter is written is also bonded together by their shared encounter with the letter and its sender. The Letter writers use the letter form to create and nurture their Christian communities by using the basic beliefs expressed in the

Christian worldview and the behaviors that follow from adopting it.

Approaching the Letters this way also helps us as catechists to recognize what the Letters are all about. As we will discover, although there is much about theology and morality in them, the Letters are not abstract theological treatises or convenient collections of moral guidelines. Rather, they are proclamations of the Good News of our salvation through Jesus of Nazareth, God’s messiah whose life, death and resurrection are both the foundation of our Christian way of relating to God and the model of the appropriate behavior that is required in response to this proclamation.

“The Christian journey is about changing hearts—one’s own heart first and then helping to transform the hearts of others. It is about learning to live differently, under a different law, with different rules. It is about turning from the path of selfishness, conflict, division and superiority, and taking instead the path of life, generosity and love. It is about passing from a mentality which domineers, stifles and manipulates to a mentality which welcomes, accepts and cares.”

—POPE FRANCIS
Homily, July 12, 2015

Thus as we read, study and make the message of the Letters our own, we will be challenged as disciples in our relationship to Christ that entails:

- *a vivid experience of our **call** to follow Jesus on the way of discipleship*
- *a renewed **commitment** to the relationship with God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit*
- *a **conversion**, by which we dare to face all the changes in ourselves and our lives that we must make to live out the implications of our discipleship commitment. This demands following the way of Jesus through suffering service to death and through death to new life with God*
- *a **co-mission** to continue the work of suffering service begun with Jesus in our own time as we carry on the challenge of building the kingdom community on earth and overcoming evil and sin in our world*
- *a greater willingness to pay the **cost** of following Jesus in suffering—even to the point of death if necessary.*

So let’s now begin the task of opening and reading our mail.