CRITICISM AND JUSTIFICATION
Biblical Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Catechism of the Catholic Church

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The concern for a method in using Scripture in catechesis and religious education has taken center stage. First, Sacred Scripture, together with Sacred Tradition and human experience, are the sources for catechesis and religious education. However, Sacred Scripture occupies a central place, since this is the written word of God. Second, the use of Scripture has to relate to the nature and goal of catechesis and religious education, which do not intend to form biblical scholars out of students but bring them in communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ (CT 5). This paper intends to answer the question, "What is an appropriate and effective use of Scripture in catechesis and religious education that will present the Christian message as Good News and liberate, touch and deepen the students' faith?"

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) is the first universal catechism published by the Catholic Church since the Council of Trent four hundred years ago. A catechism does not provide a treatise on the methodology of catechesis but provides direction and offers concrete examples of using Scripture as an effective means to a critical instruction and communication in the faith in catechesis and religious education. This study intends to propose a way of using Scripture in catechesis and religious education by scrutinizing CCC's teach-
ing of biblical interpretation and how Sacred Scripture was used in the catechism.

This study consists of three parts. The first part presents CCC’s teaching on biblical interpretation. The second part enumerates the various criticisms of CCC’s teaching and use of Sacred Scripture. The responses to these criticisms are made in view of the nature of a catechism and the nature and goals of catechesis and religious education. The last part proposes a paradigm of using Scripture in catechesis and religious education.

I. CCC’s Teaching and Use of Scripture

A. INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE IN CCC

CCC’s teaching on the interpretation of Scripture follows closely the two principles of interpretation in Dei Verbum 12. These two principles for interpreting Scripture are: a) to discover the sacred author’s intention (CCC 110) by means of all the necessary historical-exegetical tools; and b) to read and interpret Scripture “in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written” (CCC 111).¹

¹CCC follows the ancient tradition of the two basic senses of Scripture: the literal and spiritual. The “literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation” (CCC 116). It recognizes the foundational and fundamental importance of the literal sense. The literal sense is linked to the other senses of Scripture. As St. Thomas Aquinas says, “All other senses of Scripture are based on the literal sense” (CCC 116).

The “spiritual” sense includes the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical senses (CCC 115). Scripture has spiritual meanings because it conveys the content and unity of God’s salvific plan, and the human faith experiences and events in salvation history. Earlier events in Scripture foreshadow later events (the allegorical sense). Scriptural events can teach all how to act (the moral sense). Finally, events can take on an eternal significance leading all to the true homeland (the anagogical sense) (CCC 117). Thus, the three spiritual senses are part
To discover the sacred human author’s intention

According to CCC 109, which echoes the first sentence of DV 12, the first principle for interpreting Scripture correctly states that the reader “must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm, and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words.” The dogmatic insistence on divine inspiration of Scripture gives rise to the uniqueness of biblical interpretation. In order to discover the sacred authors’ intention, the reader “must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking and narrating then current” (CCC 110). Quoting the words of DV 12, CCC continues “for the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression” (CCC 110).

The first principle for interpreting Scripture, then, intends to uncover the literal sense of the text. The literal sense is the meaning, conveyed by the words, which the human authors truly wanted to affirm, and which God wanted to reveal to us by their words. CCC emphasizes that “all other senses of sacred Scripture are based on the literal” (CCC 116).

To read and interpret Scripture in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written

This second principle of interpretation, also taken from DV 12, is introduced with the words: “but since Sacred Scripture is inspired, there is another and no less important principle of correct interpretation” (CCC 111). This phrase underscores the importance of understanding the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures.

of the true meaning of Scripture, dependent on, but not limited to, the literal sense.

CCC recalls a medieval couplet by which scholars in the Middle Ages summarized the significance of the senses of Scripture.

The Letter speaks of deeds; Allegory to faith;
The Moral how to act; Anagogy our destiny (CCC 118).
1. **Disregards the Historical-Critical Method**

a. *Criticism against CCC's teaching on the interpretation of Scripture*

One of the major concerns of the above-mentioned critics is that CCC’s use of Scripture failed to do justice to contemporary scriptural studies. Sloyan observed that CCC seems to avoid employing the results of biblical studies during the last one hundred fifty years. Others noted that there is very little evidence that contemporary biblical criticism had made a significant impact on CCC. They stated that a catechism should be a reliable commentary on the sacred text, and the invaluable contributions of modern biblical scholarship should be integrated into the life of the Church. Some even claimed that CCC seemed completely oblivious to modern biblical scholarship. Implied in these critics’ negative judgments was their presupposition that historical-critical method alone suffices. Furthermore, their criticisms showed their distaste for methods that are outside the historical-critical view such as “actualizing” or applying Scriptures to later situations and to the life of the believers.³

Boys was one of the scholars who evaluated the provisional text of CCC in 1989. The provisional text was then called the *Universal*

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³William Kurz and Kevin Miller, “The Use of Scripture in the Catechism of the Catholic Church,” *Communio* 23 (Fall 1996) 481.
grated into the catechism. However, while there is no explicit use of the historical-critical method, this does not mean that CCC denies or rejects the scientific method. Recognizing the limitations of this method, CCC does not endorse this particular method as the only method in biblical interpretation and reading of Scripture in a catechism. But the principal reason the catechism does not enter into a historical-critical interpretation is that CCC, or any other catechism, is not a study of Scripture. A catechism by its nature is not a source book or a manual of recent methodological studies in biblical interpretation.

CCC is an official document of the Church which proclaims what the Church believes and holds. The fundamental goal of CCC is the handing on of the Catholic faith to help people believe that Jesus is the Son of God and in so doing they may have life in him (John 20:31). The purpose and intention of CCC are well expressed in its Prologue:

This catechism aims at presenting an organic synthesis of the essential and fundamental contents of Catholic doctrine, as regards both faith and morals, in the light of the Second Vatican Council and the whole of the Church’s tradition. Its principal sources are the Sacred Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, the liturgy, and the Church’s Magisterium. It is intended to serve as a point of reference for the catechisms or compendia that are composed in various countries (CCC 11).

Archbishop William Levada described the purpose of CCC as follows:

The purpose of the Catechism, therefore, by definition is a clear and comprehensive presentation of the doctrine of the faith of the Catholic Church. It is clearly not its intention to supply the adaptations demanded by inculturation of the Christian faith, nor to propose catechetical methodology, nor to substitute for catechisms

on the national, regional or diocesan level nor to engage in theological discussion or speculation.⁹

The teaching of the Church cannot be based on the latest efforts of modern and scientific exegesis which are constantly changing. If the catechism were to follow the recommendations of these Scripture scholars it would quickly become outdated. A catechism, such as CCC, the first of its kind in four hundred years, cannot be expected to use all the most recent, untried techniques of modern exegesis. Rather, it has to proclaim Christian doctrine as currently presented throughout the Church. A catechism is a basic source and reference in religious education and catechetical work. It is a compendium of all Catholic doctrine regarding both faith and morals, but does not provide a treatise on the methodology of catechesis. Nevertheless, since a catechism is a major instrument and source for catechesis and religious education, it can offer a concrete example and direction for the actual use of Scripture in communicating the faith (CT 28).

A catechism is not a book to carry out the different methods and approaches to biblical interpretation.¹⁰ It does not intend to explore Scripture to discover what it contains that has led to the Church’s faith and tradition. It is by its nature created to explain what the Church believes. A catechism uses Scripture to show how the teachings of the Church are grounded in God’s living Word, and how these teachings can be appropriately explained to its intended readers and hearers.

In defending CCC’s doctrinal approach to Scripture against the


¹⁰The CCC does not include pedagogical or methodological considerations. Catechetical methodology is addressed in the General Directory for Catechesis 1997, a revision of the General Catechetical Directory of 1971. The CCC is not a textbook, but a guide or a point of reference for the formation of national and local catechisms.
historical interpretation of Scripture in elucidating the doctrine on Christology, the major editor of the catechism stated that “a catechism is not a monograph of exegetical science. It is not the task of this kind of book to discuss theories about early or late dating of the New Testament, about sources and Sitz im Leben.”

CCC devotes little space to contemporary historical-critical exegesis, but this is in keeping with its decision to present the common interpretation of Scripture which is borne by the great Christian tradition. The Word of God is not the property of specialists in a method, but rather it is very much the common treasure of the Church, whose Magisterium remains the authorized interpreter over and above all the different schools of exegesis. That is why CCC dwells with particular attention on the traditional exegesis of the Fathers and of liturgical celebrations.

Avery Dulles concludes that “the effort to read Scripture by a positivistic use of historical-critical tools, while it may be useful up to a point, can lead to impasses such as the dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.” Moreover, he cites the New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, who expresses no regrets for CCC’s move to bypass critical biblical scholarship when he says that “truth to tell, the contributions of critical biblical scholarship either to real history or to authentic theology have not up to now been particularly impressive and have certainly not had the character of transmitting faith to succeeding generations.”


c. Nature and goals of catechesis and religious education

Experts in catechesis and religious education certainly reject the naive and fundamentalist interpretation of Scripture which insists that a text has only one meaning ascertained by using a single method of interpretation that can identify the singular and univocal meaning of a Scripture text. If catechists and religion teachers were strictly to follow the Scripture scholars’ proposals to use the scientific method and erudite hermeneutical approaches to Scripture, this approach would create a distance between the interpretation of the catechists and teachers and where the students are at. Students would be given much erudite information about the historical context of the Scripture text which they would be expected to memorize but which has little or nothing to do with their present faith-life experiences. Using this approach in reading and teaching Scripture in catechesis and religious education would separate catechesis and religious education from the actual faith-lives of the readers and hearers today.

The aim of the scientific exegesis which is to determine the meaning of the text intended by the authors for their originally intended audience is not the primary consideration in reading Scripture in catechesis and religious education. Catechesis and religious education use Scripture in view of their present readers and hearers. The purpose and goal of those involved in catechesis and religious education is not directed towards creating biblical experts. Rather, they aim at helping the readers and hearers read Scripture in order to have a loving encounter with the Lord leading to a deeper loving knowledge and more mature faith.

Consequently, leaders in catechesis and religious education counter this rather one-sided naive view of what a catechism like CCC should be doing in explaining Scripture, simply by recognizing the multiple meanings of Scripture. The plurality of meaning arises when the readers and hearers look not only at the images, symbols, and metaphors contained in the text, but also at other possibilities of meaning revealed at later stages of God’s revelation, or in the history of the Church, and particularly in view of the current experiences of the Church today.

In most instances, the historical-critical method’s preoccupation in uncovering the literal sense which the human author directly intended fails to bring about the sense of the text relative to the circumstances of the present readers and hearers. The purpose of reading Scripture is to help the readers and hearers mature in their faith, to receive the living Word of salvation in a truly authentic and meaningful way. A preoccupation with uncovering the original meaning intended by the authors, which at times may be elusive, inadvertently deprivates the readers and hearers who yearn to understand their Faith. The Biblical Commission warns that we cannot give a biblical text whatever meaning we like. “One must reject as unacceptable every interpretation alien to the meaning expressed by the human authors in their written text.”

Hence, a method that is solely concerned with the genesis of a biblical text loses sight of the real thrust and significant meaning of the Scripture text for the present readers and hearers. Both the readers and hearers of Scripture have to recognize that the historical-critical method restricts itself to a search for the meaning of the biblical text within the historical circumstances that gave rise to it and is not concerned with other possibilities of meaning which have been revealed at later stages of the biblical revelation and history of the Church.

In conclusion, therefore, the historical-critical method is an indispensable method in biblical interpretation but it has its limitations, particularly in bringing about the affective conversion and maturation of the readers and hearers of CCC and of the students in religious and religious education.
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2. Ibid. 19
2. Emphasis on the Spiritual Sense of Scripture Using Typological Interpretation

a. CCC's teaching and use of the spiritual sense

CCC affirms that Scripture texts do not have only one singular meaning. They contain a broader sense and meaning beyond their historical and literal sense. Within the Scripture text is a hidden dynamic meaning that points to the divine and spiritual meaning which are beyond the historical meaning revealed by scientific and technical exegesis.

The “spiritual sense” of Scripture is the meaning expressed by the biblical text when read and “context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it.” This method of interpretation aims at bringing into light the spiritual meaning of the Scripture text in order that believers may better appreciate the meaning of the Christian faith in their lives. Consequently, it is through the eyes of faith achieved through a communion with God that the understanding of God’s revelation in Scripture is deepened.

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11Ibid., 127.

12Pope Pius XII in his Apostolic Exhortation *Divino Afflante Spiritu* stated that just as much as the exegete searches out and expounds the literal meaning of the biblical text, so must the exegete do likewise for the spiritual sense of the text provided that it is really intended by God (DAS 26). The reader must not be content with the results of historical and critical exegesis alone but must seek to find the “Spirit” in the text.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission, in its documents, stressed the contributions of the historical-critical method but at the same time admonished the interpreters and readers of Scripture to go beyond the historical-critical method while preserving its valid contributions. The Commission calls for the reading of Scripture texts in view of the full truth of Jesus Christ. “The unity in the Scriptures is thus seen in the promises received by the patriarchs, expanded through the prophets, then through the expectation of God’s kingdom and of a Messiah; but these promises and the expectation have found fulfillment in Jesus, the Messiah, and Son of God. The use of Scripture in Christology is proceed then by the principle of totality, which the Fathers and the medieval theologians well recalled.”

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b. Criticism against CCC’s use of the spiritual sense

Pope Pius XII, in his *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, stated that the first method is conveniently forgotten in favor of the second method or the spiritual approach to Scripture.

Boys noted that in CCC’s attempt to pay attention to the content and unity of Scripture, CCC was led to assemble Scripture texts with regard for the theological perspective of the particular source. This tension tends to obscure the distinctiveness of the various biblical books. Sloyan argues that the principles for interpreting the Bible (the intentions of the authors, the conditions of their time and culture, the types of literature found there) are subordinated to the unity of the Scriptures “as if all its books had the same purpose.”

He then also subordinated to “the reminder that the Holy Spirit brought it all about.” He observed that this is the way Scripture has been employed throughout CCC. Sloyan declared that it is nowhere made clear that Scripture text can best be understood in context—the context in which the text occurs and its place in the whole of Scripture.