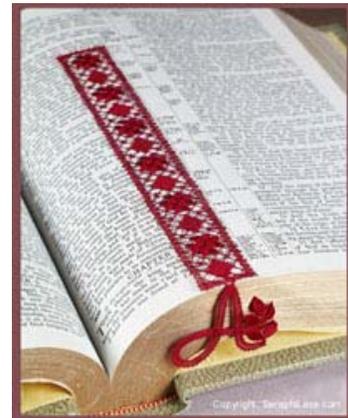


Bible Study: How to Start a Parish Bible Study

by Steve Ray

The Bible is so thick and confusing. Mary dusted off the big book and tried reading it several months ago, but she thought it would be a huge help if she could find a good Catholic Bible study—a class where Catholics could study the Bible together.

Mary visited a popular Bible study in town, but was humiliated when answering a question. The study focused on a verse in *St. John's Gospel*. Jesus had said, “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” After reading this passage the teacher asked, “OK, what does this verse mean to you?”



Mary excitedly raised her hand—she knew that answer for that one! She said that Jesus was talking about the Eucharist, the Real Presence of Christ. The room fell silent. Then there were a few snickers and a few women even gasped. Then group grew uncomfortably quiet and everyone looked at the teacher.

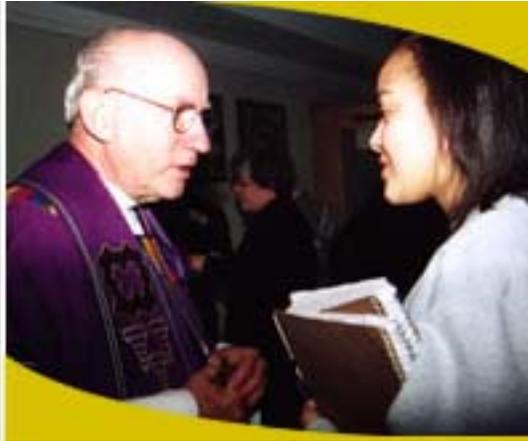
After clearing her throat, the leader informed Mary that this was an “ecumenical” Bible study and no denominational bias was allowed—the traditions of Catholicism were not welcome. Mary was embarrassed and said nothing for the rest of the class. It was very uncomfortable.

Mary realized that that the Bible Study was Protestant and other traditions were not welcome. She learned later that the study was based on “*sola Scriptura*”—the Bible alone and that Catholics were welcome, as long as they left their Catholic beliefs at the door. Mary discovered that many in the group were ex-Catholics and that half the members had left their Catholic parishes after attending the “ecumenical” Bible Study.

Mary went home hurt and frustrated. She wondered why there seemed to be a shortage of Catholic Bible studies in her community. She knew the Pope had encouraged Catholics to study the Bible and she found out that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* said, “The Church ‘forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful . . . to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ,’ by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ’” (CCC 133).

Mary wanted to talk to her priest about starting a Catholic Bible study, but she

worried about adding another burden to his already-too-busy schedule—Fr. Benedict looked tired lately. One priest for such a large parish seemed inadequate, especially with all the demands upon his time.



But, one Sunday Mary stepped up to Fr. Benedict and broached the subject. “Father, many of us are intimidated by the Bible and would love the help of a Bible study class. What do you think about starting a Catholic Bible Study?”

The pastor hesitated for a moment, then sighed, “That’s an excellent idea Mary. I’ve thought about it many times, but I can’t add a new commitment to my schedule right now, but I’m willing to

assist and give you moral support.”

With the pastor’s permission, Mary embarked on a mission. She put an announcement in the church bulletin. She called interested friends. She went through publishers’ catalogs and Catholic periodicals looking for study material. She visited the Catholic bookstore with a list of questions. Then she attended the Adult Education meeting and expressed her vision. They had some reservations but Mary’s enthusiasm was contagious. The commission requested that she come back next month with some concrete plans.

Five friends were interested and discussed ideas over coffee. What material would they use? Who would teach the class? Should the study be a “lecture” or small group discussion? How would they advertise? Where would they meet and how often? Could anyone with experience advise them?

With all her “ducks in a row” and with her face glowing, Mary went to Fr. Benedict with the good news. She also made a presentation to the Adult Education commission. Mary had done her homework and was able to overcome objections. She had examples of Bible studies in other parishes that have become an essential part of parish life and evangelism. She had materials and leaders lined up. The council voted almost unanimously and with the Pastor’s blessing the Catholic Bible Study was under way.



Practical Advice:

Our Own Experience:

An evangelistically oriented parishioner suggested to our priest that our parish start a Bible study. He was agreeable, but wanted a blueprint and to know who would teach the class. We previewed study programs and decided to develop our own. I prepared *Catholic Bible Study Sheets* since nothing else seemed available. We printed the study sheets and made them available in advance. They were useful for personal, family, small group, or parish Bible studies. Our study guides were eventually published by Ignatius Press with the title [*St. John's Gospel: A Bible Study Guide and Commentary*](#).

However, it has now been many years since we started our Bible study. Since that time there has been a good number of excellent Catholic Bible Study programs created with excellent materials. No one has to start from scratch any more since easy-to-use and excellent resources are now available. More on this in a moment.

Our Results:

Our Catholic Bible Study finished four years with an average of 150 people attending each class. We met on alternate Friday evenings. Childcare is essential for families, and starting with a Mass and Potluck dinner has worked well. I taught St. John's Gospel with a lot of emphasis on Old Testament background, the teaching of the Fathers and the Church, geography, archeology, original languages, theology, Jewish history, and daily experience. It has to be fun and informative, friendly and encouraging.

Leadership:

Gather a group of likeminded people interested in a Bible study. Start a committee of people willing to help with promotion, practical matters, and implementation. It is good to go the priest with an interested and respectful group. Ask around your parish and local Catholic organizations. Maybe your pastor would like to teach the class. If not, what about an associate, a deacon, a local seminarian, a person with a biblical background, a convert, or a team sharing leadership. In our case, I had taught the Bible in Evangelical churches before my conversion and was thrilled to find a new forum for teaching Scripture. This is becoming a common scenario.

Highest Recommendations:

For an easy-to-use and excellent Bible Study that has everything necessary get started, contact Gail Buckley at www.CatholicScriptureStudy.com (CSS). The studies are written by myself (Steve Ray), Scott Hahn, and Mark Shea. The program comes with everything needed so you are ready to go. The leader does NOT need to be an expert—only a facilitator. The prices are very reasonable. Starting out small, CSS now has more than 10,000 members.

To read how and why Gail Buckley started this amazing world-wide Catholic Bible Study, click [here](#).



Other Materials:

My book on St. John's Gospel has proved helpful to many, along with the list of [suggested books](#) on my web site. Liturgical Press publishes the widely used [Little Rock Scripture Study](#). Another series, [Our Sunday Visitor's](#) Popular Bible Study by Fr. Alfred McBride, has some good material. Keep your eye on [Catholic Exchange](#) for excellent Bible Study material. Also, [Scott Hahn](#) has a new site for Bible Study. Preview several programs, use mine, or devise your own. With the demand increasing, new material will be coming increasingly available.

Format:

Our format evolved several things. We intended to provide a short introduction to each chapter and then break into cell groups of 6–10 people for discussion using

the Study Sheets. This is an excellent format for large or small groups. Our class wanted me to teach in a lecture format with color overheads and lots of visual aids. You don't want the class to end up as small groups asking "What does this mean to you or to me?" The emphasis should be on what the author of Scripture intended and how it applies to us today in the Church. CSS has a wonderful format for those who use their program.

Promotion:

We promoted our Catholic Bible Study through local parish bulletins, Catholic newspapers, fliers, parish announcements, websites, free public announcements on radio, mailers, networking, and word of mouth. I mailed postcard reminders to each person who signed the sign in sheet or expressed an interest— to everyone who wanted to be on our mailing list. Our parish covered the cost of the materials and postage but donations helped cover some of the cost.

Expectations: Our Catholic Bible Study has fostered an enthusiasm for the Scriptures, a more knowledgeable parish, and new members and converts to the Catholic Church. It has developed a sense of community and fellowship, a deepening of the faith and a more personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Our goal has been achieved: Catholics are learning to study the Bible and to understand, love, and defend their Catholic faith.

Church Teaching:

"In order to recognize who Christ truly is, Christians, especially in the course of this year, should turn with renewed interest to the Bible" John Paul II (*As the Third Millennium Draws Near*).

Read the Scripture within 'the living Tradition of the whole Church.' According to a saying of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture ('...according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the Church')" (*Catechism* 113).



“In Sacred Scripture, the Church constantly finds her nourishment and her strength, for she welcomes it not as a human word, ‘but as what it really is, the word of God.’ ‘In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them’” (*Catechism* 104).

“You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them; and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

Other resources:

My article on “[Ecumenical or Non-denominational Bible Studies](#)”

Many other articles on the Bible – click [here](#).

For my Bible Study book and guide on St. John, click [here](#).

For the best in Bible and Catholic software, click [here](#).

For more on Bible Study, click [here](#). For many Web Links, click [here](#).

For recommended Bible study [books](#) and [software](#).

Scott Hahn’s Scripture study website, click [here](#).

Catholic Scripture Study International, click [here](#).

Gail Buckley’s articles on starting and running parish studies, click [here](#).