

What teachers need to know, about teaching Biblical Interpretation in Catholic school contexts

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**“Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like
a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?”
(Jeremiah 23:29)**

Prepared for the Northern Dioceses' Conference, 'Implementing The Religious Education
Directory' , Met Hotel, Leeds, 19 June 2024

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Part 1 Introduction

Mk 4:10-12

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret/mystery of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that ‘they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.’”

At the same time, though, we find ourselves in the same situation as Jesus' contemporaries and even his disciples: We need to ask him again and again what he wants to say to us ...
(Benedict XVI, p.183)

"The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church"

Presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission to Pope John Paul II on April 23, 1993

I. METHODS AND APPROACHES FOR INTERPRETATION

- A. Historical-Critical Method
 - 1. History of Method
 - 2. Principles
 - 3. Description
 - 4. Evaluation
- B. New Methods for Literary Analysis
 - 1. Rhetorical Analysis
 - 2. Narrative Analysis
 - 3. Semiotic Analysis
- C. Approaches Based on Tradition
 - 1. Canonical Approach
 - 2. Recourse to Jewish Traditions of Interpretation
 - 3. History of the Influence of the Text
- D. Approaches That Use Human Sciences
 - 1. Sociological Approach
 - 2. Cultural Anthropology
 - 3. Psychological and Psychoanalytical Approaches
- E. Contextual Approaches
 - 1. The Liberationist Approach
 - 2. The Feminist Approach
- F. Fundamentalist Approach

II. HERMENEUTICAL QUESTIONS

- A. Philosophical Hermeneutics
 - 1. Modern Perspectives
 - 2. Usefulness for Exegesis
- B. The Meaning of Inspired Scripture
 - 1. The Literal Sense
 - 2. The Spiritual Sense
 - 3. The Fuller Sense

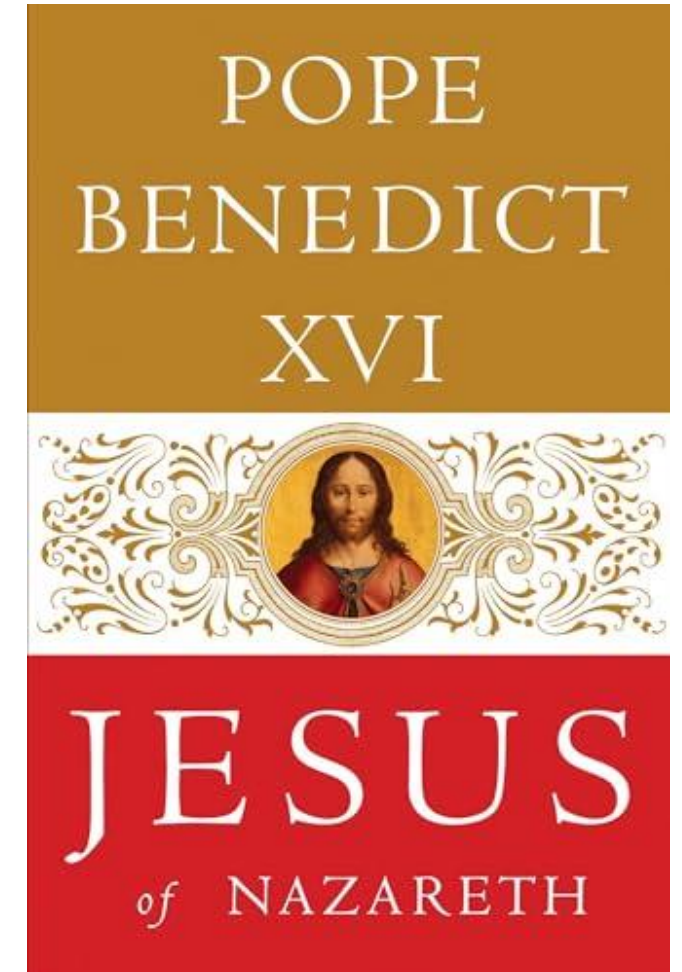
III. CHARACTERISTICS OF CATHOLIC INTERPRETATION

- A. Interpretation In the Biblical Tradition
 - 1. Rereadings
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- B. Interpretation in the Tradition of the Church
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IV. INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

- A. Actualization
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CONCLUSION



The Spiritual Deficit



One of the problems we face today, not only in religion, is illiteracy: the hermeneutic skills that make us credible interpreters and translators of our own cultural tradition are in short supply ... Dare to fix your gaze on the young Jerome who, like the merchant in Jesus' parable, sold all that he had in order to buy the "pearl of great price" (Mt 13:46).” (Pope Francis, 2020, *Scripturae Sacrae Affectus*)

The Pearl of Great Price Artist: John Everett Millais

Engraver: The Dalziels; 1863 - Wood engraving - Signed with monogram Source: *The Parables of Our Lord in Good Words*

Text illustrated: Matthew xiii.45, 46 Image capture, formatting, and text by [George P. Landow](https://victorianweb.org/victorian/art/illustration/millais/40.html)
<https://victorianweb.org/victorian/art/illustration/millais/40.html>

What GCSE does ... not so well: *The seven sins of the Proof Text Binary Argumentation Question*

[1] Fragmentalization

[2] Decontextualisation

[3] Propositionalisation

[4] Positionalisation

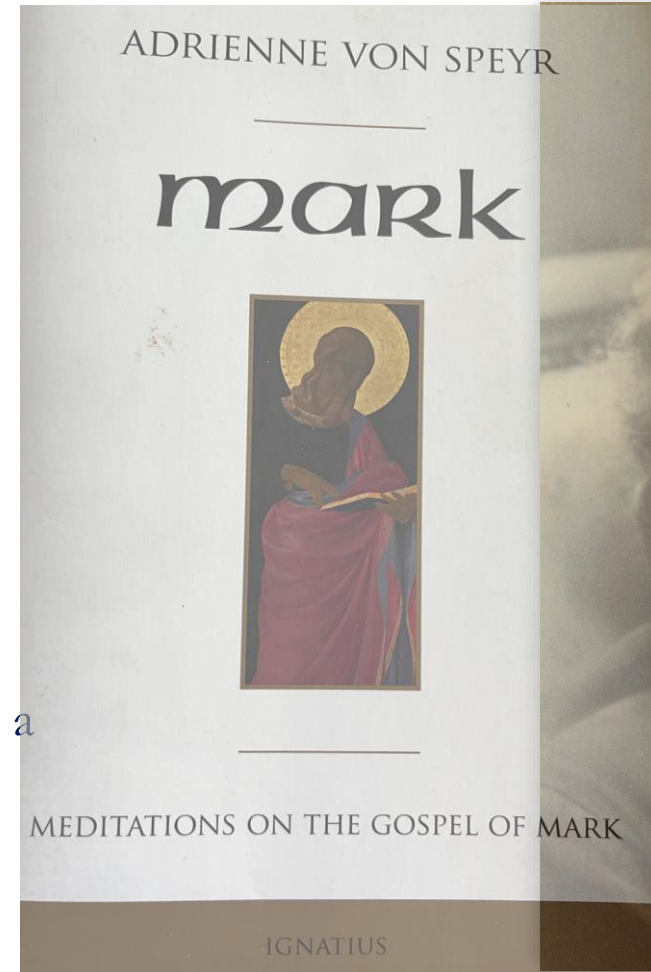
[5] Normalising contrasting diversity

[6] Difference as divergence rather than multi layered-ness

[7] RS as conflict studies

The Bible is for life, not just for GCSE

- Adrienne von Speyr, Founder of the Community of St John
- Meditations on Mark's gospel between 1945 and 1948.
- Reflecting on Mark 1:18 "And immediately they left their nets and followed him" she reflects for a page and a half, writing in the first person,
- "When we hear the Lord's call and follow him, we do this in a sort of absoluteness. We cannot see the whole. We also do not grasp the fact that this call will be the same today, tomorrow, next month ten years from now, and at the end of our life," (Speyr, 2012. p.37)
- Her meditations are filled with personal reflections that move from the narrative of Mark to the daily experience of faith.



By Unknown author - Archiv Hans Urs von Balthasar, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=94879286>

“Christians are called to interpret scripture in a variety of different settings and contexts. One expects Christians to make recourse to their scripture

in **worship**,

as they **reflect upon God, the world and their relationship to it**,

and as they **argue and debate** with each other over **how best to live in particular circumstances** [...]

their primary aim in all of these different settings and contexts is

to **interpret scripture as part of their ongoing struggles** to live and worship faithfully before the triune god

in ways that bring them into ever deeper communion with God and with others.

This means that Christians are called **not merely to generate various scriptural interpretations but to embody those interpretations as well.**”

(Stephen E Fowl, (1998) Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation Wipf and stock, Eugene OR, USA, p.2-3) Dr.

Stephen Edward Fowl, professor of theology and dean of Loyola College of Arts and Sciences at Loyola University Maryland, new

President and Dean of Church Divinity School of the Pacific

D. 16 Hermeneutical Nudges and Notes

The Bible is a library of texts

The Bible is not a 'live stream' recording of events

Different books of the Bible have distinct histories,

The layers of meaning in the Gospel

The Bible has different literary texts which follow different rules

There are different versions of the Bible

Translation involves Interpretation but sometimes also 'Modification'

The Religious Education Directory (RED) and Scripture

The RED warning against "proof-text approach"

The priority of reading longer passages

The priority of reading texts in the present-day Christian life

To discern the full sense of the text

Teach the Bible as if it is under-determined

Attend to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture

Read in the living tradition of the whole Church community (CCC113).

Be attentive to the analogy of faith (CCC 114) - The Bible is read through the Gospels

1. The Bible is a library of texts written in real places, by real people, about real things

The first point is that the historical-critical method —specifically because of the intrinsic nature of theology and faith—is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work. For it is of the very essence of biblical faith to be about real historical events.

(Benedict XVI,p.xv)

<https://www.biblestudy.org/maps/books-of-the-bible.html>

1. The Bible is a library of texts



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1. The Bible is a library of texts



The danger of privileging one genre over others

- (1) In the nineteenth century, with its historicist positivistic obsessions, orthodox interpreters often felt that they had to defend the historicity of every detail, e.g., Moses wrote the account of his own death (Deut 34); Jonah stayed for days in the belly of the whale. The Bible was thus reduced to history and history only.
- (2) In reaction to Pauline Christianity, some forms of Judaism tended to concentrate on the detailed law of the Bible.
- (3) By concentrating on the phenomenon of prophecy, Thomas Aquinas gave the impression that the divine element in Scripture resided in the prophets (ST. 2–2.171–78).
- (4) The Enlightenment reduced the Bible to rational wisdom, common sense and natural law; the Jesus seminar tends to see Jesus as a Cynic sage, without apocalyptic prophecy.
- (5) For the devout, the Bible is primarily a book of prayer, singing the praises of God in the Psalms. (For aesthetes, the Bible is of interest as a series of objets d'art, e.g., parables.) Such selectivity impoverishes us. It cordons off parts of the biblical tradition for special privilege or for special neglect, and so prevents readers from receiving the Bible in all its rich variety.

Viviano, Benedict Thomas. *Catholic Hermeneutics Today: Critical Essays* (p.18). Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition.

The consequences

- (1) Once the idea became fixed in place that, because the Bible was the inspired word of God, it must be free of error in every respect, the mind of the logician could push for wilder and wilder conclusions, further and further from the intention of the text.
- (2) How should we understand Genesis 1–11? As history, as science, as myth or as primordial history which includes elements of ancient science and myth?
- (3) Another big problem has been the right relation of Scripture and church tradition. In the wake of the Reformation criticism with its slogan “Scripture alone!,” the Council of Trent responded with a both . . . and. Divine Revelation is to be found both in the Scriptures and in sacred Traditions.
- (4) This leads to fascinating and multi-faceted issues of canon criticism, reception history of the canon, the diversity of reading communities.

Viviano, Benedict Thomas. *Catholic Hermeneutics Today: Critical Essays* (p. 18, 19, 20). Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition.

2. The Bible is not a 'live stream' recording of events

(1) Jesus and his immediate disciplines.

(2) The later ministry of the apostles who experienced a post-resurrection faith, a spiritual life that draws the narratives into remembrance and spiritual practice.

(3) The writing for the needs of specific Christian communities under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Other Gospels were written for different Christian communities in different places.

The Scripture emerged from within the heart of a living subject—the pilgrim People of God—and lives within this same subject. One could say that the books of Scripture involve three interacting subjects.
(Benedict XVI, p.)



3. The layers of meaning in the Gospel

1. Life and works of Jesus
2. Later Recollections and Reports of Witnesses
3. Post Easter community experience (of 1 and 2) through faith



Note:

this is why revelation is not the same as the words of the Bible, but rather it comes through the Bible (and through the study of the world)

4. Different literary texts with different rules, re-read through the Gospel

- Gospel is a unique form or literature
- The Bible for Christians is read through the Gospels
- The Gospel is the key to interpreting the Old Testament, it rereads the Old Testament
- This is a different understanding from some Churches

Modern exegesis has brought to light the process of constant rereading that forged the words transmitted in the Bible into Scripture: Older texts are reappropriated, reinterpreted, and read with new eyes in new contexts. They become Scripture by being read anew, evolving in continuity with their original sense, tacitly corrected and given added depth and breadth of meaning.

(Benedict XVI p. xviii-xix)

5. Translation involves Interpretation, but sometimes also 'Modification'

- Present day words in different modern languages have different symbolic meanings in different socio/cultural words than those of ancient words in ancient languages
- Translators sometimes change or add words

fix theological problems

Mark 1:10

Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. (NIV)

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. (NRSV)

εἰς αὐτόν (eis auton) = in him (not on or upon)

Where the translators ‘correct’ or hide mistakes Mark makes.

Mark 4.30-32

30 Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. 32 Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.” (New NIV)

30 He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; (NRSV)

Where the translators 'correct' or hide mistakes Mark makes.

Mark 4.30-32

12 On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, 'Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?' (New NIV)

12 On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' (NRSV)

Where the translators 'correct' or hide mistakes Mark makes.

Mark 4.30-32

42 It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached,(New NIV)

42 When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, (NRSV)

Cleaning up vulgar terms Mark 7:19a

Mark 4.30-32

19 because it does not go into your heart but into your stomach and then goes on out of the body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared that all foods are fit to be eaten.) (Good News Version)

19 since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?’ (Thus, he declared all foods clean.) (NRSV)

6. The Religious Education Directory (RED) and Scripture

- “A proper study of Sacred Scripture is at the heart of religious education ... so that pupils can gain a thorough grasp of the book that the Church venerates”
- Sacred Scripture should be a primary source of study and not just as the means for the study of a predefined idea or topic, where its only purpose is to validate the social or doctrinal ideas being discussed.
- Such a proof-text approach is contrary to the Church’s own reading of Sacred Scripture, where very careful attention is paid to both the literal and spiritual senses of the text itself (CCC 109-119).” (RED, p.21)

7. The RED warning against the “proof-text approach” because it risks literalism and fundamentalism

- “Inaccurate and poor paraphrasing, scant acknowledgement of the author and community from which passages come, lack of attention to literary form, the amalgamation of more than one author’s words, and the reduction of passages to fragments of themselves, often single verses.” (RED p.22)
- “And we live in a world where people pick and choose scripture to justify really good things but really awful things as well.
[Participant 4, agreed with by Participant 2]
- I think even if you look at the Conquistadors or you look at South Africa yes people use biblical texts. If you look at the Ku Klux Klan they use biblical texts. They use it completely out of context and we would understand it’s out of context. I would prefer them to have a context rather than just you’re going to need to use this quote to justify this. That’s difficult.”
[Participant 4]

8. The priority of reading longer passages

“I miss the Mark’s Gospel but I miss what we did have which under the new course wouldn’t have been there. So I miss that they are [not] doing some in depth biblical stuff as opposed to having, learning lots of biblical sources but not really having a huge amount of context for them, having the sources as opposed to knowing that there’s a continuum, a story that’s coming through. That’s something I miss.” [Participant 4]

Longer passage study enables the development of hermeneutical skills

Thematic Groupings

- Several miracle stories interconnecting Jesus' preaching and healing activity are in the first chapter (1:21-45)
- Five controversy stories involving various opponents are in a connected block (2:1—3:6)
- Three parables and further teachings about Jesus' parables are in one chapter (4:1-34)
- Four more miracle stories (of different types) are found together (4:35—5:43)
- Three “passion predictions” are near the middle of the Gospel (8:31—10:45)
- Seven controversy dialogues with or about Jesus' opponents in Jerusalem (11:35—12:44)
- Many of Jesus' eschatological teachings are collected in one chapter (13:1-37)”

Three-fold Patterns, often with Progressive Heightening:

- Three times Jesus says he must suffer, die, and rise again after three days (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34)
- Three times Jesus says "all things are possible" - for God or for one who has faith (9:23; 10:27; 14:36)
- Three times Jesus warns, "If your hand/foot/eye causes you to stumble..." (9:43, 45, 47)
- Three times Jesus returns and speaks to the sleeping disciples in Gethsemane (14:32-42)
- Three times Peter denies knowing Jesus or being his disciple (14:66-72; as Jesus predicted in 14:30)'

9. There is a call for a priority of reading texts in the present-day Christian life of the not just “a novelty from a bygone era” (Pope Benedict XVI)

“Added to an analytical reading, therefore, must be a lectio divina, a sacred reading, which allows the reality of faith expressed in the words that are studied, to be uncovered”

Academic study of the Bible is a head and heart exercise

10. To discern the full sense of the text,

4 senses - a harmony of meaning

Human and Divine authorship

Rich figurative, symbolic and metaphoric language

Literal sense	Language, history, culture
Allegorical sense	Greater mysteries beyond literal (eg how the OT foreshadows the NT)
Moral sense	Prompts for the good and holy life
Anagogical sense	Greater theological meanings, ultimate nature of things

Mark 14:62 (within the context of chapters 14 and 15 around it)

Jesus said, “I am; and
‘you will see the Son of Man
seated at the right hand of the Power,’
and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’”

- The Son of Man references imagery from PS110:1 and Daniel 7:13 so is allegorical, and “I Am” is allegorical and anagogical because reaches back to the burning bush and speaks to an ultimate theological truth of who Christ is.
- There is a strong moral sense of truth over falsehood. What follows is the High Priest tearing off his cloak and claiming blasphemy, and a little later, Peter denies Jesus. There is a strong emphasis on truth-telling and witnessing when it comes to faith and followership of Jesus.

11. Notes about the Quadriga, the four senses of scripture from the Catechism

- ‘an ancient tradition’,
- “profound concordance” (CCC) something close to polyphony
- The spiritual senses reach beyond the meaning of the event in history or its plain sense, and even the authors think about what they wrote in the bible.
- The quadriga, the four senses, introduces layers of meaning - a text brings different aspects of meaning forward at the same time: meaning in the sense of history, or ethical or doctrinal code and spiritually meaning speaking into the life and faith of the reader. **The RED’s ‘respond’ element may encourage this kind of reflection.**
- CCC 119 refers to the task of exegetes (formal Bible interpreters). The RED opens this task for students

12. The Bible is open.

The process of continually rereading and drawing out new meanings from words would not have been possible unless the words themselves were already open to it from within.
(Benedict xvi, p. Xx0)

The struggle to understand the parables correctly is ever present throughout the history of the Church. Even historical-critical exegesis has repeatedly had to correct itself and cannot give us any definitive information. (Benedict xvi p.184)

Teach the Bible as if it is under-determined as if we do not have the full final definitive meaning of any given text or passage. Approach it with Humility. Attend to it carefully.

- Biblical meaning is not a finished project of work
- Church has shared understandings, these have not exhausted the Bible
- The Gospel is Good News (not Good Olds)
- Be very wary of language that implies closure of the search of meaning in a text
- The power of the Bible to continue to speak to the modern life of faith relies on recognising texts are open

13. Attend to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture (CCC 112)

The sin of edited quoting.....

Should widows give all their money to religion?

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” (Mark 12:41-43)

..... **Should widows give all their money to religion? YES!**

In context: Mark 12:38-13:2

38 As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40 They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

13 As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” 2 Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

.... Should widows give all their money to religion? Maybe Or maybe not...!

14. Read in the living tradition of the whole Church community (CCC113).

Introduce students to contextual reading – reading from the perspective of different Catholic communities

- How might Catholics living in a poor part of India differ in their reaction to Mark 10:17-31 than Catholics in a wealthy part of West London?
- Mark 13: 7-18 And when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs.

This might be disturbing for those in comfort, security and peace, but perhaps it is consoling for those living through plight, conflict and insecurity.

Now, every educator, every teacher who wants to communicate new knowledge to his listeners naturally makes constant use of example or parable. By using an example, he draws to their attention a reality that until now has lain outside their field of vision.

He wants to show how something they have hitherto not perceived can be glimpsed via a reality that does fall within their range of experience.
(Benedict xvi, p. 191)



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